

My Story

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Me in a Nutshell

I'm a cheerful guy; I laugh and smile a lot. I'm always busy with something, and feel I'm wasting time if I'm not constantly on the move. Once I've decided what I want to do, I get impatient if I can't act on my impulse right now! And when I do start something, I hate to do it halfway; whatever it is, I always give it my best. Still, I do try to remember to take it easy and enjoy what I'm doing. I want to enjoy life doing the things I like to do so I won't have any regrets later. I set specific goals in each thing I do and try my best to achieve them.

Although I might seem rather happy-go-lucky and not given to thinking too deeply about things, in some respects I'm a fairly high strung and timid person. I'm prone to agonizing over the littlest things! I worry about how other people see me. I'll come up against some problem, anguish about this and that, mull it all over in my mind, sort myself out again, and move on. It seems I'm always doing that over and over. I wish I could do things more cleverly, but it just doesn't turn out that way. I also tend to be self-centered and forgetful—I'll say something one day and by the next I'll have forgotten all about it.

Growing Up

Preschool years

I was born in 1982 at a hospital in the city of Naha, ³ Okinawa prefecture. ¹ On the island of Izenajima, ² where my home is, there is only a small outpatient clinic, so women on the island normally go to the main island of Okinawa to have their babies.

Apparently I was pretty rambunctious when I was little, and never paid attention to what my mother tried to tell me to do.

Elementary school

When I first started elementary school I was shy and not very good at acting on my own initiative or doing things in front of other people. I was self-conscious and lacking in confidence.

In fourth grade, someone offered me a cigarette and I gave in to the temptation. At first it was just for a bit of fun, but it turned out to be the first step to lots of other mischief. Before I knew it, I was hanging out with troublemaker-type older kids, shoplifting and stealing bikes and cars to go joyriding in. To tell you the truth, when I was doing these bad things, part of me was scared. I think it was a kind of curiosity that made me want to try to be "bad." And besides, even if I didn't want to do such things, I couldn't go against the wishes of the older kids. When my mother found out what

I'd been up to, she bawled me out and did everything she could to get me to stop, even to the point of deliberately abandoning me to my own devices. But no matter what she said, all I did was snap back at her or ignore what she said. This went on until I was in my second year of junior high.

Junior high school

In my second year of junior high school I joined a *taiko* drum ensemble called Izena Shoen-daiko. My initial motivation for joining the group was simply that the nighttime rehearsals meant that I could go out at night without having to sneak out of the house. But the other members were serious about music. Inspired by those people, I started to get serious myself, and pretty soon I realized how much fun music could be. Partly because of my mother's influence, I had always liked singing. I formed a clear ambition to become a singer-songwriter.

Around that time, I decided I wanted to stop doing bad things, but somehow I wasn't able to give it up completely. Then one night, with a friend egging me on, we stole a car and went for a drive. The car had a turbo engine, so it really took off when you stepped on the gas. We came into a corner doing about 120 kilometers an hour, couldn't pull out of it, and ended up rolling the car. Luckily, neither of us was hurt, but it was very scary! I made up my mind to quit it all; I gave up smoking and stealing and all the other mischief I'd been into. Up till then I'd done nothing but rebel against my parents, but I began to realize that simply rebelling without being able to do anything worthwhile myself was just dumb, and I decided to knuckle down and do things the

right way.

I tend to rush headlong in one direction, even if it's the completely opposite direction from the way I'd been going the day before. That's exactly what happened at that point in my life. I got totally absorbed in things like music and training on the school soccer team. In my third year of junior high, I was accepted into a high school by recommendation, ⁴ which meant I wouldn't have to take the entrance exam. I organized some of my other classmates who had also been accepted to high school by recommendation into a group called "Little Teachers." With each "Little Teacher" taking a different subject, we tutored other classmates who had to take the high school entrance exams. We prepared carefully for the tutoring sessions, asking our teachers beforehand what points to teach and how to go about it.

High School Life

Entering Haebaru High School

Okinawa prefecture is made up of about 160 islands of various sizes. Most of the fifty or so that are inhabited don't have high schools. Counting the main island of Okinawa, only three islands in the prefecture have high schools. Izenajima doesn't have one, so after graduating from junior high, most kids from Izenajima go on to high schools on the main island of Okinawa. I go to Haebaru High School in the town of Haebaru, which is right next to the prefectural capital, Naha. Traveling by boat and then bus, it takes over four hours to get from Izenajima to Haebaru. Since that would be too far to commute every day, I live with an aunt (my father's older sister) in Naha.

Haeburu High School offers courses ⁵ in local culture, humanities and sciences, physical education, and liberal arts. The fact that it had a local culture course was why I wanted to enter this school. Apart from general subjects like math and English, we study things like *ryuka*, ⁶ the Okinawan language, *sanshin*, ⁷ Ryukyu dance, Ryukyu *karate*, and Okinawan history. I thought that studying the performing arts and history of Okinawa at high school would be useful to me in making my own music in the future.

Adjusting to a new environment

Not long after I moved to Naha and entered Haeburu High, I started feeling really out of place in a way I'd never experienced before. On Izenajima, no matter who I was with, I could always speak openly and frankly with others, and I always felt close to those around me. I wasn't even really aware of it; we just took it for granted. After I moved to the city, though, I realized with a shock how people distance themselves from others and say things they don't really mean or believe. Maybe it has something to do with being a densely populated place.

The kids at Haeburu High were unresponsive and the whole atmosphere of the school was gloomy and lethargic. They could have enjoyed school if they wanted to, but nobody even tried. I wanted to have fun like I had back on the island, but the more I tried to change the atmosphere the more out of place I felt. What hurt me the most was finding out that the people I thought were my friends said one thing but thought another. I'd take what they said at face value and act accordingly, only to be told

something completely different later. When things like that happen a few times, you really lose faith in people. I decided I didn't want to see the bad side, the mean side of people any more; I didn't want to have anything to do with people any more.

I may seem to be cheery and outgoing by nature, but I'm still pretty wary when talking with people for the first time. Now I stick to superficial conversation more than before. I realized that people can be pretty hard to deal with. Still, I have made some good friends whom I can trust and be myself with, such as the other members of my *sanshin* group.

President of the student council

By my second year of high school I was so fed up with the situation I was ready to drop out. I was agonizing over this and that, and then it occurred to me that giving up would get me nowhere. I changed my mind and came up with an idea: I'd become president of the student council and do what I could to make the school a cheerful, fun place to be! I ran for president of the student council and got voted in for one year beginning in the second term of my second year at the school.

The job of student president was hard. It's not easy to accommodate everyone's point of view and establish a firm course of action. I wanted to respect each person's ideas on any given matter, but when you want to actually get things done it's impossible to please everybody. When I would say what I thought, those who thought differently would become hostile. The more I fretted over such problems, the more timid I became, until I ended up not being able to accomplish anything at all. I'm getting by,

though, thanks partly to the encouragement I get from friends who tell me to buck up. They remind me that if I really want to make a difference to the school then I have to accept being disliked by a few people along the way.

I still agonize over problems sometimes, but I tell myself that if I don't follow through, everything will go back to the way it was before. I have to think positively. From now on I'm going to be more resolute. I'll just do what I think is best for the whole school. I'm going to relax and just accept that some people aren't going to like me.

Music

My life revolves around music. I compose and sing songs on guitar and *sanshin*, I'm studying classical Okinawan music and traditional folk songs in class and in my afterschool club, and I'm active as a member of the Izena Shoen-daiko drum ensemble. I love each of these activities and I give my best to them all. Although they are all different genres of music, I can't really think of them separately, as if traditional music were one thing, *taiko* drums another, and guitar music something different again. When you think about it, what I'm doing in each case is essentially the same thing: music. To me, they are all simply music.

My desire above all is to draw from my own experience in creating my own distinctive sound and rhythm. The mooing of cattle, for example, is different from one animal to the next. One might give a short "moo," another a long "mooooo." In the same way, I think people's sounds and rhythms differ from one person to the next. There are some aspects of classical Okinawan music and traditional folk

songs that cannot be represented in musical notation. So the same song is rendered in subtly different ways depending on the person playing or singing it. Those differences represent the distinctive quality each performer brings to music that is not the result of theory or technical skill. I try to respect my own sensibilities and give free expression to my own message through music.

Music has also given me new opportunities. In the summer this year during the Izena Shoen Festival on Izenajima, I performed with the Shoen-daiko drum ensemble. I composed a new piece for the festival and was in charge of producing it for the stage. Even harder than creating the new musical piece is coordinating all the people involved. If I became too concerned about the wishes of individual members, I would not be able to make any decisions or accomplish anything. I decided that, in order for everyone to perform well together, I had to show leadership even if it meant being a bit pushy. As a result, I think we were able to do our best for the festival performance. I think my experience on the school student council and in the school's folk performing arts club stood me in good stead on that occasion. Although the process of preparing for the festival was really hard, and while I wasn't entirely satisfied with the final performance, on the whole I really learned a lot.

My Future

My ambition to become a singer-songwriter one day hasn't changed since I was in junior high. I've considered various options, such as trying to make it as a singer-songwriter after I

graduate from high school, or going to college in the United States to study music in depth. Sometimes, though, my dreams have gotten ahead of me and I haven't been realistic enough about them. At those times, I think having such a definite goal made me over-eager—I worried about having so much to do and not enough time to do it in. Now I think that, since I plan to make music my whole life, there's no need to rush. If I go to the local performing arts university, I can study Western classical music, continue studying Okinawan classical music, and even have opportunities to perform overseas. I'm thinking of taking that university's entrance exam.

Family and Friends

My family

We're such a natural part of each other's lives that it doesn't seem to make much difference whether we are actually together or not. I know my family provides the crucial support in my life. Especially since I moved away from home and my parents send me money for school fees and living expenses, I appreciate how lucky I am and how tough things are for them. I'm waking up to the fact that none of us goes through life completely alone. I think it's really amazing the way my parents work hard and manage to make ends meet while raising six children, and I know I owe them a lot. Although I'm the eldest of six brothers, I don't worry about my brothers much. There's not a bad egg among them, so I think they'll do all right without me hassling them.

My friends

For me, it's absolutely essential to have friends I can relate to honestly and not just superficially. With these friends I can share both good times and bad. They are there for me when things go wrong, like when I break up with my girlfriend or whatever. In that respect, friends are precious. Then again, I think all the people in my life are valuable. In a sense, my life is sustained by all of them, and I think even the most ornery of the lot contributes to my life one way or another. I came to see things this way through experiences like performing on stage, because I learned that you can't do very much just by yourself—really valuable things can never be achieved by one person alone.

I think that when two people love each other they're bound to clash sometimes and see each other's bad sides. It would be great, though, to be able to love each other in a way that includes all those negative aspects as well. I'd like someone who'll make the effort to understand me but who'll also tell me what my faults are. My ideal is a relationship in which we bring out the best in each other and always feel at ease together.

My Island: Izenajima

Lying in the northern part of the archipelago of Okinawa prefecture, Izenajima is shaped like the territory of France. It's a small island, with a coastline about eighteen kilometers long and a population of around 2,000. People on the island take great pride in the fact that it is the birthplace of King Sho En, ⁹ founder of the second Sho dynasty ⁸ of the Ryukyu kingdom.

I go back to Izenajima about ten times a year,

such as during long school holidays or when we have Shoen-daiko drum events. I can truly relax in the natural surroundings of Izenajima. Whereas the sky over Naha feels small, Izenajima's horizons seem to extend forever. When I'm alone on the beach, just gazing at the sky, I feel like I'm in a world all my own. The sound of the waves, the whistling of the wind, the twittering of the birds—sounds like these conjure up all sorts of images in my mind. Sometimes I turn those images into songs. Although Izenajima is only a small island, it seems like the embodiment of a vast world. Perhaps it is the beauty and abundance of the island's landscape that makes me think so. Because I want to grasp things in the big picture and make music on a grand scale, I am fascinated by the "big world" of Izenajima.

At the moment I can't say whether or not I'll ever come back to live on Izenajima some day. My parents say I should do what I want. If I'm going to continue with my *taiko* playing, I'd like to do it with my fellow Shoen-daiko drummers.