

JOHN CAGE

b. September 5, 1912

d. August 12, 1992

A fascination with Taoism and Zen Buddhism led John Cage to chance music. Based on the “I Ching”—the Zen book of changes—and the flip of a coin, he created compositions solely by chance.

“I can’t understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I’m frightened of the old ones.”

Twentieth century composer John Cage pushed the boundaries of traditional music, experimenting with sound, environment and audience perception. His avant-garde work influenced music, painting, dance, performance art and poetry.

Cage was born in Los Angeles. He was playing piano on the radio regularly by the time he was 12. The son of an inventor, Cage developed a reputation for innovation and originality—qualities that became the hallmarks of his career.

In 1930, after two years at Pomona College, Cage left for a less traditional education in Europe. Settling in Paris, he spent 18 months painting, writing poetry and composing music, before returning to California to focus on music.

From 1931 to 1936, Cage’s composition teachers included Adolph Weiss, Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg declared the young man “not a composer, but an inventor of genius.”

In 1937, Cage worked as a dance accompanist in Seattle, where he met dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. The two became professional and life partners for the next 50 years.

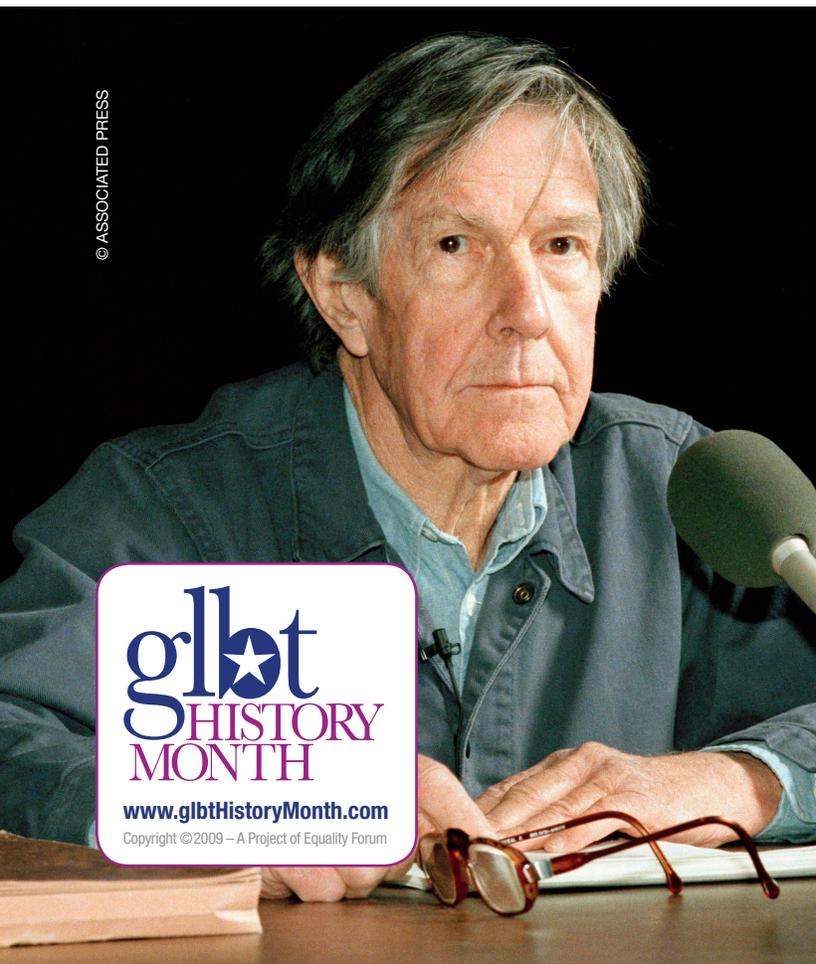
In 1938, Cage began to experiment. He composed pieces for the prepared piano—a piano he created with objects placed on and between the strings to alter sound. He also used record players and phonographs as instruments.

In the 1940’s, Cage continued to pursue unorthodox techniques. His fascination with Taoism and Zen Buddhism led him to chance music. Based on the “I Ching”—the Zen book of changes—and the flip of a coin, Cage created compositions solely by chance.

In 1948, Cage joined the Black Mountain College faculty and began collaborating with David Tudor and Robert Rauschenberg, among others. He composed his most controversial piece “4’33,” three scores of silence over 4 minutes and 33 seconds. The intended “music” of the piece is the unintentional sound created by the audience and the environment.

Cage continued to compose and collaborate with other artists. In his later years, he focused on electronic music, often using radios and “Happenings,” as he called them—pieces that are mostly unwritten, except for timed intervals in which a note, a sound or silence is scheduled.

John Cage was also a writer, philosopher, visual and performance artist, and cofounder of the New York Mycological Society for the study, collection and appreciation of mushrooms and fungi.



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