

EXPERIENCE—NOBUAKI IGUCHI, OSAKA, JAPAN
CHANTER ROCKS AROUND THE WORLD
BY STEPHANIE CELANO, STAFF WRITER

Although visually impaired, Nobuaki Iguchi is reaching audiences through his music, sending out the message that people with disabilities can accomplish their dreams.

“Behind the storm of daily conflict and crisis, the artist continues the quiet work of the centuries, building bridges of experience between peoples.”

—John F. Kennedy

For many teenagers, the dream of becoming a rock star is the ultimate fantasy. Why would Nobuaki Iguchi be any different? So at the age of 15, while attending school in Osaka, Nobuaki and some friends who loved music took the first step—they formed a rock band. It’s been about 25 years since he started that band and today his musical talent is not going unnoticed.

Nobuaki and members of his current band, Chanter (pronounced *shantay*), which he formed in 1980, are more inspiring than the average rock band members mainly because they are anything but average. You see, three of the band members—including Iguchi—are partially or totally blind. Additionally, they are the first rock band in the world to include a sign language rock vocalist. These unique characteristics of their band are gaining the attention of audiences with and without disabilities throughout Japan and the world.

Born with a degenerative disease of the retina and atrophy of the optic nerve, Nobuaki began losing his sight at age 6. With no cure or prospect for his sight to return, he was faced with the inevitable gradual deterioration of his vision. At a young age, he was sent from his home in Nara to attend a school in Osaka for the visually impaired to learn how to live with his loss of vision. While at school, he met children who were completely blind and this changed his perspective. He realized that he could not pity himself when others’ circumstances were much worse than his own.

At 15, he met a girl at his school who seemed to be so optimistic despite being blind. Because of her positive demeanor, Nobuaki befriended her and learned of her involvement with the Soka Gakkai, and in 1973, he began his practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. At this same time, his dream to become a musician began to emerge.

Despite the physical challenges, Nobuaki, who is a percussionist, says the main reason he has challenged himself as a musician, beyond his love for music, is because he didn’t want to be confined to the realm of being labeled handicapped or disabled. He wanted to break through those barriers and go anywhere he pleased. Iguchi believes his band Chanter can show the world that people with disabilities have tremendous strength and capability to do what they want to do.

“Music is the language by which we can communicate with everyone in the world,” states Iguchi. “Through music we can reach anybody. It is a medium by which we can overcome the barriers that exist between people.”

Over the past five years, Chanter has been playing in a variety of venues and reaching audiences of all ages, although the band’s performance is especially geared toward people with disabilities. At the start of a Chanter concert, all the members of the audience receive a brightly colored balloon. Once filled with air, the balloon acts as a tool for audience

Title: Chanter Rocks Around The World

Subject: World Tribune 12/17/99 n.3273 p.3 WT991217p03 Osaka, Japan

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Keywords: Around Career Celano Chanter Experiences Iguchi Japan Nobuaki Osaka Rocks Stephanie World

members who are hearing impaired, allowing them to feel the rhythm of the music through the vibrations on the balloon while enjoying Chanter's vivid light show.

Tomoko Yamamoto, the sign language rock vocalist, engages the entire audience as she enthusiastically signs the lyrics to each song while singing and moving about on stage and through the audience. Her burgeoning career as a sign language rock vocalist is opening new doors for her. She is now sought out to perform in sign language musicals and the people wishing to study under her are ever increasing. Her initial reason for joining the band several years ago was because of the warmth of the band members.

While performing, Nobuaki can only see flashes of light through his peripheral vision and derives a great boost through the exchange of energy from the clapping audience members. This exchange further invigorates his drumming, enabling him to give more of himself during a concert, raising the level of excitement for everyone.

"Because of our music we have had many memorable encounters. I have had the opportunity to meet people that have significantly more challenging circumstances than my own. They encourage the entire band and me; they give me the strength to live life. I am so grateful that we can use this rock band to reach out," he says.

The name *Chanter* is French for "to sing." Chanter's upbeat music is positive, sending messages of hope and courage. The theme song, "Love Comes True," is about the courage to keep looking toward the future. According to Hiroyuki Nitta, who wrote the song, singing was always a way for him to overcome his hardships. Love, he says, is powerful in that same way.

The song "Wake Up Hero" conveys that anybody can be a hero, but you don't know when that time will come. It's possible to have a bright future, but you just can't wait for it to happen, you have to exert yourself.

"If we show that we are doing our very best, then somehow, we will be able to encourage other people who have disabilities to keep working toward their goals whether they are related to music or not—no matter what it is," Nobuaki says.

In June this year, Nobuaki brought Chanter to Los Angeles to participate in the third annual Art & Soul International Festival sponsored by VSA, an international nonprofit organization that promotes the creative power of people with disabilities. Chanter performed at the weeklong festival, along with hundreds of other artists, in celebration of the arts as a creative expression of people with disabilities. It was an opportunity to continue to build bridges with one another and share the possibilities of artistic achievement.

Last year Chanter performed at more than 200 venues all on weeknights and weekends—after their full-time jobs! All four members work regular jobs in addition to their musical careers. Nobuaki is a consultant to Japan Lighthouse, an organization dedicated to helping people who have lost their vision; bass player Shin'ichi Kumano is an acupuncturist and D.J.; the lead vocalist, Hiroyuki Nitta, is a rehabilitation therapist; and Tomoko Yamamoto works as an administrative assistant in an office and volunteers as a sign language translator in her spare time. Currently they have recorded four CDs and two music videos of sign language rock. A CD-ROM for children will be coming out soon.

"Through the activities of Chanter, I want to contribute to kosen-rufu. SGI President Ikeda once encouraged me to work toward kosen-rufu not just in Japan, but for the whole world," admits Iguchi. "I believe the rapport Chanter achieves with its audiences is the greatest example of that spirit."

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