

# Interview with Livingston Taylor

By Ms. Nanami for *Japanese Weekly Bunshun*  
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**Could you tell me about your set list of your December's performance in Japan? If not decided yet, the outline of a set list would be fine. For example, it should mainly be the new songs from your album "There You Are Again" and older original songs mixed with some covered songs like "Over the Rainbow," etc.**

Yes, it is just as you suggest. I will be playing songs from the newest CD, as well as some songs from my older catalogue, many of which have just now been re-released in Japan by Sony.

**As you play guitar, banjo and piano, how do you creatively use and play these three instruments, [understanding] the difference of these three?**

Well I started out on guitar, so it is still the mainstay of my music. But I have recently been working very hard on my piano, and it is coming along to the point where it is taking more of the spotlight. It has been my plan to be able to make music well into my old age, and sitting down seems like a good idea. Also, I don't have to carry the piano on the road. I haven't been playing the banjo much of late because of the difficulties of traveling with so much gear. But maybe I'll bring it to Japan. It adds a different color to the musical palette.

**What do you think is the difference between these instruments?**

I use the piano to speak the language of music. I use the guitar so I can have music wherever I go. The banjo allows me a tall drink of bluegrass when I thirst for my home in North Carolina.

**Are you familiar with any kind of Japanese culture?**

In my youth, my idea of Japanese culture was sushi and sake. As I have grown older, I have become more aware of Buddhism, largely due to my former wife's interest in it. From the distance of the American shore, the culture and society of Japan are both a mystery and a magnet.

**Have you ever collaborated with some Japanese musicians?**

Over my years of teaching at The Berklee College of Music in Boston, I have had the pleasure of having many Japanese students. They are consistently at the top of the class. Though I haven't actually collaborated with any Japanese musicians per se, a Japanese duo named "Indigo" recently recorded one of my songs, "Never Lose Hope." They did a wonderful job and it was a great compliment to me.

**And do you have any idea of Japanese music? Either traditional or modern pop music?**

Beyond what my students bring me, no, not really. It doesn't seem to make it to the US. Maybe because your English is so much better than our Japanese.

**If your music needs to work with Japanese musicians who have very different traditions, how do you approach the situation?**

Whenever I work with musicians I don't know very well, I allow the music to be our bond. That is

the best thing about music. We always start with rhythm, or time, and from there we can move very easily through the water, allowing the music to be our language.

**When you sing and play in Japan, do you feel or see any different reaction in Japanese audience compared with American audience?**

I find my Japanese audience to be far more informed about me and my music than the average American audience. Once again, we use music to connect, and the result has always been a great joy to me.

**Do you pay special attention to a Japanese audience when you are on stage? Do you try to adapt yourself to a Japanese audience?**

It has long been my philosophy - and what I teach my students - that a good performer pays very close attention to whatever audience might be there. So I always have an eye on my audience, looking to see how our conversation is going. Even though I am on the stage and they are sitting in the hall, we are still having a conversation. Because I speak very little Japanese, I try hard to enunciate my lyrics very clearly so that I can be as well understood as possible. But it is really the music that connects us.

**What do you think is the significance of standing on the stage for such a long time is for you?**

I love being with my audience, whether I am on stage or signing autographs after a show. I think they have the feeling that we are friends, and they come back to see me again. It has been a wonderful career.

**What do your fans, your friends and your family say about your voice?**

When people first hear me, they think I sound like my brother James. We do come from the same family, and there is a similarity in our phrasing and our voices. As people get more familiar with my music, they begin to differentiate, and then they become proud that they can say, "No it's not James, it's Livingston!"

**How would you describe your voice?**

I'm a baritone. Sometimes a scratchy baritone, but a baritone nonetheless.

**A Japanese concert flyer says that your voice is "everlasting, heartwarming voice." How do you feel about this expression?**

I hope it's true!

**Could you talk a bit about the influence something or somebody had on you and your music?**

Obviously, because he is my older brother, James Taylor has had enormous influence on me. But the two of us together had an older brother Alex, who brought amazing music into our house when we were young. Lots of R&B was the staple there, as well as my parents' choice of Broadway show tunes by the likes of Lerner and Loew, Rogers and Hammerstein, and traditional music from Woody Guthrie.

**How have your feeling and attitude toward music changed through your life?**

As I have aged I have tried hard to add new skills to my musical repertoire. As a young man, it seemed to flow out of me without much effort, but now I am much more deliberate in my writing and hopefully more of a craftsman in my playing.

**Was there specific positive turn or negative turn that affected your music?**

It was when I was sixteen years old and really left my home for the "real" world, I made a commitment to being a musician. It has sustained me through both very good and somewhat darker times in my life, and continues to do so today. I suppose you could trace those times in my writing, but I just write the songs.

**If you had to offer just a few words to summarize the most important and essential to your life and music, what would you say?**

Watch your creativity land. See what effect you are having on those around you.

**Could you describe how you feel you are received in Japan?**

I have always been made to feel very much at home in your beautiful country. I hope my audience there loves me as much as I love them.

**When do you feel that you are in your favorite time?**

I am happiest flying above the clouds in my little airplane.

**What is your favorite music?**

The music of Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II.

**Could you describe your feelings about today's world?**

Sometimes good, sometimes bad, but I am always glad to be here. Life is good!

**What do you think about today's music presence and circumstance?**

It's a real changing world out there. The advent of the iPod has done, and will continue to do more to change the industry than any of us could have imagined I think. But there will always be great music, and terrible music, and people to love both.

**What is the relationship between music and language to you?**

Music is the universal language among human beings, I think. So yes, music does become language when I play, and I hope it can be understood on some level, even by those who don't understand the words.

**Does music become language when you sing and play? Is it close?**

I think that this relationship is the main keyword to understand you and your music. I think it probably is so.

**You express the relationship between you and audience like "We have a conversation." Could you describe this expression more concretely?**

I like the idea of conversing with my audience. It is most important for me to hear and see what it is they are communicating to me. I can listen to a crowd and hear if they are quiet and engaged or if they are shifting in their seats and not engaged. I can see the soft glow of their cell phones if I have lost them completely and they are checking their email. So I know if they need me to change what I am saying to them musically. Hopefully I can find something that will engage them.

**If you have something in your mind you want to express and to be understood by Japanese audience at the coming concert in Japan, what would you say?**

I would like them to know how honored I am that they would come to see me play, or buy one of my CD's. It means a great deal to me.

**How would you explain the significance of your newest CD There You Are Again? What is the difference from other albums you have released for 36 years?**

I had the opportunity to work with some of the best musicians in the world, and the budget that allowed me to create a CD exactly as I wanted it. It is not always true when you have a record company looking over your shoulder. They like a certain amount of input. But since I was the person paying for the production, I got to have it my way. I think it's different in that respect from other CD's I have made in the past, and also it has a wider range of musical styles than I have written in the past. I think my years of experience being a musician has finally ended up on a recording.

**Would you please show your message to Japanese audience (and readers)?**

I am so grateful to be able to visit Japan, and to have the opportunity to play my music is such an honor. I am very much looking forward to seeing my friends in Japan and to making new ones.

**I would like to thank you for your time, and for your thoughtful questions.**

I look forward to seeing you when I get to Japan.