

The story of John Cage's *The city wears a slouch hat*

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The *city wears a slouch hat* is a piece with a history that begs to be told, the kind of story that biographical movies are made of: a story of opportunities discovered and lost; of ambition, success and failure; of grand dreams and their swift reduction to the modest proportions demanded by reality. It is a story about a young composer with a fresh idea and his encounter with The Establishment; it recounts his brush with fame and money, but leaves him a poor artist alone in the big city. When I describe it in this manner, it seems almost too novelistic to be true. But the truth is that the piece came at a critical juncture in Cage's life, and its failure — and *The city wears a slouch hat* was mostly a failure — permanently affected his work. The John Cage of the *Sonatas and interludes*, and *4' 33"* would not have existed had this piece been a success.

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Although *The city wears a slouch hat* was written in Chicago, its story begins in San Francisco and ends in New York City. San Francisco was Cage's home base in 1941. Together with Lou Harrison, he had established a percussion ensemble there and was beginning to achieve some recognition as a promoter of music for percussion instruments. Like all successful promoters, Cage had the ability to articulate the big idea — he was not just interested in performing and composing, but in leading a campaign "for more new sounds" (the title of one of his articles at that time). He had a knack for generating excitement about the musical possibilities opened up by the use of sounds previously relegated to the category of noise. "I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase," his 1937 credo on the future of music began, "until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard."

Cage was ambitious. His vision of the future of music and the role he could play in it evolved into a plan to create a "Center for Experimental Music." "This Center was to be a place where the work with percussion could continue," he recalled later, "and where it would be supplemented by the results of close collaboration between musicians and sound engineers, so that the musical possibilities might be continually refreshed with new technological instruments." Developments in audio recording fired his imagination, but to be practically involved in creating the sound world of the future Cage needed access to equipment and technical expertise. In short, he needed money. He

devoted himself to contacting possible backers for his plan — corporations, movie and radio studios, wealthy arts patrons — but no one took him seriously. A particularly poignant moment in his own telling of this tale concerns his meeting with the head of the Sound Department at MGM:

He showed me a room provided with a library of sound recorded on film and all the auxiliary equipment: light tables, film recorders and film phonographs, equipment with which a composer could compose music exactly as a painter paints pictures, that is, directly. I begged to be allowed to use this room for a few hours a day. But that was impossible, considering the objectives of Hollywood: the doors were closed.

If the doors were closed in California, Cage thought that they might be opened in New York City. In 1941 he headed eastward with his percussion instruments.

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Cage did not go directly to New York; he stopped in Chicago. The opportunity had arisen to teach at Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's School of Design (Cage gave a class in "sound experiments"), and so he stayed in Chicago for the fall term. But although he had not yet reached his destination, things seemed to be happening quickly. He gave a concert at the Chicago Arts Club that attracted the attention of the press ("People call it noise—but he calls it music," was the Chicago Daily News' account). He met various influential people, no doubt trying to sell them on his plan for the Center for Experimental Music. He was introduced to the famed surrealist artist Max Ernst and his wife Peggy Guggenheim; their interest in Cage's work had the potential of resulting in the financial backing he needed. "Come stay with us when you get to New York," they told him.

Since moving away from San Francisco, everything was going Cage's way. Thus, when the Columbia Broadcasting System approached him to write a score for to accompany a radio play by poet Kenneth Patchen, Cage must have thought that his quest was over. Without his having to beg for it, Columbia was offering him the opportunity to work with sound technicians, to have access to equipment, to have the backing of a large corporation to produce innovative music. The Columbia Workshop commission was the key to obtaining his dream: if not his Center for Experimental Music, then at least the platform from which his center could be launched.

Cage's idea for *The city wears a slouch hat* came straight from his vision of the technological future of music. He would write a score exclusively for sound effects — "to use them not as effects, but as sounds, that is, as musical instruments." Patchen's script accommodated this vision with its liberal use of sonic imagery. Every scene in the play has some reference to the aural imagery surrounding the characters: music, street noises, telephones, ocean waves. Indeed, the main character of the play is simply "The Voice", and his magical freedom of movement throughout the play suggests the permeation of space by sound. The sweep of the action around the city, up to the sky, and out to the sea could best be put across to an audience through the manipulation of

sound. When told by the sound effects engineer that "anything was possible," Cage let his dreams take over: "I wrote 250 pages of score for instruments, the timbre, loudness, and relative pitch of which I described, but the existence of which I only guessed." He composed the sounds of his imagination, confident that the technical know-how of the radio sound engineers could turn them into reality.

The 250-page score was as far as the dream went. When Cage, a mere week before the performance, delivered his score to the station, he was told that it was impossible to play. No doubt the engineer, in telling him that anything was possible, was not counting on the fantastic imagination of a composer devoted to musical experimentation. The visions that Cage had created in his mind — of a sound effects score, of the instruments that would play it, of the Center for Experimental Music that would result — these were all built on nothing more than a misunderstanding; when he arrived at the radio station they all collapsed. Cage must have been crushed. However, consummate professional that he was, he immediately began work on a substitute score, one more modest in means and using only percussion instruments, recordings, and amplified "small sounds." Working around the clock he was able in only one week to write the score, copy it, and rehearse it with the players. The play was broadcast with this percussion music, the music recorded here on this disc.

The reality of the Columbia Workshop production, then, hardly resembled Cage's dream of a center for technological experimentation in music. The percussion score was nothing but a compromise, quickly assembled to cover the shambles that was left of his original conception. But despite the failure of the production to match Cage's ambitions, it fueled his dreams. From what he was told about letters received by the radio station, it appeared that *The city wears a slouch hat* was a success. Thus, Cage reasoned, although this particular production fell short of his artistic goals, it could be the gateway to bigger things. In particular, it gave him a valuable credential to take with him to New York. "I came to New York expecting to be received with open arms by the highest officers of the Columbia Broadcasting System." Full of confidence in the future again, he spent literally all his money on the bus fare to New York.

Life in New York boosted Cage's morale. He and his wife stayed at the home of Max Ernst and Peggy Guggenheim, where they were introduced to some of the most famous artists of the day: Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, Virgil Thompson, Gypsy Rose Lee. Guggenheim began arranging for a concert of Cage's percussion music to open her new art gallery. Cage was able to interest the Museum of Modern Art to host a concert. Together with his Columbia connections, all this publicity would surely result in the backing necessary for Cage's center.

But just as in Chicago, Cage's dreams were founded on misunderstandings. When he went to the Columbia Broadcasting System offices he found that, contrary to his impression, the Chicago broadcast had

not been successful at all; they refused to do any further business with him. When Guggenheim found out about the Museum of Modern Art concert she was furious. She refused to pay to have his percussion instruments shipped from Chicago and kicked Cage and his wife out of the house. Other financial support was not forthcoming; he made ends meet by writing to friends and asking for money and by doing research work for his father.

Cage had left San Francisco in search of his dream, his Center for Experimental Music. Two years later his quest had left in New York with no money, no instruments, and no real prospects. The promise of *The city wears a slouch hat* — its intimation of the "all-sound music of the future", supported by radio studios and lifting John Cage to new musical heights — was all a mirage.

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That is the story of this piece. What happened afterwards? Cage, of course, rebounded from his depression. Through a study of eastern religion and philosophy he tempered his worldly ambition and sought tranquillity through a more modest art of acceptance. His situation had more specific musical results. Left in New York without his extensive collection of percussion instruments, he was forced to rely on the prepared piano, an instrument he had invented around 1940 but which he had barely used since then. His exploration of this medium significantly changed the direction of his work. In a very real sense we owe the subsequent string of exquisite prepared piano compositions — *The perilous night*, *Amores*, *Sonatas and interludes* — to Peggy Guggenheim's refusal to pay for the shipping of Cage's instruments. Beyond this, the prepared piano softened Cage's compositional voice. In 1937 he dreamed of "a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heart beat, and landslide"; by 1948 his dream was of a piece made of pure silence. Would a prominent composer, the director of a prestigious research center and beloved of radio networks, have been able to propose such a thing? To what degree do we owe the John Cage we know to the failure of his initial vision?

And what happened to the score for this piece? The percussion music for *The city wears a slouch hat* was put away, the score left with the Columbia Broadcasting System. Cage probably thought of it only as a bad memory, one of those many disastrous performance encounters that composers put up with over their lives. When his music was published in the early 1960s, he brought out many of his earlier works, but *The city wears a slouch hat* was not one of them. Perhaps he no longer had a copy of the score in his possession. The score used in this performance was retrieved by librarian Bob Kosovsky from the basement of the New York Public Library just a few years ago. It had been sitting on the shelf there as part of an archive of CBS musical materials, unknown. It took so long to turn up simply because no one was looking for it.

And the original music for *The city wears a slouch hat*, the real music, the 250-page score that Cage originally composed, the one for the instruments of his imagination — that music has never been heard from again.

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