

**Takeshi Asai** is a pianist whose path to the jazz club scenes of New York City, where he performs now, was rather unusual. Having once worked in the non-music industry, he never even dreamed that he would combine his role as a professional musician, touring the world and releasing new albums, with running his own recording studio and working as an educator. What path has led him to where he is today?

**Marta:** *You come from Japan, where you studied at a prestigious university. How did it happen that your further career was associated with universities such as Berklee, Stanford or Harvard?*

**Takeshi:** My university in Japan is known for great jazz musicians (lol). That's one factor why I came to play jazz piano today. Therefore, I had a lot of performance opportunities while I was a student. Stanford showed me the beauty of America. The students, teachers, the campus, and the city of San Francisco, everything I saw was magnificent in the 80s, and that's where I have decided to come back to the US, no matter how. Berklee, that's where I found a grip in jazz; I learned everything from piano technique, even classical piano repertoire, and the most sophisticated music theories that became my foundation today. Also, I met great musicians that I happened to record albums with, tour internationally and break up (lol). Harvard, I simply found I was not smart (lol).

**Marta:** *How did you meet music? Why did you choose piano among all the instruments?*

**Takeshi:** I still remember the moment my mother told the 6 year old me that I had a piano lesson. I was in the middle of mud fighting with my bad friends. Because of the unfinished mud fight or not, I never liked piano lessons.

But there was a neighbor who played the Beatles all the time. When I listened to "Let It Be" I was shocked, then I went to the piano and started playing the famous intro by ear. That's when I started music with passion, and it never disappeared. (Well, it did from time to time (lol). )

**Marta:** *Observing your achievements on the music scene among years, I can see you're a very versatile musician. Moving in the broadly understood field of jazz, you don't set hard genre boundaries, but you give yourself the broadly understood freedom in the creation process. Why did you choose jazz?*

**Takeshi:** I am still finding who I am (lol). When I was a teenager, I felt great excitement in Baroque music. But, that does not have reality in me in terms of performing. I started playing guitar in a Beatles cover band, then switched to keyboards because no one else played piano. (When I was 13, I was better at guitar.) When I was 16, my math teacher gave me a cassette tape of Keith Jarrett's "Köln Concert." Then, improvisation became my passion. Then his album "My Song" hit me with a hammer. Playing jazz piano became officially my passion.

But, now I can explain why people call me "versatile." I might have had professional music ears called "relative pitch," at an early age. Rather than picking up music genres, I listened for beautiful harmony and chord changes. That's why I still hear music not by the genres but by the harmony.

**Marta:** *When I saw you perform, I thought you were such an elite prodigy, but what I found is you have a very different background from other musicians. How was it like transferring from an IT professional to jazz pianist?*

**Takeshi:** One simple answer is, it's not me (lol). One day in the office, my boss in an IT company, who came to see me at a gig in Manhattan, told me I should become a full time musician. My initial reaction was "what?" But a few weeks later, when I finished my daily practice at 1 am, I heard the voice, "quit your day job and become a full time musician. Good things will happen." So, I obeyed the voice and quit the "elite" job. Then the life of hell began. Basically, my piano skills are far from

professional. I took classical piano lessons again in my 40s (my teacher was a grand-pupil of Franz Liszt), struggling and struggling in gaining enough piano technique.

**Marta:** *So, maybe that is the secret which makes you so unique and not destroyed by the rigid framework of requirements and strictly defined paths in music schools, which can cut their wings by many, killing individuality?*

**Takeshi:** Very true. I have had the freedom of playing the music I only love. Life is too short to do what you don't like to do.

**Marta:** *I can see your free approach and at the same time extremely hard work and persistence in striving for the highest perfection, I observe your achievements on jazz stages around the world (I guess, there is no continent where you would not set foot with your music!) - both as a leader and as a sideman alongside the greatest jazz musicians. Your versatility and open mind allow you to play literally everything, in every possible constellation, at an incredibly high level. What would you do if suddenly you got, let's say, a phone call or mail from a polish jazzman or band to come and perform with them on a festival?*

**Takeshi:** It would be my highest honor!

**Marta:** *It would be so amazing to have an opportunity to listen to you live! By the way, on your electric projects, you show us a wide spectrum of your musical inspirations and abilities. You seem to feel really good at any genre of the music, using any instruments. But, apart from this, you're also a great sound engeneer and producer. Would you, please, tell us something more about your work in studio?*

**Takeshi:** It's simply one thing to me. If you keep polishing the sound coming from your instruments, you care about the sound quality more and more. My new hat as a sound engineer came from that motivation. Then, studying the science of sound engineering became so much fun. Now, my fellow professionals come to my studio to record their albums, and I will be their engineer. It's such a pleasure, and at the same time, it's a big benefit of knowing all the facets of making great music.

**Marta:** *The latest album (The Electric Project Vol. 2) is amazing digital music. The one before that was a solo piano live recording followed by a series of acoustic jazz piano trio. I also found that you have been engaged in Broadway theater music production in NYC while you keep your busy performance schedule in jazz clubs in NYC. How did you manage all these different projects? What's the secret of being so comprehensive?*

**Takeshi:** Again, it's simply one thing to me, with just multiple outlets. But on a practical level, I ditched my to-do lists, which I used to feel accomplished when I crossed items. These days, I simply use the first-in-first-out method, or even first-comes-in-mind. In that way, I believe I can understand my mission in a bigger picture.

**Marta:** *I heard a lot of listeners comment that you are such a virtuoso pianist. How did you study piano technique?*

**Takeshi:** Strange, I have never thought I was virtuoso. I have three big disadvantages; being a late starter, having small hands, and being miserable in reading music. My classical piano teacher told me that I had to practice three times more than other pianists. So, I did. I still feel I am so behind my fellow pianists.

**Marta:** *Who are your music influencers?*

**Takeshi:** The Beatles! J.S. Bach, F. Chopin. Keith Jarrett left me a big impact. Then series of jazz pianists i.e. Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Herbie Hancock, Red Garland, Fred Hearsch and Brad Meldeau. The French people made me love Takemitsu, Messiaen, and Poulenc. Broadway musicals have always been awesome for me. When I taught American teenagers, I learned about Taylor Swift, which became my new favorite (lol).

**Marta:** *In your DTC Studio in New York, apart from playing, recording and producing music, you're also a teacher as a Steinway & Sons Educational Partner in your Music School & Productions. Is it true you that in recent days you have expanded your teaching offer, teaching also international students from i.e. Japan, Korea and Italy? What is it like to conduct remote lessons on such a peculiar subject as creating and producing music, in addition - in a foreign language?*

**Takeshi:** I love two "Lingua Franca." One is music. When we talk about nations and borders and cultures and differences, music is there to unite all of us. I really felt when I performed in the US for the first time. We don't even have to speak. The second Lingua Franca is English. I communicate with Italians, French, Polish, Egyptians, Koreans, Chinese and everyone in English. The world is very united from the view of musicians.

**Marta:** *Seeing your extraordinary skills and talent, openness, hard work, constantly climbing to higher heights with constantly raising the bar - I have no idea what could I wish for you at the end of the conversation? There seems to be nothing that Takeshi Asai cannot achieve?*

**Takeshi:** I cannot play piano very well (lol). Honestly, after every single gig, I find tons of homework, then I start practicing on the next day. There were only three times in my entire life when I felt I played piano very well.