

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

By Kay Larson

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

A “heroic” and “fascinating” biography of John Cage showing how his work, and that of countless American artists, was transformed by Zen Buddhism (*The New York Times*)

Where the Heart Beats is the story of the tremendous changes sweeping through American culture following the Second World War, a time when the arts in America broke away from centuries of tradition and reinvented themselves. Painters converted their canvases into arenas for action and gesture, dancers embraced pure movement over narrative, performance artists staged “happenings” in which anything could happen, poets wrote words determined by chance.

In this tumultuous period, a composer of experimental music began a spiritual quest to know himself better. His earnest inquiry touched thousands of lives and created controversies that are ongoing. He devised unique concerts—consisting of notes chosen by chance, randomly tuned radios, and silence—in the service of his absolute conviction that art and life are one inseparable truth, a seamless web of creation divided only by illusory thoughts.

What empowered John Cage to compose his incredible music—and what allowed him to inspire tremendous transformations in the lives of his fellow artists—was Cage’s improbable conversion to Zen Buddhism. This is the story of how Zen saved Cage from himself.

Where the Heart Beats is the first book to address the phenomenal importance of Zen Buddhism to John Cage’s life and to the artistic avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. Zen’s power to transform Cage’s troubled mind—by showing him his own enlightened nature—liberated Cage from an acute personal crisis that threatened everything he most deeply cared about: his life, his music, and his relationship with his life partner, Merce Cunningham. Caught in a society that rejected his art, his politics, and his sexual orientation, Cage was transformed by Zen from an overlooked and 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 Cage influenced and the art he inspired. His creative genius touched Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, Alan Kaprow, Morton Feldman, and Leo Castelli, who all went on to revolutionize their respective disciplines. As Cage's story progresses, as his collaborators' trajectories unfurl, *Where the Heart Beats* shows the blossoming of Zen in the very heart of American culture.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Heroic... fascinating." --*New York Times*

"Inspirational... exuberant." --*Los Angeles Times*

"Revelatory... *Where the Heart Beats* may not just be the best book written yet about John Cage; it's probably also one of the most substantive-yet-readable entryways into the nexus of 20th-century American art and the immortal qualities of Eastern thought... one of the most profound, not to mention unexpected, gifts imaginable." --*Slate*

"Absorbing... no future commentator on Cage's work or influence will be able to ignore Larson's contribution... a milestone in contemporary cultural criticism." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Remarkable... without a doubt the richest, most stimulating, most absorbing book I've read in the past year, if not decade — remarkably researched, exquisitely written, weaving together a great many threads of cultural history into a holistic understanding of both Cage as an artist and Zen as a lens on existence... Not unlike Cage's music, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* is impossible to distill, to synthesize, to relay. Rather, its goodness is best experienced in full, with complete surrender." --*Brain Pickings*

"Strange and wonderful... a gloriously rich reading experience, studded with layers upon layers of deeply inspiring and endlessly fascinating paths. One of the best books of the year in any category." --NPR.org (A Favorite Music Book of the Year)

"Kay Larson's groundbreaking work makes for spellbinding reading. Her understanding of John Cage is profound and her capacity to make Cage's own voice come alive is an enormous achievement. Cage, for whom Buddhism was a central catalyst, made music his meditation. *Where the Heart Beats* opens up Cage's creative process and connects us to Cage's most wonderful heart and mind. This book is a deep well of inspiration that will be treasured forever."

--Mark Epstein, MD; author of *Thoughts without a Thinker*

"In her thoughtful and eloquent writing, Kay Larson beautifully conveys John Cage's playful elegance, his love of contradiction and the originality of his thinking. She describes his method as a balance between rigor and freedom, a synchronization of body and mind. Cage's arduous yet ultimately joyful path of discovery influenced generations of artists. The multi-faceted, layered form of the book reflects his process and elucidates the profound Buddhist and aesthetic principles that informed his life and art. *Where the Heart Beats* is a stunning achievement."

--Meredith Monk, composer/director/performer

"This book is beautiful. It takes my breath away."

--Pat Steir, painter

About the Author

An acclaimed art critic, columnist, and editor, KAY LARSON began her career in journalism in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, at *The Real Paper*, then served as an associate editor at *ARTnews* and an art critic for the *Village Voice*. She was the art critic for *New York* magazine for fourteen years, and has been a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*. In 1994, she entered Zen practice at a Buddhist monastery in upstate New York. Though Larson has written for many types of publications, *Where the Heart Beats* is her first book.

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Luis Vargas:

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