

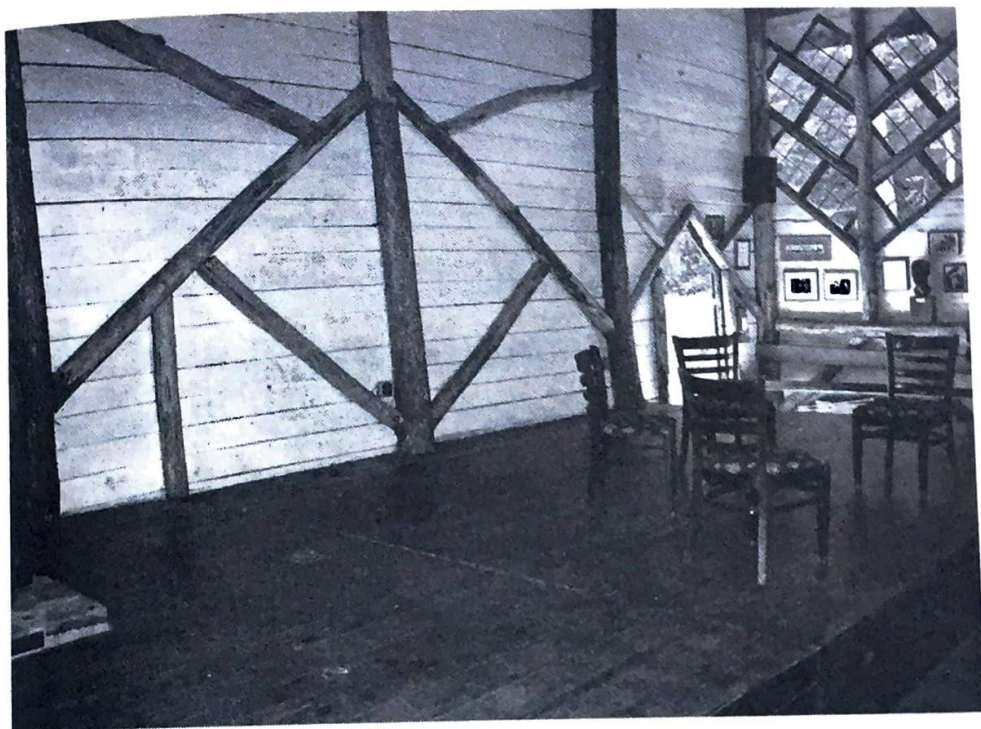
4'33" at First Listening



The Maverick Concert Hall in 2008. Photo: Kyle Gann.

to locate from the main road; even once you've found the right dirt path, you creep your car into the parking lot without getting much reassurance that there's anything there. But for over ninety years the Maverick concerts have remained a prized venue for classical chamber music in a lovely natural setting.

The most famous event in the history of the Maverick series occurred in the late evening of August 29, 1952: the premiere of John Cage's *4'33"*. Pianist David Tudor sat down at the piano on the small raised wooden stage, closed the keyboard lid over the keys, and looked at a stopwatch. Twice in the next four minutes he raised the



The Maverick stage. Photo: Kyle Gann.

lid up and lowered it again, careful to make no audible sound, although at the same time he was turning pages of the music, which were devoid of notes. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds had passed, Tudor rose to receive applause—and thus was premiered one of the most controversial, inspiring, surprising, infamous, perplexing, and influential musical works since Igor Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*.

Of course, what the audience heard during the work entitled 4'33" (*Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds*, or just "four thirty-three" as Cage tended to call it) was not literal silence. Years later, Cage described the sounds heard

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during the 1952 performance, which conveniently fell into three movements, paralleling the intended structure: "What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out." In 1985 Cage said to Ellsworth Snyder, "I had friends whose friendship I valued, and whose friendship I lost because of that. They thought that calling something you hadn't done, so to speak, music was a form of pulling the wool over their eyes, I guess." And again: "They didn't laugh—they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry."²

One can get an idea from the program what it was that shaped people's expectations. The first work of the evening was a theatrical piece by Cage that was at the time intended to be retitled at each new performance for the current date; the program listed it as *Aug. 29, 1952*, but he later more conveniently gave it the permanent title *Water Music*. This was a theater piece notated with a single page of instructions rather than a musical score, and involving a radio, whistles, a duck call, and a deck of cards, along with other paraphernalia. Lasting six minutes and forty

He felt carsick, but knew better than to ask her to drive more evenly. Fifteen silent minutes passed before he flipped on the radio and gave the dial a quarter turn. A crush of warm static filled the cabin.

"There's no working radio tower in the country. It's all static," she said, without looking to him.

"I know. But 102.3 plays the best. Not too tinny. Full and robust. If a cello were to perform static, it would sound like this."

She shook her head and turned the dial. "I prefer 93.9," she said. She still hadn't looked at him.

"It's too thin and monotone. There's no variation. It just sounds like static."

"And that's why I like it," she said. "It sounds like static is supposed to sound."

He reeled the dial to the far end. "106.7," he said. "Just listen." Snatches of foreign transmissions laced the white noise. Syllables surfaced like glowing bubbles from the harsh swirl. Voices in a storm. She turned the dial back to 93.9 and they listened to static-sounding static. Fog fell over the fields. A bus was parked in a meadow. Paint chips pointed down a gravel road to the rusted remains of a tractor factory. Dormant smokestacks. Nowhere was a fire less likely to be found than inside a factory furnace.

"Do you worry about land mines?" he asked.

"Not really. There's a steel plate mounted beneath the driver's seat."

"Does it happen to cover the passenger's seat, too?"

She *had* to smile, but before she shook her head and said he could amputate his own legs now, her gaze hardened around a figure a hundred meters down the road. An elderly woman with the posture of a parenthesis. A twine-strapped bundle of blue tarpaulin hung from her shoulders. A lavender dress hem fluttered at her ankles.

"Don't you know this road isn't safe on foot?" Sonja asked through the open window. "Do you need a ride?"

The woman shrugged the blue tarpaulin, and watching her Akhmed

He came back one winter, not to train, but to relax and to go over the plans. He stayed in the log cabin, on a ridge overlooking the meadow. He spread the plans and photographs of the towers out across the rough-hewn table at the small window that looked out and down at the emptiness.

One afternoon he was astounded by a coyote stepping through the snow and jumping playfully just under his wire. At its lowest point in summer the wire had been fifteen feet in the air, but the snow was so deep now that the coyote could have leaped over.

After a while he went to put some wood in the stove and then suddenly the coyote was gone, like an apparition. He was sure he had dreamed it, except when he looked through binoculars there were still some paw marks in the snow. He went out in the cold to the path he had dug in the snow, wearing only boots, jeans, a lumber shirt, a scarf. He climbed the pegs in the pole, walked the wire without a balancing pole, and traveled out to meet the tracks. The whiteness thrilled him. It seemed to him that it was like stepping along the spine of a horse toward a cool lake. The snow reinstructed the light, bent it, colored it, bounced it. He was exuberant, almost stoned. I should jump inside and swim. Dive into it. He put one foot out and then hopped, arms stretched, palms flat. But in midflight he realized what he'd done. He didn't even have time to curse. The snow was crisp and dense, and he had jumped feet-first off the wire, like a man into a pool. I should just have fallen backward, given myself a different form. He was chest-deep in it and could not get out. Trapped, he tried swishing back and forth. His legs felt wrong, neither heavy nor light. He was encased, a cell of snow. He broke free with his elbows and tried to grab the wire above him but he was too far down. The snow leaked along his ankle, down into his boots. His shirt had ridden up on his body. It was like landing in a cold wet skin. He could feel the crystals on his ribcage, his navel, his chest. It was his business to live, to fight for it—it would be, he thought, his whole life's work just to get himself out of there. He gritted his teeth and tried inching himself upward. A long, tugging pain in his body. He sank back into his original form. The threat of gray sunset coming down. The far line of trees like sentries, watching.

He was the sort of man who could do chin-ups on one finger, but there was nothing to reach for—the wire was out of his grasp. There was the momentary thought of remaining there, frozen, until a thaw came,

and he'd descend with the thaw until he was fifteen feet under the wire again, rotting, the slowest sort of falling, until he reached the ground, perhaps even gnawed at by the same coyote he admired.

His hands were fully free and he warmed them by tightening and untightening. He removed the scarf from his neck, slowly, in measured motion—he knew his heart would be slowing in the cold—and he looped the wire with it and tugged. Little beads of snow shook from the scarf. He could feel the scarf threads stretch. He knew the wire, the soul of it: it would not betray him, but the scarf, he thought, was old and worn. It could stretch or rip. Kicking his feet out beneath him, through the snow, making room, looking for somewhere compact. Don't fall backward. Each time he rose, the scarf stretched. He clawed upward and pulled himself higher. It was possible now. The sun had dipped all the way behind the trees. He made circles with his feet to loosen them, pushed his body sideways through the snow, exploded upward, tore his right foot from the snow and swung his leg, touched the wire, found grace.

He pulled his body onto the cable, kneeled, then lay a moment, looked at the sky, felt the cable become his spinal cord.

Never again did he walk in the snow: he allowed that sort of beauty to remind him of what could happen. He hung the scarf on a hook on the door and the next night he saw the coyote again, sniffing aimlessly around where his imprint still lay.

He sometimes went into the local town, along the main street, to the bar where the ranchers gathered. Hard men, they looked at him as if he were small, ineffectual, effete. The truth was that he was stronger than any of them. Sometimes a ranch hand would challenge him to an arm wrestle or a fight but he had to keep his body in tune. A torn ligament would be disaster. A separated shoulder would set him back six months. He placated them, showed them card tricks, juggled coasters. On leaving the bar he slapped their backs, pickpocketed their keys, moved their pickup trucks half a block, left the keys in the ignitions, walked home in the starlight, laughing.

Tacked inside his cabin door was a sign: **NOBODY FALLS HALFWAY.**

He believed in walking beautifully, elegantly. It had to work as a kind of faith that he would get to the other side. He had fallen only once while training—once exactly, so he felt it couldn't happen again, it was beyond possibility. A single flaw was necessary anyway. In any work of beauty

there had to be one small thread left hanging. But the fall had smashed several ribs and sometimes, when he took a deep breath, it was like a tiny reminder, a prod near his heart.

At times he practiced naked just to see how his body worked. He tuned himself to the wind. He listened not just for the gust, but for the anticipation of the gust. It was all down to whispers. Suggestion. He would use the very moisture in his eyes to test for it. *Here it comes.* After a while he learned to pluck every sound from the wind. Even the pace of insects instructed him. He loved those days when the wind rushed across the meadow with a fury and he would whistle into it. If the wind became too strong he would stop whistling and brace his whole self against it. The wind came from so many different angles, sometimes all at once, carrying treesmell, bogwaft, elkspray.

There were times when he was so at ease that he could watch the elk, or trace the wisps of smoke from the forest fires, or watch the red-tail perching above the nest, but at his best his mind remained free of sight. What he had to do was reimagine things, make an impression in his head, a tower at the far end of his vision, a cityline below him. He could freeze that image and then concentrate his body to the wire. He sometimes resented it, bringing the city to the meadow, but he had to meld the landscapes together in his imagination, the grass, the city, the sky. It was almost like he was walking upward through his mind on another wire.

There were other places where he practiced—a field in upstate New York, the empty lot of a waterfront warehouse, a patch of isolated sea marsh in eastern Long Island—but it was the meadow that was hardest to leave. He'd look over his shoulder and see that figure, neck-deep in snow, waving good-bye to himself.

He entered the noise of the city. The concrete and glass made a racket. The thrup of the traffic. The pedestrians moving like water around him. He felt like an ancient immigrant: he had stepped onto new shores. He would walk the perimeter of the city but seldom out of sight of the towers. It was the limit of what a man could do. Nobody else had even dreamed it. He could feel his body swelling with the audacity. Secretly, he scouted the towers. Past the guards. Up the stairwell. The south tower was still unfinished. Much of the building was still unoccupied, nursed in scaffold. He wondered who the others walking around were, what their purpose was. He walked out onto the unfinished roof, wearing a

construction hat to avoid detection. He took a mold of the towers in his head. The vision of the double cavallettis on the roof. The γ -shaped spread of the wires as they would eventually be. The reflections from the windows and how they would mirror him, at angles, from below. He put one foot out over the edge and dipped his shoe in the air, did a handstand at the very edge of the roof.

When he left the rooftop he felt he was waving to his old friend again: neck-deep, this time a quarter of a mile in the sky.

He was checking the perimeter of the south tower one dawn, marking out the schedules of delivery trucks, when he saw a woman in a green jumpsuit, bent down as if tying her shoelaces, over and over again, around the base of the towers. Little bursts of feathers came from the woman's hands. She was putting the dead birds in little ziploc bags. White-throated sparrows mostly, some songbirds too. They migrated late at night, when the air currents were calmest. Dazzled by the building lights, they crashed into the glass, or flew endlessly around the towers until exhaustion got them, their natural navigational abilities stunned. She handed him a feather from a black-throated warbler, and when he left the city again he brought it to the meadow and tacked that too just inside the cabin wall. Another reminder.

Everything had purpose, signal, meaning.

But in the end he knew that it all came down to the wire. Him and the cable. Two hundred and ten feet and the distance it bridged. The towers had been designed to sway a full three feet in a storm. A violent gust or even a sudden change in temperature would force the buildings to sway and the wire could tighten and bounce. It was one of the few things that came down to chance. If he was on it, he would have to ride out the bounce or else he'd go flying. A sway of the buildings could snap the wire in two. The frayed end of a cord could even chop a man's head clean off in midflight. He needed to be meticulous to get it all right: the winch, the come-along, the spanners, the straightening, the aligning, the mathematics, the measuring of resistance. He wanted the wire at a tension of three tons. But the tighter a cable, the more grease that might ooze out of it. Even a change in weather could make a touch of grease slip from the core.

He went over the plans with friends. They would have to sneak into the other tower, put the cavallettis in place, winch the wire tight, look out for security guards, keep him up to date on an intercom. The walk would be