

She's Number One & So Is Her Band

BY MARK LEVITON

The Los Angeles suburb of North Hollywood, filled with fast-food outlets, dingy dental offices and anonymous urban architecture, seems the last place to find anything unique. But on a cramped North Hollywood cul-de-sac, just around the corner from a noisy intersection, lives a woman critics call the brilliant and original jazz composer since Duke Ellington. Toshiko Akiyoshi, voted top arranger in the latest *Downbeat* poll, leads the Akiyoshi-Tabackin Big Band, ranked Number One Big Band by the same poll. Akiyoshi also plays piano with the band, while husband Lew Tabackin leads its five-member saxophone section. She sits this afternoon at a low Japanese table, drinking tea to chase off a cold that forced her to cancel rehearsal sessions.

"I felt, in the late Sixties, that I hadn't contributed anything. I thought I would quit music," Akiyoshi says. Her hands form no gestures, but her face and eyes are expressive. "Then I began to look at the black movement to see how it could relate to me. I realized I could draw from my Japanese heritage, which was richer than American, and bring an infusion to benefit jazz. That was my way to find significance."

Akiyoshi's mantelpiece is full of awards—Grammy nominations, *downbeat* certificates, a trophy from Japan's *Swing Journal*—and propped against the piano that almost fills her living room is a half-finished sheaf of music, the pencilled notes precise and sharp.

Akiyoshi is the only woman in history to write a complete repertoire for a big band and organize musicians to play it. Beyond this surface novelty is music that veteran jazz listeners call fresh, appealing and dramatic.

Akiyoshi was born in Manchuria, China, in 1929, where her father ran a textile factory for a large Japanese firm before going independent in the same business. After the Japanese lost World War II the family had to forfeit their assets and return to Japan, a situation which caused much emotional and financial hardship.

"My father wanted me to be a doctor when we first returned to Japan," Akiyoshi recalls in hesitant phrases, as though not quite at home in her adopted language. "That was really crazy because I can't stand the sight of blood! I was sixteen years old at the time, and had already been taking piano lessons for nine years. I was the youngest of four daughters, none of whom were professionals, so I decided to try medical school. We came to Japan in August and school doesn't start there until spring. While I was waiting for school to begin I saw an ad at a dancehall one day that said 'Pianist Wanted,' so I went in and got the job. I forgot about being a doctor."

Akiyoshi began to build a reputation from that point on as a sensational pianist with a strong style and superb ideas. She made a few records for Japanese labels and became quite popular. But to really experience the jazz world she needed to travel to the U.S., which she did in January 1956, enrolling in Boston's Berklee School of Music. There she studied

composition and piano while continuing to work with combos when she could, and she spent a lot of time in nightspots seeing her idols play live. In April 1957 at John Hancock Hall in Boston her composition "Jazz Suite for Orchestra," written as a school assignment at Berklee, was performed by a student band and was warmly received. Her stature in the jazz community grew and in 1958 she was named in *Mademoiselle* as one of America's top women. She had overcome the prejudice in the mostly male jazz world that a woman couldn't handle jazz music. In 1959 she married saxophonist Charlie Mariano, and they formed a quartet, playing several of Toshiko's compositions.

The late Sixties was a troubling time for Akiyoshi. Her marriage to Mariano broke up after they had one daughter, and Toshiko had difficulty finding work because of the failure of many New York clubs. "It was also the time of black revolution" she remembers, "and some clubs were only booking black musicians. There were many black organizations supporting black music, as a part of the whole political movement. I don't think that's wrong—blacks had to go through so much to make things better. But not being black I had a tough time."

Akiyoshi met Tabackin while organizing a concert for herself in Town Hall in 1967. He was playing tenor sax with Doc Severinson's band on *The Tonight Show*. In 1972, when Johnny Carson moved to the West Coast, Tabackin and Akiyoshi, by then married, did too. "One day Lew came home from work

and said there was a rehearsal hall union members could rent for fifty cents an hour. "I had thought of having a band in New York but the halls were all \$35 which meant an investment of several thousand a year, which wasn't financially possible. But this was different. I had about six charts to begin with, and Lew helped get the musicians together. We began our weekly Wednesday rehearsals." Escalation of the band's activities has recently permitted Tabackin to quit the Carson show and concentrate on working with his wife and in smaller combos.

In 1973 Akiyoshi wrote an old friend at RCA records in Japan, asking if he would like to record her new big band. The resulting album, *Kogun*, went on to become the largest-selling big band record in Japanese history. It was released in the United States at the end of 1978. For the last six years Akiyoshi has been writing challenging, robust and often humorous music that leaves plenty of room for the many fine soloists in her fourteen-piece band. Like Ellington, she enjoys writing for specific members of the band, making it important to keep the personnel constant, no easy feat when everyone has other jobs too. The band is something of a music school as well. "There are two ways to write," explains Akiyoshi "You can put the music down so the players work at 75 per cent capacity and the music sounds comfortable, or write music that may require more endurance on their part. The first way the writer's getting most of the benefit, having the music played. The other way is more beneficial to



the writer and the players. But," she adds, "I always have to remind myself the music comes first. A lot of bands play very well, but they don't have a characteristic sound. I want my band to have what you call style."

Akiyoshi is fortunate to have Tabackin as principal soloist, for he is strong on tenor sax and flute, an instrument she often uses for a wide range of effects and tone colors. She writes superbly for bass trombone, which she considers the instrument that "holds the bottom," and exults in placing instruments in fresh combinations.

Akiyoshi often writes program music, jazz based on a very specific memory or event. Her suite "Minimata," found on the *Insights* album, is a powerful work with an emotional range that draws the most from its players. The subject is a Japanese fishing village, where mercury poisoning from an industrial plant killed fish and caused hideous deformities among people unlucky enough to have eaten the catches. Ex-*Life* photographer Eugene Smith was beaten to near-blindness by company thugs after his documentary photos of the Minimata situation appeared. "Musicians are powerless, in the sense that they are unable to change the world socially," Akiyoshi wrote in notes to the piece. "However, they may feel very much concerned about what is going on around them or what has happened in the past, and they can express their feelings through their writing and playing."

Two albums of new work are already recorded, awaiting release in 1979, *Live at Newport* and *March of the Tadpoles* ("tadpoles" is Akiyoshi's affectionate nickname for her trombone section). *Salted Ginko Nuts*, the band's eighth album and first to be produced by its leaders, will be released in Japan late in 1979. No American release date has yet been planned.

The band's new music runs from the happy shuffle of "Son of Road Time" to the pensive "Elusive Dream" to the almost Spanish-sounding "Notorious Tourist from East." It's all rich, driving and startling jazz. "I've always loved the piano and still play solo gigs when I can," says Akiyoshi, "But I guess the orchestra is my real instrument." &

Mark Leviton is a freelance writer—male, Caucasian—working on a novel having nothing to do with rock & roll. Leviton maintains—and our research bears this out—that there is absolutely nothing exceptional about him.