

Michi Fuji

Violinist Michi Fuji was born in 1990 in Toyota City, Aichi, Japan. She graduated from the Aichi Prefectural University and came to New York City in 2008. Michi received a degree from the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in 2011 and became a member of the Junior Mance Trio soon after.

Michi was interviewed in Clinton, New York on April 3, 2014 by Monk Rowe, director of the Fillius Jazz Archive.

MR: Well welcome to Hamilton. My name is Monk Rowe and I'm pleased to have Michi Fuji here today on the campus. I enjoyed your playing a lot last night.

MF: Thank you.

MR: Some student asked you a question I probably was going to ask — why did you come to the United States, and you simply said "I wanted to learn jazz."

MF: That's it, yeah.

MR: You couldn't stay in Japan and learn jazz then?

MF: I can learn jazz in Japan, but jazz in Japan is not original. Jazz is original in America, in New York and New Orleans. Not Japan.

MR: Someone was speaking about jazz in Japan recently and they said it was very much connected with style, and like it was a hip thing to go here or something like that. Does that make sense?

MF: Yeah. People not really strict to starting bebop or swing. They try to learn more of other things, and more new jazz. But I moved to New York — I'm going to have to learn more bebop and swing and blues.

MR: I bet you started at a young age on the violin.

MF: Yeah.

MR: Playing classical music?

MF: Yeah.

MR: Okay. Did you do any of the — was it pretty much with a teacher and learning to read music?

MF: Yes.

MR: Did you feel like you wanted to be a musician from that age? Was this something that you felt driven to do? You said something about "there wasn't anything to do so I played my violin."

MF: Right.

MR: What does that mean?

38 MF: When I was a kid I liked the violin — going to elementary school we started getting more
39 busy, studied or homework. But in the kindergarten, not that much homework. I had time
40 to play the violin a lot so I just played.

41 MR: I'm not sure how to ask this question, but you know with YouTubes and people see all
42 this information. Sometimes we'll see YouTubes of very small children in Japan or South
43 Korea, and they're playing at this incredible level. We don't see it that much from
44 American children, at least in my exposure. Do you think that there's something to that,
45 or is it high pressure for Japanese children to excel at music, from some parents?

46 MF: Yeah. Some parents really want to — are strict about education or some music. And
47 some parents are thinking when their kids are really small that the kid's going to have to
48 be in music, sing. So there's really strict training. Yeah.

49 MR: And it could be for other things too. In the *New York Times Magazine* last week there was
50 a very long article about a young Japanese baseball player. And it talked about — his
51 total life was baseball. He spent the summers at camps and all that.

52 MF: Some, yeah. Some parents and kids it's like that.

53 MR: Okay.

54 MF: But my parents, no.

55 MR: They weren't driven for you to be a professional violin player.

56 MF: Ut uh. No, I don't think so. Just as a kid I played a lot.

57 MR: Okay. Do you remember your first experience to jazz music — hearing jazz for the first
58 time?

59 MF: Yeah. I was I think 15 or 14 years old. I was buying the Coltranes but I totally did not
60 understand that music. But I was buying the CD's. And also I was going to the library
61 and checking out some jazz music. Yeah. It was like 14, a teenager. But I no understand,
62 just listening.

63 MR: But you don't have to understand it to like it.

64 MF: Right. It's cool.

65 MR: Of course when you pick out Coltrane too, that could be a little overwhelming.

66 MF: Yeah. Maybe the cover of the CD is cool. I don't know.

67 MR: Sure. You're attracted by the look of it.

68 MF: Yeah.

69 MR: So you didn't listen to violin players first?

70 MF: In jazz?

71 MR: Yeah.

72 MF: In jazz, later, yeah. For jazz I was listening at time to Coltrane and Miles. Miles Davis.
73 And then, oh I heard Stephane Grappelli. I tried to listen to that.

74 MR: Did you like that era of music?

75 MF: Yeah. I like Stephane Grappelli, and his tone and swing and his music.
76 MR: How did your parents feel about you going to the United States?
77 MF: I have a brother and a sister — I have one older brother and I have a younger sister. And
78 my brother has a really regular, stable life. And he is living close to my parents' house
79 also. So he is doing good. So I can be free kind of. So always my brother is kind of
80 conservative. Like he is a boy, like a son. So he always has responsibility. But I am
81 second so I always open the door, you know, not innovative but surviving. So my parents
82 used to act like my attitude is so — oh New York, okay.
83 MR: And you came to New York specifically to go to the New School?
84 MF: My English still is hard, but my grades were so bad. So I was going to college, the name
85 is St. Elizabeth's in New Jersey. In Morristown. St. Elizabeth's. I was studying English,
86 just English there for one year in New Jersey, so I went to New York by train for one
87 hour. And I was there one year and then moved, transferred, to the New School. And I
88 graduated. I studied at the New School two years and a half.
89 MR: Did you get a degree?
90 MF: Yeah. I have a degree in Japan and at the New School.
91 MR: Okay. Your degree was in classical violin?
92 MF: Yeah. And in New School it's jazz.
93 MR: Okay. And that's where you met Junior [Mance]?
94 MF: Yeah.
95 MR: You know we have something in common, that we both like the song "Harlem Lullaby."
96 MF: Right.
97 MR: I understand you played that with him the first time you met him? Or is that not quite
98 correct?
99 MF: The first time, what happened? I was just listening to his "Harlem Lullaby" over and
100 over. And the first time Hide, me and Junior tried it I was really listening, and I played
101 the same place Junior played, Junior had soloed. Junior had soloed. And he saw me.
102 "That's my solo you just played." So I learned that the song doesn't have music so I just
103 listened and played what he played. It's okay.
104 MR: Yeah. It's a really neat song. You give lessons?
105 MF: From?
106 MR: Do you give violin lessons?
107 MF: That means?
108 MR: Do you have students?
109 MF: Oh, I'm teaching but I don't teach jazz yet. This time is the first time. But I'm teaching
110 the violin so far.

111 MR: And Hide said something about talking to parents when they ask about their children. Do
112 you have students ask you about making a living in the music world? What's it like?
113 MF: Yeah. Sometimes they ask me can you make a life as a jazz musician? So far I'm
114 teaching, mostly I'm teaching to play.
115 MR: Did you ever play on the street like Hide?
116 MF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sometimes.
117 MR: Well you do what you have to do I guess, as a musician. You didn't have aspirations to
118 play in a symphony orchestra then?
119 MF: I did not play like seven years. But last year my friends asked me to sub for the
120 symphony, with Beethoven's something — I forgot the number. But I did not play seven
121 years in a symphony, but okay I try, I did it last year. So yeah I did it. So, one time in
122 New York.
123 MR: It seems to me it'd be such a different thing.
124 MF: It's different, yeah.
125 MR: I mean you're in a whole section of violin players. It's all supposed to sound very
126 cohesive and like one big instrument I guess.
127 MF: Yeah. In a symphony, yeah, it's different.
128 MR: What's your day-to-day — I asked Hide the same question — so a week for you can be
129 various different things? You play other gigs? You have students.
130 MF: Um hum. I like sessions, jam sessions, and a home session, my friends ask me to come
131 and play just sessions. I like that. And I have to practice, and teaching, and sometimes I
132 walk for my body to exercise.
133 MR: Well I know the answer to this question, but is it expensive to live in New York?
134 MF: But my area is not that much. It's fine.
135 MR: There's a professor here on campus that's writing a paper about women in jazz.
136 MF: Nice.
137 MR: Does it make a difference, that you think, that you're a woman playing jazz?
138 MF: Yeah, I feel different sometimes.
139 MR: Yes? How so?
140 MF: I don't know. But even playing with a woman is different. I don't know why. It's always
141 been a man, right? But sometimes with a woman I feel different attitude to men, you
142 know, the attitude. And the woman musicians I feel are different.
143 MR: You mean if you're in a band and there's another woman.
144 MF: Yeah, I feel different. I don't know why. It's different.
145 MR: I'm trying to imagine how it's different. Do you think the other woman might want to be
146 the only woman in the band?

147 MF: I don't know. I not so much play with women. I don't have opportunity. But it's kind of
148 different. I don't know why. And harder.

149 MR: Who are the violin players that you — you mentioned Django — I mean Stephane
150 Grappelli, and anybody else you particularly like on violin?

151 MF: Stuff Smith, Christian Howes, Ray Nance.

152 MR: Christian Howes and —

153 MF: Ray Nance, Ray Nance. Ellington trumpeter.

154 MR: Oh, Ray Nance, of course. Yeah he played trumpet and violin and sang.

155 MF: Yeah.

156 MR: And what's the challenge with — did you ever play the electric violins?

157 MF: Ut uh. It's heavy.

158 MR: It's heavier, huh? What do you notice about going around the world with Junior, and how
159 people react to jazz. Is it any different in different parts of the world?

160 MF: That meaning is — people react? The violin there is true? People are kind of surprised.
161 Regularly it's piano-bass-drums. But the violin has its own sound. But I think a violin is I
162 think just really a sensitive instrument when compared with a horn. And Junior is really a
163 loose style. But his style is loose but his music is really sensitive — and I don't know
164 how, maybe sensitive, that the violin mixes blues, I don't know how I think. Not naïve,
165 not always going to power.

166 MR: More delicate.

167 MF: I think so. The point is it's good for the violin. It's not gypsy, it's not classic, the trio is,
168 the violin that comes with Junior is the music, not going to gypsy. Classic, no. It's kind of
169 loose and jazz sounding, and delicate.

170 MR: Can you recall the first time you heard about the blues. What does this blues mean?

171 MF: A feeling?

172 MR: Yeah, the feeling, and the musical form that goes along with it.

173 MF: Yeah, but resonant feeling and, yeah, and sing.

174 MR: How did you learn it?

175 MF: Just listening. Junior and I listen a lot to B.B. King. But yeah, just listening. But
176 sometimes I transcribe somebody's blues and learn, but mostly listening.

177 MR: How do you make a violin swing?

178 MF: It's hard to make a violin sound swinging — I'm going to have to learn for myself how to
179 swing the violin. But that's a different thing compared with classical. But even classical,
180 people really swing, right? But for the techniques, you mostly have to learn by the
181 bowing I think.

182 MR: Because to get the swing eighth note [scats] what is the mechanics of that?

183 MF: So far I think with the bow, like this move. The tone is stopped, so you've got to have
184 something to slur. The horn section is more like smooth. But the violin always — if the
185 bow is like this it's not good.

186 MR: You can't go back and forth as much.

187 MF: Yeah. A technique I have to learn this about. Slur and staccato. But I'm going to have to
188 learn.

189 MR: Do you have advice for young musicians who want to pursue it as a career?

190 MF: For jazz?

191 MR: In any way.

192 MF: Just listening and just trying to play with great musicians. Just learn from the great
193 masters.

194 MR: Right.

195 MF: And just I think getting good at playing good, one thing is practice, right? One thing is
196 experience.

197 MR: A lot of people complain, well how do I get experience?

198 MF: Jam sessions? Play with somebody, especially good musicians.

199 MR: Yeah, I know Hide said that, he was talking to some bass players last night. Go to jam
200 sessions. Can those things become very competitive?

201 MF: Jam sessions, competitive?

202 MR: Jam sessions, yeah. Or are they mostly friendly?

203 MF: Oh friendly, yeah. No competition.

204 MR: There used to be a term they called "cutting contests," where people could sort of try and
205 make their reputation by playing better than the other person and that kind of thing.

206 MF: I'm not going — not that kind of jam session. Just friendly. Because it's really — the
207 music needs to communicate with the musician. So friendly is good.

208 MR: Someone asked a question last night, a student, about the three of you improvising
209 together. And I think people have a hard time understanding that most times when you're
210 improvising you're playing over a song form. Like most of you know where you are in
211 the song. Is that your experience?

212 MF: Yeah.

213 MR: Okay. Because sometimes students can't follow it. Or, like, how do they know when to
214 stop? How do they know when the bridge is coming? That kind of thing.

215 MF: Just, they have a form, the song form. Regular is 32, right, 32-bars. Not always 32 bars.
216 But I know always where I am when I am playing. I know.

217 MR: Do you like working without a drummer or does it not matter to you?

218 MF: I love drummers and I need to feel more drum feeling. But this trio, Junior is great at
219 accompanying and the rhythm is real. And Hide is very great. This trio is fine. But

220 always I'm learning a lot of things from a drummer. Because the violin is hard to feel and
221 play with a rhythm feel.

222 MR: Rhythmically?

223 MF: Yeah. Rhythmically phrase. So I really need a drummer feeling. I learn from the
224 drummer a lot.

225 MR: And do you get calls from other musicians to play gigs?

226 MF: Sometimes.

227 MR: What kind of gigs would they be?

228 MF: Always — sometimes I play with a string section where I can also improvise. And then
229 sometimes I play like harp. So I have a lot of opportunity to play with jazz string players.
230 And sometimes my friends call me to play a session.

231 MR: I don't know if you can answer this question, but what's the average pay, the average
232 money that musicians in New York expect to get these days?

233 MF: The amount?

234 MR: Yes. I know it varies from one thing to another.

235 MF: But rent, right? Rent and food, right?

236 MR: But if someone called you up and said "I have a gig" it's like playing music for a
237 wedding reception — what would you expect the money to be for that?

238 MF: The amount?

239 MR: The amount, yes.

240 MF: A wedding is sometimes — if it's a wedding, maybe at least a hundred, two hundred. In a
241 wedding, yeah.

242 MR: And when you play in a jazz club?

243 MF: It's up to the player. Because Junior is always a good amount. But other musicians, it
244 depends. So it's up to the musician.

245 MR: I asked Hide about goals. I think you heard his answer when he said there's no goals in
246 jazz. It's like one day to the next. What about you? Do you have goals that you think "I'd
247 like to be doing this in a few years?"

248 MF: Not that goal, but smaller goals. For example, I really want to know a lot of tunes. Just
249 things. But that is not for the career, just for my ability. So I want to know the tunes. And
250 I want to hear more harmony things from the piano or bass. That goal I always have. But
251 I don't think about the goal of a career. More the practice way. I will learn that tune. Like
252 that goal.

253 MR: Well a lot of jazz musicians have found their way into academia, teaching in colleges and
254 so forth. Is that a goal of yours? To be a professor?

255 MF: Me?

256 MR: Yeah.

257 MF: I don't know if I'll have a chance. I want to do anything. But for me, if my fingers are
258 stiff because I don't have time to practice, this is, for me, getting really frustrating. And if
259 I couldn't play in a session it's not good. It's kind of frustrating. But if I cannot stop
260 practicing it's all right. But to get rid of the time is not good for me. But the point, the
261 center is the ability going up. If I can be a professor it's fine, but the center is not
262 teaching.

263 MR: The center is that you continue to be a good player.

264 MF: But the teaching is okay.

265 MR: No that's a good way to put it. Because if you really get involved in teaching it might
266 take away from your time and your effort and the whole thing. There was a brief time of
267 fusion music in the 70's, there were some electric violin players, the Mahavishnu
268 Orchestra. Are you familiar with any of that music? Very electric, with the violin going
269 through —

270 MF: But I like Nigel Kennedy. He's electric. And he's very masterful of the classic music. But
271 I like his treatment.

272 MR: What's the club scene like in New York now. I know some of them are very expensive to
273 go to, like the Blue Note and so forth. But I imagine there's other places that are easier
274 for the public to afford. Like Café Loup, where you play, they charge a cover?

275 MF: No.

276 MR: Oh they don't, that's good. And you play there every Sunday. And you probably don't
277 know what you're going to play when you get there, you just wait for Junior to say
278 something. Sometimes when I'm on a gig I wish I was keeping notes like if someone
279 asked me to play something and I didn't know it, that I should write it down and that
280 week I should make it my business to learn it.

281 MF: I ask Hide, what are the changes. Even Hide says he don't know. Because he's listening.
282 After he finishes the song, "I don't know."

283 MR: Yeah. "I don't know how I got through it."

284 MF: Right. Ask Junior. Finally, in a rehearsal, Junior also doesn't say anything, just play and
285 listen. So finally I looked at his hands.

286 MR: From a video? You looked at his hands to see what chords he was playing.

287 MF: Yeah. And always I'm playing behind Junior. So I always see the piano. It's good
288 training.

289 MR: That's interesting. Because sometimes the bass players used to do that too, look at the
290 piano player's left hand.

291 MF: Yeah, I'm always watching the left hand.

292 MR: But usually the bass player's got to know those changes you know, because that's where
293 it starts. Very interesting.

294 MF: Yeah, I'm getting in the habit, with different piano players. But I got in the habit. If it's
295 not Junior I worry. Some piano players — you couldn't get away with this.
296 MR: What's it like to go back to Japan now and play?
297 MF: We went back last year with Junior. It's good.
298 MR: Yeah. Did your family come out to see you?
299 MF: Yeah. That was nice.
300 MR: Well it's been a pleasure having you here at Hamilton and I look forward to your concert
301 tonight. Does Junior make you speak to the audience?
302 MF: Ut um. Even Junior not so much speak to the audience.
303 MR: Okay. And you've been on two or three recordings with him already.
304 MF: I think so. Maybe.
305 MR: Is it any different playing in the studio? Maybe they were live recordings.
306 MF: Yeah with Junior it's the three of us, it's live.
307 MR: Does it make you more nervous? You probably think more about what you're doing.
308 MF: Yeah.
309 MR: Well thanks for your time today, it's been a real pleasure.
310 MF: Okay. Thank you.