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written by Christopher Caldwell

Tales from Japan, by Jonatha and Harold Wright (SoundSpace Inc.; CD, 71 minutes; \$14). **Ichi, Ni, San, Shi... Go! 500 Rivers and Other Tales from Japan, by Jonatha and Harold Wright** (SoundSpace Inc.; CD, 56 minutes; \$14)

"Long ago and far away, somewhere in Japan..' — spoken in Japanese — is how Jonatha and Harold Wright begin their folktales. When not traveling and collecting source material in Japan, the Wrights are professional storytellers and teachers based in Yellow Springs, Ohio, who frequently perform from their English-language repertoire "Two Thousand Years of Tales from Japan."

Now some of their favorite tales have been recorded and are available on two CDs. One of the neat things about the Wrights' storytelling technique is that they effortlessly blend Japanese terms and onomatopoeic sound effects into the fabric of their traditional tales, and not once does it alienate or seem like scholarly affectation. Each tale begins on a cultural note that may be unfamiliar to most, from language to unconventional behavior of stock characters or unfamiliar social systems of the generally rural Japanese setting. But the way a listener can become so fully engaged within seconds is a testament to the power of these tales and the skill of the storytellers.

For listeners having previously encountered traditional Japanese stories, perhaps through the writings of Lafcadio Hearn or other folk collections, there is a pleasant mix of familiar material, such as "Crane Maiden" and "Snow Woman" as well as formerly uncollected material, notably "500 Rivers" which the Wrights learned from Fujita Hiroko, a fellow storyteller and folklorist from Japan. For biographical and historical purposes, more information about how the Wrights encountered these tales would be intriguing. Perhaps a companion disc will follow, about how these folk tales were found. There is entertainment for all ages here. Children and adults alike will enjoy the magical elements and suspense, while adults especially will appreciate the wry commentary on married relationships and the many human foibles that transcend cultural divisions. These folktales do exactly what they should do: namely, bear repeated listening throughout the life of the audience.

There is a homemade simplicity to the presentation of these CDs, from the tasteful but budget-conscious packaging to the warm spontaneity of the recording. One can tell that the Wrights have told these tales many times, but are open to the amorphous possibilities of the storyteller's art. These releases by Jonatha and Harold Wright are wonderful examples of how oral traditions can live and breathe in the audiobook age.

To hear Jonatha and Harold Wright tell stories is to encounter storytellers who clearly respect their subject matter more than the financial profits made from sharing it.