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This is the 10-year anniversary of the establishment of the Jazz and Contemplative Studies curriculum at the University of Michigan. This appears to be the first program at a

mainstream academic institution to include a significant meditation component and related studies, and was ratified only after a lengthy and turbulent debate among the UM music faculty. I thought I would share a passage from a forthcoming book called *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* that makes mention of the ordeal in getting this program passed. Some of you may have seen the passage on the PBS website for the program they recently aired called "The Buddha". Long-time ISIM member Chris Chalfant has submitted a nice essay that is related to this theme, for which there appears to be increasing interest in the contemporary improvisation community.



In the Winter 2000 semester, I proposed a Bachelor of Fine Arts curriculum in Jazz and Contemplative Studies at The University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. It seemed like a perfect fit: jazz's improvisatory core brings the field into close proximity with the heightened presence that is commonly associated with meditation practices, and the jazz tradition boasts a long legacy of artists—e.g. John Coltrane, Alice Coltrane, John McLaughlin, Don Cherry, Wayne Shorter, Yusef Lateef, Sonny Rollins, and Herbie Hancock—who have engaged with meditation and related spiritual pursuits in order to harness the synergistic interplay between these areas and their work and lives. The wide range of contemplative practices now available, as well as a burgeoning body of research into the neuro-physiological, psychological, and health-related aspects of these practices, not to mention the ample literature that deals with their cross-cultural theoretical underpinnings, added to the resources that this program of study could draw upon. Combining a full slate of coursework in jazz and overall musical training with about 25 credits of coursework that included meditation and related practices and coursework in psychology, philosophy, religion, and socio-cultural studies; this curriculum would not only be the first of its kind in jazz education, it would also embody several of the important themes—diversity, interdisciplinary studies, creativity, and spirituality—in higher education at large.

Despite this reasoning, the curriculum stirred a debate of epic proportions that essentially riveted this major school of music. Some colleagues argued that there was no place for meditation in an academic setting, that it smacked of mysticism, and defied the standards of assessment and rigor that needed to be upheld at all costs. One colleague, from an area that specializes in music from the 18th and 19th centuries, admonished that the curriculum would "set the school back 50 years". Not to be outdone, another proclaimed that "you can do the same thing (as meditation) with Prozac!"

Fortunately, there was also strong support for the proposal, with a number of colleagues viewing it as one of the most forward-looking ideas they had encountered in their academic careers. When the votes were tallied, the curriculum was approved by a solid two-thirds majority of the faculty, and in the years since it was put in place, a number of Michigan's brightest and most talented jazz students have followed this pathway. That the approval of this degree program was important to the subsequent expansion of thinking across the University of Michigan campus about the creativity-consciousness relationship—a campus-wide Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies was established shortly thereafter—points to ramifications inherent in this work that extend far beyond music. I have long been convinced that the next frontier in higher education will involve probing the innermost dimensions of the knower—consciousness—and the robust creative activity of the arts, jazz in particular, provides an ideal entryway to this realm.

This book explores jazz as a catalyst for movement in this direction. It both delineates the new terrain and identifies limiting patterns in existing approaches that inhibit the fulfillment even of conventional goals. It offers a critique of both jazz education and overall musical study, tracing the inhibition of creativity in the former to deep-rooted patterns in the latter, none of which, of course, can be substantively considered without a look at overarching patterns in education and large vis a vis creativity and inner experience. The curricular manifestations of these patterns—in jazz, music, and beyond—are but the tip of a paradigmatic iceberg that extends far into the waters of how knowledge and human potential are construed in the academic world. If creativity poses moderate challenges to the reigning learning, teaching, and research paradigm; consciousness shakes the model from its most foundational

levels. What is needed is for curricular breakthroughs such as the above that embody these principles and which might serve as prototypes that can enhance movement in this direction across fields. Science, business, law, education, engineering, athletics, medicine—most every field imaginable possesses rich creative and interior dimensions that may be harnessed in curricular models. Given the extraordinary challenges of today's world—ranging from economic uncertainties to ecological and health crises to urban strife to terrorism and international hostilities—the time has come for education to take this interior turn.

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Sakyamuni Buddha recited the words “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form” in the Heart Sutra over 2500 years ago. When I practiced Aikido, Zen and music at the Jikishinkan Dojo/Brooklyn Buddhist Association from 1993 to 2004 with the legendary Sensei Joseph Jarman, we incorporated these powerful words into all of our practices.

What indeed does “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form” mean and what does it have to do with improvisation? We rehearsed the Dojo Band and Lifetime Visions Orchestra at the dojo with the intent of combining our awareness training and music. The effect was powerful. From these experiences I feel very strongly that those words recited so many centuries ago have everything to do with improvisation.

In our Zen training we learned a phrase “living under the blade.” Coming from Japanese warrior traditions, the term means that we should live and breathe every moment as though it may be our last. We must live with a total sense of fearlessness, of complete commitment to the moment.

Training the mind gives us clarity and confidence. There is no confusion, distraction or doubt. What a perfect match for improvisation! John Cage certainly was onto something. We can see the thread when we speak of Pauline Oliveros, Phillip Glass, Joseph Jarman or Meredith Monk.

Recently I had the opportunity to discuss form with Meredith Monk as I consulted with her on my recent production of “Looking Through Trees” in Brooklyn, NY. I showed her what I called the “form” of the piece. It was an outline of six sections. I remarked that I knew the piece would work since the form was set. When she looked at my chart she immediately said, “John Cage would call that structure.”

That comment resonated so strongly. Something clicked inside. Everything made sense to me. What I had presented was not the form, but a linear roadmap of a very non-linear concept. It was a tangible necessary for the rehearsal process. It was a means to allow for the form to present itself as the artists came together for the first time in the presence of a live audience.

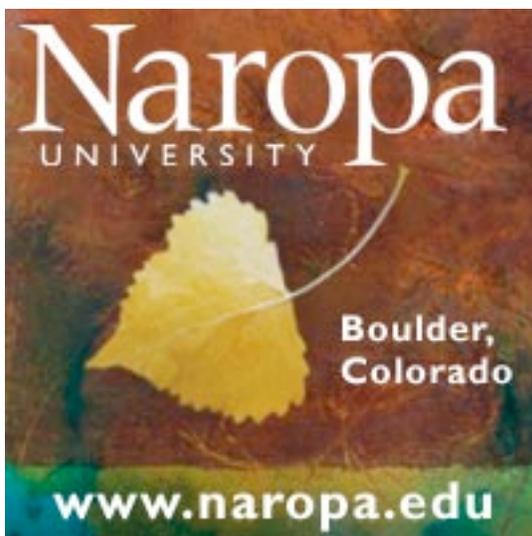
Form is an essence, a feeling. It is a smell, a sensation. When the body is in “good form,” it is in alignment with nature. As Florence Noyes described it, the body is working on “law.” George Russell would come into class at the New England Conservatory talking about “the concept.” He would say, “It’s about gravity man.” How right he was.

When we are in tune with the laws of physics and our minds are empty we become a vessel for the magic of the moment. Our intuitions guide us. We can be completely lost in the music, yet never feel lost. We are guided by the moment. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”

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**Note from the Conference Director
 Kate Olson**



Photo credit: Roman Stolyar

This year's conference is the fifth annual ISIM Conference, and as a prime-number-milestone year, it also marks the return of the conference to its birthplace: Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Although I first became involved with ISIM during my graduate school years at the University of Michigan, I'm now continuing my tenure as Conference Director from a new location: Seattle, WA. As I look to the changing weather of the fall and winter months to match my change in location, I'm also cognizant of the constants.

Every new city, every alternative venue, every far-flung corner of the earth is home to the same community of improvisers. We share a language, no matter how diverse our cultural and geographical backgrounds. Within 6 months of moving to this beautiful city, I've stumbled upon a community of improvisers that not only welcomed me, but encouraged me, provided me with venues and opportunities for performance, and showed a genuine interest in my creative work. I'm certainly not the only witness to this phenomenon: you can read about the founders of the Racer Sessions and other improvisers' collectives in the New York Times, and I implore you to not write mine off as a singular experience.

The beauty of my discovery of this community in Seattle is that it exists entirely independent of outside funding or organization. It is entirely self-sustaining, from inception to completion. As an independent community, it has the power to maintain absolute creative autonomy and collaborate seamlessly with new artistic inputs.

The spirit of this fluidity is expressed in the conference theme this year, and thus my challenge to all ISIM Conference participants and performers: use this opportunity for every last ounce of its worth. Meet new improvisers. Attend the performance of a group you've never heard of before. Introduce yourself to someone whose first language isn't your own. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

I look forward to this upcoming conference not only as a venue for rekindling old friendships and reacquainting myself with known quantities in the improvisation world, but also an opportunity to explore improvisation styles and collaborations with the improvisers themselves who are less familiar to me. We have quite a few performances scheduled by young and new improvisers, who will hopefully have the vitality and depth of vision to sustain organizations like ISIM long into the future. I gladly welcome all of you back to Ann Arbor to partake of this wonderful experience.

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