

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

BIOGRAPHER KENNETH SILVERMAN PLACES AN AMERICAN COMPOSER AMONG THE ICONS

by Eryn Loeb / GSAS '07

A recent Facebook campaign that has garnered more than 90,000 “likes” aimed to get John Cage’s 1952 composition “4’33””—which famously consists of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence—to the top of the music charts at Christmas. Though the effort was more tongue-in-cheek prank than earnest tribute, it speaks to the composer’s enduring influence. And it’s the kind of quirky homage that Cage, who died in 1992 just shy of his 80th birthday, would have probably loved.

In *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* (Knopf), a rigorous, understated biography of Cage, Kenneth Silverman opens a window

into the man who created that landmark avant-garde composition and other similarly challenging works. Silverman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer and professor emeritus of English at NYU, makes a convincing case for Cage as one of the most important artists of the 20th century. “The modern musical world just would not sound the way it does today without Cage,” Silverman explains. His impact stretches to the music of Frank Zappa, Stereolab, and Sonic Youth, as well as that of hip-hop DJs, whose methods were prefigured by a 1939 work, “Imaginary Landscape No. 1,” which Cage wrote for turntables.

Experimentation was a hallmark of Cage’s life starting in his teenage

years. As a boy in Los Angeles, he was a voracious reader and a winning orator who began playing piano in the fifth grade. Valedictorian of his high school class, Cage enrolled at Pomona College when he was just 16 but dropped out after only two years and headed to Europe; there, for about 18 months, he immersed himself in painting and poetry. Upon his return to the States in the early 1930s, he channeled his interests in art and literature into musical compositions inspired by Aeschylus, *Ecclesiastes*, and later, Eastern philosophy. Cage’s forward-looking works for various instruments were always shaped by his insatiable curiosity, what he once described as “the incessant desire...to explore the un-

known.” When he wasn’t composing he pursued a range of interests as a printmaker, a poet, and, rather endearingly, an avid collector of mushrooms—he even co-founded the New York Mycological Society.

Cage was such an innovator, Silverman argues, that his role in American culture “places him beside such self-reliant individualists as Henry David Thoreau, Gertrude Stein, Charles Ives, and especially Walt Whitman.” And his impact can be seen beyond just music. Cage’s bold eagerness to use art to make people uncomfortable was a key influence

tinct thread runs through this list—Silverman believes that all his subjects are uniquely American figures made so “by their antagonism toward the way things have been done in the past—especially the way that they’d been done in Europe.”

As reflected by the book’s title, Silverman appreciates Cage’s enthusiasm for reinvention perhaps more than anything else. “You never could [anticipate] what he was going to do because everything he did was always fresh...you had never heard or seen it before,” he says. He particularly admires Cage’s “HPSCHD” (1969), so

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on Yoko Ono’s confrontational performances, and he frequently collaborated with Merce Cunningham, the avant-garde dancer and choreographer who was Cage’s creative and romantic partner for 50 years. Though Cage—who received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and American Academy of Arts and Letters—focused mostly on music, it was his inquisitiveness and anarchic spirit that thrilled other artists and inspired their own envelope-pushing work. When Ono, a former concert pianist, first met Cage, she turned to her then-husband, Japanese composer Toshi Ichihyanagi, and said, “Do you realize this is it?”

It took Silverman seven years to research and write Cage’s story, but he says that’s what he’s come to expect after spending decades writing in-depth biographies of Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel F.B. Morse, Harry Houdini, and the Puritan minister Cotton Mather. It may seem unlikely, but a dis-

named as an abbreviation for “harpsichord,” which Silverman describes as “a sort of musical love-in for seven harpsichords, more than 50 tape machines, and 64 slide projectors—to mention only three of the many giant ingredients.” It was the product, as Cage told a TV interviewer at the time, of his interest in “going to extremes.” This “gargantuan multimedia jamboree,” Silverman notes, best illustrated Cage’s broader goal: “Bringing people together and breaking down barriers.”

Ultimately, Cage’s complex, often esoteric work was about finding new ways to get people to listen—to music as well as to the world around them. That’s the essential point of “4’33,” which captures a different slice of time in every performance. What Silverman calls Cage’s “musical sermon” can also be seen as the composer’s groundbreaking statement of purpose: All sounds are worth listening to, and there is music even in silence. ■

■ bibliofile

ILLEGAL LIVING: 80 WOOSTER STREET AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOHO (JONAS MEKAS FOUNDATION) ROSLYN BERNSTEIN GSAS '67, '74 AND SHAEL SHAPIRO



Few people strolling the chic streets of Soho these days probably recognize the name of Lithuanian immigrant George Maciunas. Founding member of Fluxus, the avant-garde artistic movement that counted Yoko Ono and George Brecht as members, Maciunas (1931-1978) helped give birth to Soho’s Bohemian community in 1967 by establishing the neighborhood’s first artists’ live-work experiment at 80 Wooster Street. Called the Fluxhouse Cooperative II, the building housed the hip New York Cinematheque, which hosted movies, events, concerts, and meetings as the lofts above filled with artists craving huge, cheap studio space. For several years, occupants lived there “illegally” as they waited for an old residential law to change. *Illegal Living* is a portrait of the building over 40 years, using numerous photos and scholarly details to archive the art—and the stories—created in those lofts as the neighborhood slowly, irrevocably transformed beneath them. —Jason Hollander

EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD FOR THE WHOLE WORLD: THE ROSS SCHOOL MODEL AND EDUCATION FOR THE GLOBAL ERA (NYU PRESS) EDITED BY MARCELO M. SUAREZ-OROZCO COURTNEY SALE ROSS PROFESSOR OF GLOBALIZATION AND EDUCATION AT STEINHARDT AND CAROLYN SATTIN-BAJAJ STEINHARDT '09, '11



A collection of 15 essays by prominent educators including Vartan Gregorian and Howard Gardner, *Whole Child* is a rallying cry to radicalize outdated education systems using the Ross School, a private Long Island institution, as a model. In order to prepare today’s students, the writers advocate holistic learning, including interdisciplinary programs that weave together world history, sciences, and visual arts. In one essay, UC Santa Cruz professor Ralph Abraham blames ineffective curricula for a “math anxiety” epidemic and urges educators to rethink the current emphasis on standardized testing. Instead, Abraham advocates a chronological syllabus that connects ancient geometry, advanced calculus, and chaos theory. —Sally Lauckner

Second Life

AN UNDERGROUND HIT BY A FILM-STUDENT-TURNED-AUTHOR GOES MAINSTREAM

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

Hitting bookstores this month is the paperback edition of Hilary Thayer Hamann's debut novel, *Anthropology of an American Girl*, which received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly* that begins: "If publishers could figure out a way to turn crack into a book, it'd read a lot like this." But it was eight years ago that Hamann (TSOA '85, GSAS '93) made the gutsy decision to publish the book herself—not for fear of rejection but rather in the spirit of independent artistry. She worked hard to get noticed, sending 500 galleys with letterpress covers and handwritten notes

to reviewers. Although it didn't receive national press, many college newspapers covered the book favorably and it soon became a cult hit among women, many of whom blogged about it online. After the novel sold through its first printing of some 5,000 copies in a matter of months, Hamann decided to reach out to mainstream publishers. Last year, Random House imprint Spiegel & Grau edited and released her labor of love.

Despite its 600 pages, *Anthropology* is an addictive read largely because of Hamann's poetic prose and highly detailed descriptions of life as a teenager in late 1970s East Hampton. But it isn't the Louis

Vuitton-toting, cocktail-clinking Hamptons you might find in the chick lit section; Hamann's introspective literary style has been compared by critics to that of J.D. Salinger. The semiautobiographical story follows Eveline Auerbach as she leaves home to attend NYU, where the author herself received a BFA in film and TV production and dramatic writing, an MFA in cinema studies, and a postgraduate certificate in anthropological filmmaking. "The idea came right out of my experience at NYU," Hamann says. "I just didn't have a camera, so I did it with words."

NYU Alumni Magazine sat down with the author to discuss her unusual publishing journey.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE EVELINE?

For all the social noise of being 16, there's an almost ironic internal simplicity that she has, and that I think a lot of girls have. She's emotionally sturdy and self-contained, so she doesn't need a lot of energy from the outside to convince her who she is and what her goals are. It's a very brave part of a woman's life to investigate.

MUCH LIKE HER, YOUR PARENTS DIVORCED WHEN YOU WERE 3 AND YOU GREW UP SPLITTING TIME BETWEEN THE HAMPTONS AND THE BRONX. WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

The Bronx is the Bronx: It was an Irish-Italian neighborhood where people slapped each other on the side of the head—it was gloriously crass and vividly real. You can't buy that kind of experience; there's something about it that's so concrete and substantive, whereas my liberal mother's lifestyle in the Hamp-

tons was very idealistic and highly intellectual.

PARTS OF THE BOOK WERE CULLED FROM JOURNALS YOU'VE KEPT SINCE AGE 14.

And now, of course, everything is done on computers, but I prefer writing [by hand]. The details weren't too hard to recall—people always seem amazed, like "How do you remember Wacky Packs?" I'm like, "How do you *not* remember Wacky Packs?"

WHY DO YOU THINK THE FIRST VERSION RESONATED WITH FEMALE READERS?

At that particular time, there was a lot of so-called chick lit being published. So what was being passed off as "what women want" was lighter fare, smaller paperbacks about women in maybe more stereotypical circumstances. Mine looked really different, but

PHOTO © HILARY THAYER HAMANN



A KALEIDOSCOPE OF JOURNALS THAT AUTHOR HILARY THAYER HAMANN (ABOVE) HAS KEPT SINCE AGE 14. THEY HELPED HER RE-CREATE THE LIFE OF AN EAST HAMPTON TEENAGER IN THE 1970S.



PHOTO © DOUG YOUNG

■ **bibliofile**

■ ANOTHER FINE MESS:
■ A HISTORY OF AMERICAN
■ FILM COMEDY
■ (CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS)
■ SAUL AUSTERLITZ
■ TSOA '02



Comedy has always been “the balm for wounded souls,” Saul Austerlitz writes. Yet the genre doesn’t garner the same cinematic respect—or Oscar nominations—as its dramatic counterpart.

To help balance the scales, film critic Austerlitz offers an extensive tour through the form—from silent film-era stars Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton to contemporary man-boys Will Ferrell and Judd Apatow—that explores the links binding one generation to the next and their indispensable contributions to celluloid culture. Biographical essays on comedic greats such as Woody Allen and Peter Sellers make for an engaging read that doubles as a comprehensive reference guide, as shorter entries (from Bugs Bunny to Tina Fey) complete the canon. *Kirkus Reviews* calls it “compulsively readable” and “an indispensable list-making tool for the Netflix generation.”

—Renée Alfuso

it did very well. I think that might have had to do with the fact that it was an alternative and a different kind of voice that appealed to people in a new way.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO SELF-PUBLISH?

[Initially] I didn’t intend to publish it—although of course, sitting there writing, I wasn’t thinking literally, no one’s ever going to read this—I just didn’t write it to fit a market to send to publishers. Being an artist from NYU, I made movies on my own, so why not make a book on my own? My then-husband had a design and print company, so we had the equipment and facilities, and we wanted to do something really high quality.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO GET SUCH A POSITIVE RESPONSE?

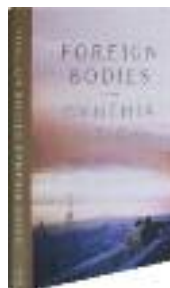
It was nice proof that such things

can happen and that people receiving the books wanted to share that different point of view—it was almost a renegade thing. [A few years later] there were still women sharing stories and writing about *Anthropology* online, and it was being sold on eBay.

HOW DID THE EDITS MADE BY RANDOM HOUSE CHANGE THE BOOK?

I think it’s more accessible and easily understood. The new edition is chronological whereas the original started at the end with Eveline completely compromised. I wanted the audience to judge her and then to dismantle that judgment throughout the course of the book. The original is a beautiful mess, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world. Aside from my kids, it’s probably the thing that I’m proudest of. ■

■ FOREIGN BODIES
■ (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
■ HARCOURT)
■ CYNTHIA OZICK
■ WSC '49



In her twist on Henry James’s celebrated novel *The Ambassadors*, Cynthia Ozick follows Bea Nightingale, a divorced, middle-age teacher from the Bronx, as she reluctantly embarks on a mission to rescue her runaway niece and nephew from the dilapidation of post-WWII Paris. Charged by her antagonistic brother to assume the role of family ambassador, Bea makes furtive, and often unsolicited, interjections into the lives and relationships of others, as her stoic approach to her own unfulfilled life begins to unravel. A PEN/Malamud Award-winning novelist, Ozick continues her tradition of masterful literary prose with a textured narrative that explores the cost of personal reinvention.

—Assia Boundaoui