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Asian Improv aRts Distributes Awards to Mid-Career Artists

Recently, Asian Improv aRts, the San Francisco-based non-profit presenter and artist development organization, distributed awards of \$15,000 each to five exemplary mid-career individual artists: Henry Threadgill, Kamau Daaoud, Tatsu Aoki, Jon Jang and Francis Wong. Funded by a grant from the **Ford Foundation**, the purpose of the program is to recognize the contributions of mid-career artists to the quality of life in our communities through their bodies of work and experience.

In its work over the past two decades, Asian Improv aRts has developed an intimate knowledge of the trials and tribulations that artists face in realizing a life's work gained from direct experience on a day to day level in supporting dozens of artists over significant periods of their lifetimes. For this particular program, Asian Improv aRts wished to address the challenge of "mid-career" artists in achieving acceptance because they are neither a "rising star" or "elder legend". In doing this we wished to honor mid-career artists who have made the commitment to "the long haul", potentially having many years of creating mature high quality work ahead of them while at the same time bearing tremendous responsibilities. These responsibilities include providing for their families and the cultural legacy of their communities and artistic traditions while facing the limited professional opportunities of our current world and its inevitable "wear and tear".

About the selected artists

Except for performance poet Kamau Daaoud, who is very connected to the music, all are composers and performers who have strong individual voices and have created and led their own various ensembles "back in the day" and beyond. Each is part of a continuum representing different generations of the community self-reliance movement in four different major cities.

What they share in common is the passionate commitment toward developing one's own creative vision that carries along a strong sense of urgency guided by integrity. They have been strong leaders in the world of music, as well as in various communities, and have directly and indirectly mentored three generations of artists. Moreover, in order for their body of works to be realized they have had to serve both as artist and producer almost all the time. This has meant creating artist-led organizations, seeking partnership with other organizations or presenters and self-producing concerts, festivals and recordings, etc. As visionary artists, they chose to play these multiple roles in making connections to make things happen because we are almost the only ones willing to work twice or three times as hard to make it happen.

Henry Threadgill has been a seminal figure in the vanguard of contemporary instrumental music since the early-70's. He has created a body of music that includes more than 150 recorded works which, while firmly rooted in America's Great Black Music tradition, often integrate forms and instruments historically associated with chamber or orchestral music.

Kamau Daaood has served for some 30 years as a griot for black L.A. Steeped in the jagged rhythms of bop and the incantatory wail of John Coltrane's tenor sax, Daáood is a jam-session poet, a writer who builds riffs with an improvisator's sense of drama and structure.

Tatsu Aoki, a prolific artist, composer, musician, educator and a consummate bassist, works in a wide range of musical styles, ranging from traditional Asian music and jazz, to creative free and experimental music. Utilizing his unique experiences growing up in one of Japan's oldest performing arts families and his 25 years in Chicago's Creative Music community, Tatsu is a dynamic force in the Chicago Asian American cultural milieu.

Jon Jang, composer, pianist, bandleader and educator, has followed his own path of creating music which has become "two flowers on a stem," a metaphor expressing the symbiotic relationship of his cultural identity as a Chinese American as well as his musical philosophy of honoring tradition and encouraging innovation.

Few musicians are as accomplished as **Francis Wong**, considered one of "the great saxophonists of his generation" by the late jazz critic Phil Elwood. Wong's imaginative career straddles roles as varied as performing artist, youth mentor, composer, artistic director, community activist, arts administrator, consultant and academic lecturer.

It is an honor for Asian Improv aRts to present these awards and thanks the **Ford Foundation** for its tremendously generous support of this program.