



# Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists

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**Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists** Kay Larson , John Cage

**The first biography of composer John Cage to show how his work, and that of countless American artists, was transformed by Zen Buddhism.**

One of the greatest American composers of the twentieth century, John Cage created music that defies easy explanation. Many writers have grappled with Cage's music—which used notes chosen by chance, randomly tuned radios, and even silence—trying to understand what his music means rather than where it came from. An unprecedented and revelatory book, *Where the Heart Beats* reveals what actually empowered Cage to compose his incredible music, and how he inspired the tremendous artistic transformations of mid-century America.

*Where the Heart Beats* is the first biography of John Cage to address the phenomenal importance of Zen Buddhism to the composer's life, and to the artistic avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s. Zen's power of transforming Cage's troubled mind, by showing him his own enlightened nature—which is also the nature of all living things—liberated Cage from an acute personal crisis that threatened his life, his music, and his relationship with his life-partner, Merce Cunningham. Caught in a society that rejected his music, his politics, and his sexual orientation, Cage was transformed by Zen from an overlooked and somewhat marginal musician into the absolute epicenter of the avant garde.

Using Cage's life as a starting point, *Where the Heart Beats* looks beyond to the individuals he influenced and the art he inspired. His circle included Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Merce Cunningham, Yoko Ono, Jasper Johns, Morton Feldman, and Leo Castelli, who all went on to revolutionize their respective disciplines. As Cage's story progresses, as his students' trajectories unfurl, *Where the Heart Beats* shows the blossoming of Zen in the very heart of American culture.

Both an innovative biography and a ground-breaking cultural history of the American Century, *Where the Heart Beats* is the work of acclaimed art critic Kay Larson. Following her time at New York Magazine and The Village Voice, Larson practiced Zen at a Buddhist monastery in upstate New York. Larson's deep knowledge of Zen Buddhism, her long familiarity with New York's art world, and her exhaustive original research all make *Where the Heart Beats* the definitive story about one of America's most enduringly important artists.

## Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists Details

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## From Reader Review Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists for online ebook

### Matthias says

A treasure trove of information about John Cage and his music. It whets the appetite to listen to more of Cage's music and to read more about Zen Buddhism. My only complaint is that the otherwise engaging writing is often repetitive as if the author has written the short chapters over many years and then just stapled together.

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### julieta says

This book focuses on John Cage and his relationship with Zen and Tao, and it's very rich with thoughts about how that is related to his music, and to his approach to art. You get an idea, but I am sure there is more. I loved reading this, since it is the part of John Cage and his process which most interests me. Wonderful John Cage.

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### Jeff says

Most bios and studies of John Cage acknowledge that in the middle of the century, Cage became interested in first Hindu philosophy and then Zen Buddhism, and that studying these things shaped his subsequent works and "substituted for psychoanalysis" in his personal life. Few of the scholars who note this, however, have really explored exactly what that means. Kay Larson's new book brings its strongest focus precisely on the period between 1948 and 1952 when Cage's ideas were undergoing their most radical change. These years correspond to a number of key events in his life: his trips to Black Mountain College, his taking classes with D.T. Suzuki at Columbia University, his meeting with artist Robert Rauschenberg, the formation of the Merce Cunningham Dance Co. Larson is to be applauded for the detailed consideration she gives to Buddhist thought, and Cage's relationship to those ideas. I have never encountered such a thoughtful analysis of Cage's most infamous work, "4'33" and its follow-up "0'00". Larson helps the reader understand that these works are far from Dadaist pranks or anti-music, but works of profound spiritual engagement with the "nothing" of Zen teachings.

That said, the book has some structural peculiarities that are annoying, and there are some errors and unedited mistakes that weaken the book as a whole. (I mean, if she can't spell Aaron Copland's name correctly, how do I accept what she says about him?) But ultimately, these errors are a few embarrassing burps in what is otherwise a satisfying meal. How nice, in Cage's centennial year, to have a work that is accessible to non-musicians that makes clear Cage's continuing relevance to us today.

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### Ted says

Maria Popova rave. Interesting topic, fascinating subjects, decent writing, a little too much breathless use of core theme to explain every small action and event in Cage's wanderings. Didn't read all the way through because it was more detail than I cared to know, but an interesting and insightful book for anyone interested

in John Cage and his social circle and the principles driving his work.

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## Robert says

(7.24.12) Reviewed in yesterday's Times. (8.1.12) Had a bit of an accident in Elliott Bay Bookstore last night: bought this and four other books. (8.6.12) Started reading this today, having just finished the nonsensical *Lost History of Skin*. I'm hoping for a quick passage from the ridiculous to the sublime. (8.25.12) Today I finally finished ploughing through it. What a disappointment! And what a shame: what could have been a fabulous book turned out to be dreadful. It's badly written, badly edited, and littered with inconsistencies and non sequiturs. Ms Larson doesn't understand either abstract expressionism or post modernism, is disdainful of Pollock, and just wrong about Oldenburg. And somehow she manages to avoid even mentioning Reinhardt. I learned a single fact - that 4'33" was originally conceived with the title *Silent Prayer*(!) Also I found some of her discussion of the particularities of Buddhist belief and it's relevance to Cage of interest, but it's always difficult when you know how mistaken a book is in the territories that you know well to trust it when it strays outside them. Things must really be on the slide at Penguin when they let a book like this out. (9.9.12) I kept fretting about it, and decided I would after all review it <http://www.askyfilledwithshootingstar...>

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## Gaetano Venezia says

An immersive, surprising, and life-altering read. I had no idea there were so many connections between Cage, modern art, and buddhism. Cage now seems more a cultural figure, conceptual artist, and teacher than a composer. Larson does a great job of revealing Cage's extensive network of influence by meandering through connections and following out their implications, instead of abiding by a strict chronology or primary theme. Larson seems to have embodied some Cagean and Buddhist approaches in her writing style.

Taking on Cage's thoughts and perspective makes for an immersive, interactive read: Drills, brakes, intercom announcements, footsteps, fans—all become musical and interesting. Every object becomes a "Duchamp"—completely ordinary and a perfect work of art. Complex entities suddenly come into view and targets recede. One's own mind can rest and be watched.

Despite loving this book, it actually took me a while to get through because it's insights were constantly pushing me out of the book into introspection and the infinite interesting happenings all around me.

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## kathy j. says

I loved the first 150ish-200 pages of this book. I knew little about John Cage and found it fascinating to learn about his history in general and his time here in Seattle. I'm down with Buddhism and enjoyed learning more about DT Suzuki's introduction of Buddhism to America and thoroughly enjoyed reading about the art scene in New York at the time.

Until...something happened about 200 pages into the book where it was just a hot mess of uninteresting and unfinished work. I was looking forward to hearing more from John Cage's writing and less from the author's tenuous assumptions about John Cage and Suzuki's work. I skim read the penultimate 150 pages and then just gave up on the last 50 pages. I just couldn't do it. The last 200 pages seemed like a list of research notes

with no real integration between them. It was painful. I decided that it was not worth accruing the extra library fines and returned it unsatisfied and unfinished. It was a bummer.

So, 5 stars for half of the book. 1 star for half of the book leaving us at a nice 3 stars, it was OK.

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### **Tara Brabazon says**

I can't help it. Any book that probes, pushes and engages with John Cage - I have to reward with 5 stars. Yes, at times, Larson does over-egg the Zen Buddhist connections with Cage's work. But there is a respectfulness and a rigour, a compassion and a care, granted to Cage's life here.

Cage's quotations gleam through the book. He was - simply - one of the most important, influential and transformative people of the 20th century. While most histories of the century focus on war, brutality and violence, Cage's 20th century revolution was enacted through silence, questioning, reflection and indeterminacy.

I also wanted to note that this fine book engages - and strongly - with the role of indeterminacy in Cage's writing, pieces and life. It is a strong trope and theory that binds the book.

Next life, I'm coming back as John Cage. Incredible man. Magnificent writer. Challenging thinker.

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### **Kerfe says**

This book is vast. Larson's focus is John Cage, but all that made him, followed by all that he made, encompasses the shifting ways of producing and experiencing art that was the Twentieth Century.

Revolution, evolution: the world r/evolved; art r/evolved; Cage took it all in and turned the mirror both out and in. What reflected back was unpredictable, startling, a surprise.

Of course the well-known tipping point is Cage's piece 4'33": is silence music? Or: how often do we stop and find even one minute to leave empty for the world to fill for us with its own sounds?

Like Cage's embrace of Zen thinking, every question suggests another.

It would be impossible to summarize what Larson covers here. And one could quote endlessly from Cage, those to whom he was drawn, and those who were drawn to him. Often I found myself arguing with these artistic statements, but I could never say they did not make me react or cause me to consider my feelings about their actions and words.

It's true, a lot of what was bright and new in the art of the 20th century has turned into trite cliché, surface fashion and advertising.

And many of these artists have seemingly "moved on".

But the core of Cage will never grow old: he allowed himself to consider tradition and formulate different rules; he allowed himself to approach from a different direction, time, place. He found and entered previously invisible doors, closed others, created or ignored still others. And that approach to life never

changed.

He left himself open to the world, not as he saw it, but as it might be.

I haven't even begun to explore all the tangents of information contained in this book, but I did watch Cage performing "Water Walk" on "I've Got a Secret" (just google it) and I advise you to do the same. Truly delightful.

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## **Dan says**

There's a pretty strong disconnect between the content of this book and how it's written which is a shame.

I absolutely loved learning about John Cage's life and thoughts, and Larson gives you a pretty thorough rundown of a lot of it, especially for a newcomer. But the book kind of plods along like "John Cage did this... then he went over here and met these people... then he read this thing... then he went over to this other place for a bit" and the organization of the book is a mess. The chapters are subdivided into these weird headings and sections and Larson creates all these goofy cliffhangers between them like "But what John Cage didn't know was that this student (Rauschenberg or some shit) would change his life..."

But anyway it was still suuuuch a pleasure to read about Cage's life and get a nice little intro to Zen Buddhism too, John Cage is really awesome and he could see the future

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## **George Jr. says**

My more detailed review is here, but the enthusiasm for this book at goodreads compels me to add to it. I understand the appeal of this book, but, especially in this John Cage centennial year, it provides a misleading and shallow view of the man and his work.

The influence of Zen thought on Cage's work is important, but it's a part of a whole. Zen thought was a component of his move towards his encompassing philosophy of composition as process. But it was just a part, and as Cage moved through the decades, much of that explicit thinking was replaced by other ideas, and ultimately Duchamp and Thoreau were more important to him.

Larson passionately yokes Cage to her own faith, and what she does is unfair. The breathless psychological Romanticism is antithetical to the man, she's constantly speculating about what he might have read and how he might have thought about it and then making her case, such as it is, from those unsupported assertions.

Larson knows nothing about the music, and is so uncomfortable with it that rather than having an opinion she defers to various critics. This is a device perhaps suited for a high school English paper, not here. She obsesses over 4',33" and *Music of Changes* and this crowds out all the important, beautiful music and art Cage created (he was a composer, after all, not a philosopher, and her later disavowed the overly-determined chance processes - from the Tao, not Zen - that he used for the latter work). Very badly written and edited as well. I know why this book was published, but in the current version it should never have been published.

If you want an introduction to Cage as he was and is, Rob Haskin's new *Critical Life* is superb: learned, clear, brief, both truly loving and truly critical. Rob Haskins

### **Joe Noteboom says**

As more or less a philistine when it comes to the avant-garde and, for the most part, willfully ignorant of Buddhist philosophy, I wasn't sure this book was for me. But after a few false starts over a few years, I'm glad I committed to getting through it. As Larson/Cage puts it: "You can become narrow-minded, literally, by only liking certain things, and disliking others. But you can become open-minded, literally, by giving up your likes and dislikes and becoming interested in things."

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### **Tony Guarino says**

A detailed cookbook for making John Cage, with a vast collection of stories from his musical and spiritual influences.

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### **Barry Graham says**

This is a good book, but it might have been a great one if Kay Larson showed more interest in John Cage and D.T. Suzuki and less interest in herself. On the rare occasions when she manages to shut up about her own speculations as to what she imagines Cage may have been thinking at a given moment and just tells the story, her book is interesting. When she's just quoting Cage's words, it is compelling. Sadly, this is a book about an ego-transcending genius written by an ego-driven mediocrity. Too much Larson, not enough Cage.

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### **Jeff Fink says**

At the outset I didn't care for cage. By the end, I joined Larsen, in love.

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