



A workshop for life

by Mike Bienstock

It's a breezy, sunny July day and I'm sitting on a bench in the Halifax Public Gardens. I'm watching the patterns of dappled sunlight, morphing in time with the swaying branches and leaves, move across the walkways, grass, flowers, and people, at times in sync, and at others in counterpoint to the sounds of the leaves on the wind and the hum of traffic on Spring Garden Road. Occasional voices and footsteps punctuate. I'm soaking up the moment in awareness. My mind had just been blown.

And appropriately enough, by Julian Priester, a legendary jazz trombonist who has played with the likes of Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington, John Coltrane and Sun Ra, and seemingly everyone in between. Not more than an hour earlier I had traded phrases with him, drummer Jerry Granelli, and other faculty and participants of the Creative Music Workshop (CMW) in a spontaneous, collaborative, improvisational composition. And even though it may have seemed akin to Schrödinger's cat talking with Einstein, Feynman, and Schrödinger himself, nonetheless, my musical mewls, such as they were, in response to and as part of the music that was unfolding before me were listened to and understood and constituted a valid part of a communal conversation and journey of the moment. It was a form of creative freedom I had rarely felt.

I'm not a professional musician of any kind, but also no stranger to jazz and "free jazz," and other forms of improvisation. Most weekend nights of my teenage years were spent haunting the jazz clubs of Manhattan, where I grew up, trying to be a ghost and inconspicuously blend-in and not bely that I was underage, so I could listen to the musical greats of the time, Priester and Granelli among them.

Nor was I a stranger to artistic collaboration. For a couple of decades, I worked creatively and collaboratively with large ensembles of artists and technicians crafting visuals for Hollywood movies, improvising in the moment, depending on the light, the weather, the mood, the equipment available, the

director's vision or whim, in addition to whatever studio/location, budgetary, technological, and, especially, time constraints existed. But there had always been a script and a schedule. On that afternoon, there were neither.

"One reason why people like improvised music is that it's a direct reflection of life, not something we thought up," Jerry Granelli, the CMW's founder and creative director, once said. "It scares you ... makes you think you're going to die for a moment ... do you have the courage to play? 'Can I move out of my desires and wants, and into compositional choices?'"

The Creative Music Workshop was a vision and passion of Jerry Granelli's to create a space for musicians and artists of all kinds to learn how to put themselves out on that precipice to create collaboratively and collectively in the moment, aware of, listening to, and completely in tune with one another on a journey without any preconceived ideas, form, or agenda, and travel to and arrive at a destination together as one. How do you teach that?

"Jerry had been teaching music for years and years. As a kid he was a child prodigy on the drums. His dad was also a drummer, and his dad would send his students to Jerry when they got too good," says J. Anthony Granelli, Jerry's son, musician, and current director of the CMW. "Into the '60s he taught drummers

for a lot of the bands in San Francisco at that time, like the Big Brother and the Holding Company guys and the Jefferson Airplane guys. So he'd always been teaching. In the years before he moved to Halifax, he'd been teaching for a long time."

Jerry Granelli, who died in July of 2021 at age 80, had a musical career spanning seven decades. In 2016, he received Nova Scotia's Portia White Prize, which recognizes cultural and artistic excellence on the part of a provincial artist who has attained professional status, mastery, and recognition in their discipline. As a musician and drummer, Granelli played across genres: jazz, funk, pop, psychedelic rock, Celtic, avant-garde. He played with Vince Guaraldi (*A Charlie Brown Christmas*), Ornette Coleman, Sonny Stitt, Charlie Haden, Sly Stone, to name



Jerry Granelli (photos courtesy of 1313 Music Association)

a very few. The list is long. There were no boundaries to his artistry, and he brought that same philosophy to his teaching. After discovering Buddhism, he went to the Naropa Institute in Colorado in the '70s, where he started its Creative Music Program. He went on to teach at the Cornish Institute of Arts in Seattle, and the Jazz Institute of Berlin. His music speaks for itself; but his greatest legacy may be as a mentor and teacher, not just for music and percussion, or improvisational composition, but for how to find oneself and nurture self-expression, creativity, inclusion, belonging, and community – something he did everywhere he went.

In Nova Scotia, the CMW hatched in 1996 alongside what is now the TD Halifax Jazz Festival as its flagship summer education program. “He was there at the very beginning of it (formerly Atlantic Jazz Festival) and what became the CMW sort of happened at the same time, they kind of started to grow together,” says J. Granelli, about his father working “hand in hand with Susan Hunter, who started the jazz festival.... He probably helped Susan a bunch. It was her baby, but he was whole-heartedly involved from the get-go, bringing people up to Halifax – I was in a bunch of bands that he brought up to play at those early festivals in what was then in the lounge of the Holiday Inn. The tent thing didn’t happen for many years.

“He started the CMW with Donnie Palmer and Skip Beckwith, and at the time it was sort of a jazz program, but he always wanted to make it more and more about open improvising and spontaneous composition, and over the years he sort of nudged it more and more in that direction. It was a natural outgrowth of everything he had already been doing.”

The CMW’s eight-day intensive program (July 8-16), held in conjunction with the jazz festival, focuses on actively listening and observing – learning to be completely aware and in the moment, along with exploring the connection between mind and body through group exercises, discussions, meditation, instrument workshops, and playing in group ensembles in order to improvise and communicate effectively and directly, unlock inner creativity, and overcome fear and performance anxiety. Participants of all ages, skill levels, and artistic disciplines are welcome, amateur and professional alike.

“It’s built up of a lot of disparate parts. The course of a given day has creative process stuff, there’s meditation and individual instrument stuff and ensembles ... there’s movement, there’s bodywork, all kinds of different things going on,” says J. Granelli. “And the whole thing is the experience of it. Everybody has things they enjoy or find difficult or find uplifting or challenging. That’s why doing the program is so great. At the end of that time, you come out of it having experienced a whole thing.”

When I attended the CMW it was held at Sacred Heart School in Halifax. For the past number of years, it’s been located at the Nova Scotia Community College’s Waterfront Campus in Dartmouth, which is “completely ideal,” says J. Granelli. “We have a lot of room there and the rooms are nice.... Especially since over the years we’ve done it wherever we could find to do it. There were always nice people letting us do it. This is the first place that was really fitting for us. It’s perfect ... they’re great partners.”



Creative Process work



CMW participants at their ensemble performance at the Halifax Jazz Festival.



Ensemble work



Sam Penner and Andrew Jackson perform *Where Dance and Music Meet*, directed by Susanne Chui. Photo by Kevin MacCormack, courtesy of Mocean Dance and 1313 Music Association.

The program offers two streams. The Creative Process program, which explores improvisation, movement, listening, meditation, communication, and dealing with fear, self-consciousness, and risk-taking, starts at two full days and continues for mornings during the weekdays. The Core program, which includes complete access to the Halifax Jazz Festival, builds on the Creative Process program and comprises intensive full days of instruction with the entire faculty for the whole week, working in ensembles, and performing together during the last day as part of the festival.

Some of the things that participants work on address ways to unlock their creativity and have the freedom to find their own personal voice, break constraints surrounding sounds and expressions, overcome self-doubt, see challenges as opportuni-

ties rather than obstacles, learn how to lean into the fear of failure or of putting themselves out there and to embrace it, and not judge themselves or their ideas or censor themselves.

One of the workshop's ultimate goals is to enable participants to create a personal practice and approach to creativity, be it music, dance, writing, or other endeavours, that's incorporated into their daily lives, and which stays and evolves and changes with them. In a sense it's a practice to navigate life itself, not just a particular discipline.

"The thing that's so powerful about this stuff is that it keeps growing and evolving. It's not like you just go and get the information and you have the information and you're like you understand it and it's perfect and you're done," says J. Granelli. "It's not like learning scales or chords. The work is self-evolving, it has a quality to it of the more you know about it the more you become interested in it. It's like peeling an onion, and it just gets deeper and deeper and deeper. And lessons and concepts that you learn early on take on different meaning and different contexts the more involved you get."

Although music and dance feature prominently as part of the CMW, the program has always been multi-disciplinary. Participants as well as faculty in the past have included poets, writers, sculptors, photographers, illustrators, and those from other disciplines. This year Barbara Bash, a renowned author, calligrapher, illustrator, and performance artist, will join Michael Blake (trumpet), Ross Burns (guitar), Doug Cameron (percussion), Susanne Chui (dance), Nick Dourado (piano, saxophone), Andrew MacKelvie (saxophone), Nick Maclean (guitar), Nicole Rampersaud (trumpet), and J. Granelli (bass) on the faculty. Bash taught western pen calligraphy and created a Book Arts program while at the Naropa Institute, and painted in performance, and created brushstrokes for Granelli's students to play.

The CMW's faculty alumni includes eclectic, innovative, and influential artists. Among the most recent are bassists Rufus Reid and Simon Fisk; cellist Peggy Lee; pianist and composer Peter-Anthony Togni; Hammond B3 organ guru Dr. Lonnie Smith; horn players Julian Priester, Jane Ira Bloom, and Dave Douglas; composer and clarinetist Jeff Reilly; the singers Jay Clayton and Erin Costelo; and guitarists Christian Kögel, David Tronzo, Robben Ford, and Bill Frisell.

Encompassing and uniting multiple artistic disciplines and their respective communities far and wide – from Halifax, across North America, Europe, and elsewhere – is one of the program's missions: fostering and facilitating cross-pollination and cross-collaborations between the arts, helping to build a cohesive and robust arts community. "Improvisation is such a bridge between the forms because everybody – composition is in every form, whether it's writing or visual arts or music ... everything, even dance," says Susanne Chui, a CMW faculty member who is a dancer, choreographer, and the co-artistic director of the Atlantic region's contemporary dance company, Mocean Dance.

"I had been improvising in Toronto, and I came back and was looking for dancers to improvise with, but there wasn't too much of an improvising scene here, so I started to find



Nick Maclean, Ellen Gibling, I'thandi Munro, Kelvin Mansaray, India Gailey perform *Where Dance and Music Meet*, directed by Susanne Chui. Photo by Kevin MacCormack, courtesy of Mocean Dance and 1313 Music Association.

some camaraderie with musicians,” says Chui about first connecting with Jerry Granelli around 2011. “Susan Hunter was the one who introduced us ... she was running 1313 Music.” That meeting led to a decade-long friendship, mentorship, and collaboration that eventually culminated in the performances *Where Dance and Music Meet*, which took place at St. Andrews United Church in Halifax on Mar. 31 and April 1. The pieces and concepts were developed with Jerry Granelli over the years. His death prevented his taking part, and the show became a tribute to him.

“Before going to CMW ... I was quite drawn to improvisation and really loved the freedom it gave me as an improviser or as a dancer to really be like a creator and a performer all at once. I love the agency that it gave to the dancer to really be able to pay attention to what’s happening at any moment and also compose,” says Chui. “There’s always awareness practice that is part of that ... but something about meeting Jerry and learning that approach really clarified it for me and gave me a really deeper connection to it, but it wasn’t like, oh here’s a technique – here’s a dance technique that I do, let’s improvise ... it went further than that. It became like a life practice.... And of course, it gave me a community of people.

“*Where Dance and Music Meet* was the name of a bunch of explorations he did over his lifetime with a bunch of dancers, so we kept that title,” says Chui. “His ex-wife was a dancer – Nina Seybolt, and when he was at Naropa in the mid-’70s there was a lot of cross-disciplinary collaboration there and that’s where he met Nina.... They did a lot of projects together and had a band where she danced with the band and taught a course called ‘Where Dance and Music Meet,’ along the same lines.”

At the Naropa Institute, Jerry Granelli had started a creative music program integrated with its dance and theatre departments, and brought together exceptional musicians, among

them Don Cherry and Charlie Haden, composer John Cage, and poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Ann Waldman to teach. “It was a real entrance into education based on this type of music – in how it could be taught. Naropa was about crossing boundaries and making the arts melting pot work together,” Jerry Granelli had said of his work at that time.

“After they left Naropa, he kind of left it for a while and didn’t really come back to it until we started working on it again about a decade or so ago,” says Chui. “It was part of his formative time in those early Naropa years when he was integrating a lot of the information he was learning, and he left it and then he came back, so it was almost a full circle to pick up that work and take it further with me.”

The full-length evening of nine dance-music pieces co-created by Chui, who was the director, with six core collaborators from the faculty of the CMW focused on dissolving the boundaries of dance and music by exploring meeting places of space, pulse, melody, vibration, and song, creating something magical.

“It was a really special show, really honouring the spirit. There were like 19 performers, and J. Granelli came up (from New York to participate),” says Chui. “For me to be able to put all of my dancing – it happens in little pieces throughout the summer – this is kind of all in one place, and to see them all together was really powerful, as was sharing that with all of the musicians (involved) who were close with Jerry.”

The 1313 Music Association, the CMW’s parent organization, hosts Creative Music Labs throughout the year, which build on the work done in the summer program and are always open to all. There are also other multi-disciplinary projects and educational opportunities and networking within the collective arts community that are intertwined. For example, Mocean Dance has a Clear Forum choreographic lab at Ross Creek Centre for

Doug Cameron and l'thandi Munro perform *Where Dance and Music Meet*, directed by Susanne Chui. Photo by Kevin MacCormack, courtesy of Mocean Dance and 1313 Music Association.



the Arts in Canning for artists from across Canada, and Chui has done some improvisational and multi-arts projects with Erin Donovan of Hear Here Productions in Mahone Bay, which creates site-specific work in the realms of music, dance, theatre, film, and visual art. The CMW is planning to work with Donovan and award-winning dancer Kate Holden to offer workshops on the South Shore, as well as in the Annapolis Valley with singer/songwriter Kim Barlow and the Music in Communities artist-driven cooperative, later this year.

One takeaway that is sometimes forgotten is that learning is a lifelong experience. Those within or who have previously attended the program, students and faculty alike, experience immediate as well as long-term growth, because the concepts taught are always applicable to wherever they are on their personal and artistic path, so it's not unusual for them to return again and again.

"People come year after year after year. And in a sense the program is essentially the same... it changes depending on who's there and the different issues that people bring up and are trying to work through, but the work is self-evolving," says J. Granelli. "We're using the same tools to teach those lessons. Like getting up and playing a solo in front of the whole group the first time you do it has one meaning, the seventh time you do it, or the fifth year you do it, has a completely other meaning. It's the same exercise but where we all are as artists changes and the way you experience that exercise changes. That kind of playing isn't something that one just sort of figures out. Even for those of us who have been doing it for a long time, you're constantly learning and growing.

"To see the same people over and over again, to see people who came as teenagers and have them come back 20 years later ... and they progress, or to see people who were really

young and now have kids – it's amazing. It just keeps growing in you, and fundamentally becomes a way we see the world. There's no expiration date or aging out or anything. You come back and experience it again and it'll be different the second time you do it and the third time, etc.," says J. Granelli.

"It feels like a long path," says Chui. "You also recognize that people are on a different part of their path, it's a life path not just like, OK you're not there yet. It's not a judging about where people are at. It's where they are in it. It helps people see their music or their practice as a long-term thing too and not put the pressure on having to make it at this moment. It's really the long road of how you make it a life practice.

"The level of care and interest... that level the CMW summer program cultivates around, like appreciation for other people and being able to listen to each other and create something together, that touches camaraderie and community, it doesn't go away. The staying power of the Creative Music Workshop and the people in it has been really incredible – that open door situation where you can always come and go but you're always part of it. You don't have to be chosen to be part of it. You show up. Which is also unusual in the professional arts where things are done by audition or by curation or you're being asked into something. This principle, which goes right back to ... everyone's welcome, every level is welcome, everyone has something to offer, everyone has something to learn from somebody else, everyone is as good as everyone else in terms of their basic humanity and what they can give and offer. That's pretty special, and I forget and have to be reminded sometimes of just how special those spaces are."

www.creativemusicworkshops.com

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