

Mantle Hood Comments on Bringing Suenobu Togi to UCLA

Source: Oral History of UCLA's Institute of Ethnomusicology, 1961-1974. Interview with Mantle Hood conducted in 1972 by Dustin Miller, Center for Oral History Research, Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Transcript pp. 664-65.

"I'm not quite sure of the year, but it would have been around '60, I suppose--or was it later? Maybe '61?-- I made an appeal to the imperial household, the head of palace ceremonies in Tokyo, explaining to him that we had in residence here artists from various parts of Asia (that time none from Africa), that we felt it was one of the most direct ways for us to understand a culture, and that we certainly thought it was terribly important that Japan be properly represented. What I was therefore asking for was consideration of allowing one of the palace musicians to come here to teach gagaku and bugaku, which is the dance form. Well, that appeal was honored after a few day's consultation at various levels, I guess, in the palace, and Suenobu Togi came to us and taught.

"The agreement was that he'd be here two years. He came at the end of the second year and said he'd like to stay a third year, and I explained that we had rather agreed with the head of palace ceremonies that he would return at the end of two years, and they had said that they would replace him with another palace musician. So I felt rather honor-bound to write back. And I said [to Suenobu], 'If you will stay, I mean, if that is your initiative,' I said, 'the result I worry about, because I'm afraid that you might lose your job in the palace if you stay one more year.'

"Well, the plight of the palace musician in Tokyo, I may be a little inaccurate here, but I think their salary is something like eighty-two dollars a month. All of them have to have outside work, moonlight. This man, I think, was playing a cello in a nightclub jazz ensemble. He said, 'I will quit even if I do go back, because I just can't afford to keep up two professions, two lifetimes.'

"Well, the upshot was I wrote to the head of palace ceremonies. They demanded he come back. They told me they would send me a replacement. It was a bit awkward. but he did stay a third year and then indicated he would like to become an immigrant and get a visa.

"Well, he was here under a J visa, which meant he had to return to Japan for two years, but I said I would try to help through the chancellor, So, he went back. It took us three years before we got him a visa, and I found out later that one and a half of those three years was because his file had got lost somewhere. During that same period--now here's a commentary on our society, on our scale of values--during that same period of trying to get Suenobu Togi an immigrant's visa, I learned that if he were a sushi maker, you know, who makes the little rice cakes and so on, he could get it in three months, but merely being a palace musician, whose family had been in the service of the emperor continuously since the eighth century, it took me three years."