

Reflections at the 25th Anniversary of the Breitenbush Jam

Conversation with Alito Alessi, Ray Chung, K.J. Holmes, Daniel Lepkoff, Karen Nelson, Steve Paxton, Scott Smith, and Nancy Stark Smith by Kristin Horrigan.

At the Breitenbush Jam, Breitenbush Hot Springs, Detroit, OR, USA, March 12, 2006

*Seven people roll towards the back of the room. **REVERSE.** We roll towards the front. Someone enters dancing a solo. **ALL BUT SOLOIST HOLD. KRISTIN, REPORT.** It is four in the morning—the middle of the all night jam at the 25th anniversary Breitenbush Contact Improvisation Jam and Conference—there are 16 of us doing Lisa Nelson's Tuning Score. It seemed to arise spontaneously, an echo of a performance earlier that night. A call rang out in the space and we responded. Someone added another call and now electricity crackles in the air as we unite in the focus of this practice, surreal in the mid-night hours. The calls get wilder as night deepens towards morning.*

This spring the Breitenbush CI Jam and Conference celebrated its 25th anniversary, from March 10 to 18 in Detroit, Oregon. Founded by Alito Alessi and Karen Nelson in 1981, the Breitenbush Jam is the longest running multi-day jam in the U. S. It has become known for gathering many prominent teachers of contact improvisation (as well as dancers of all levels of experience) and for its setting among mountains, redwoods, and natural hotspots.

While the jam and conference have taken many shapes over the years, the central elements have remained the same: a focus on the practice of CI, the teachings of major contributors to the field, and an exploration of performance. In the early years, as I understand it, the jam was held on separate days from the conference (classes, lectures, work sessions), then a weekend of performing in Eugene, OR, followed. Now, the conferences take place in the afternoons of the jam and performances are held at the jam each evening. This year the conference featured Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, Ray Chung, and Scott Smith teaching classes, and Karen Nelson leading a series of warmups. Also present to celebrate the anniversary and to contribute to the discussions were Alito Alessi, Daniel Lepkoff, and K.J. Holmes, as well as more than 50 dancers—beginners to veterans, newcomers and old-timers—from all over the U.S. and abroad.

The dancing takes place in a beautiful, wood-floored room in the central lodge of the Breitenbush Conference and Retreat Center with windows looking out into the forest. Staring up at the tall, old trees—easily a hundred feet taller than any near my East Coast home—I felt surrounded by history: of the land that runs deeper than all of us, of a form whose life line stretches out longer than my own, and of the first multi-day jam in this country.

The overarching theme of this year's jam was a celebration of its history. Amidst the reminiscing about jams past were conversations about how the jam, the times, and the dancing itself have changed. As a newcomer I was touched by the welcome extended by those who call this jam home and honored to have had the opportunity to conduct an interview with several pioneers of the form about these topics.... Kristin Horrigan

Kristin: I'm curious to get at what makes this jam particular, unique, special. What's the intention of this event and how has it changed over the years?

Karen: We wanted to practice contact. It turned out though, that in this space without caffeine and with all the hot water and relaxation, it was really difficult to maintain a focus and the practice got very flakey. So the next year we connected with Nancy and she starting coming to teach a few classes. It really changed everything 'cause it really brought the focus back to contact.

Nancy: I'm quite amazed at how it's been possible for you to maintain the quality of focus on contact and closely related issues and at the same time really value and support anarchy. Case in point, the first night at orientation when the Breitenbush liason person said, "Let's spread out to get everyone in the circle." Alito said, "I'm not going to ask everyone to sit in the circle. We're in the room together and everybody's focused—if people want to be outside the circle or in the circle, it's okay." So it's not an enforced sense of community but an embraced sense of community. Coming back after ten years absence it's interesting to see how you've been able to keep the focus strong and to keep the attitude relaxed but clear.

Kristin: You all have made the choice to come here now and many other times—how does being here relate to your artistic work?

Steve: This is the only jam I come to. It's a chance to let my body go through a less formal program. A chance to play and not get hurt. If I haven't been working during the winter and I come here and start dancing and the dancing is fun and I overdo it, the hot and cold tubs seem take care of me.

Alito: When I first started doing contact, it was the values that seemed to resonate most with my life, and this jam reflects those values. The jam has evolved from the people who have been here. Also it's a manifestation of my life. I don't really see my life as an artistic life. The thing that really makes me happy is to fulfill to the best of my ability my values for what I think living and dancing is. This jam is a reflection of my attempt at that.

Nancy: I think of this as a multi-dimensional conference, rather than going to the Holiday Inn somewhere and giving presentations. It's like the state-of-the-moment of the work, both on and off the dance floor. How you watch and how you dance, what you present, what you're talking and thinking about. It's also some kind of resonating chamber for the work—just seeing somebody move this year, or seeing how they're improvising, how they're teaching, what they're saying, or the language they're using. And I love that that can happen amidst the hot water and the other kinds of beneficial effects. They're not separate. There's a mixture of things we need for getting updated with one another and cross-pollinating and exchanging. A lot happens here.

K.J.: I started coming in '87, and came every year until '95; it was a destination in my year. It was a place I was home for a week. It was such an acute desire to come back this year after ten years, partly because I do so much teaching that I really just wanted to see what contact was for me as a *dancer*. I don't go to jams, and I'm not that interested in that so much. It's really great to feel how much history is here and who I am in relationship to a lot of different people. For

instance, recognizing people who've never been here before by the way they're hanging back. There are still a lot of different reasons for people to come here—it's consistent somehow. There's something about it still being on the planet that is so incredible!

Scott: I've only been one other time in the last seven years since I moved to Europe. There are obvious answers for me in the feedback I get from being here, which is just "GOOD"—I feel supported here. It's a place I can dance, and there's an opportunity for my dancing to be for nothing. It's not something I have to objectify: "What will this dancing get me in the future?" It can just be an artesian well of pure me dancing in relationship and in an environment that supports that, rather than a politic concerned with my dancing, like "What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? How am I going to do it? Who should I connect with? What's going to be helpful?" It's really refreshing to get to drop that for a week. It reminds me of why I chose art—before art got complicated with having to make a living. I can pay some money to be here and then I can just do something for nothing for a week, before I have to get back to the categorical world of politics and the common logistics of art in theaters and workshops.

Ray: I get really recharged every time I'm here. There's no other time in my life that I get to dance if I choose for a week. Maybe that's why I keep coming back. Initially it was because of the focus of the form. Over the years it's become more about the family, about growing old together, and it's real and it's great...

Kristin: What surprises you about the way this jam has changed? And about the way the dancing in particular has changed?

Steve: I don't feel surprised about what happened. It was very predictable. We got older—25 years! Getting older means that whereas there used to be a kind of hot, hormonal element to the jam—the energy, the way that people really, really danced together when they were clicking. I don't think I see so much of that. I see more agreeable dancing now, where it doesn't have that high energy. It doesn't have the urgency that it used to have. Also what's changing quite predictably is children now are attending. They seem comfortable with adults and with their bodies by and large. They seem to have gotten a benefit from being around the situation. They seem to enjoy being here. I think that is a predictable and remarkable thing to have achieved.

Nancy: I'm surprised actually—and I don't remember this being the case before—that there are a number of people here who really don't seem to understand what contact improvisation is.

Steve: Here?

Nancy: Yeah. There have always been different levels but with the Internet, there's a difference in how the word travels now. There are a number of people that I've spoken to this year who didn't know anybody else who had ever been here, but saw it on the Internet and were curious and decided to come on their own, not as a part of a tribe... though maybe as part of a global tribe.

Alito: There's always been an interest to also have beginners here.

Steve: Are we serving them, do you think? I think the real test of any organization or society really is how do you deal with newcomers.

Daniel: It's kind of hard to know, because it's hard to be all over the world at once, but I kind of sense a whisper game effect with the essential questions that frame contact improvisation. And it's becoming almost unrecognizable to me when it comes back around. I meet someone who tells me they did contact, and it seems to me to have very little or nothing to do with the core of it. I have questions about whether some of the community building and support things serve to clarify or to distract. There are the forms that give people ways to participate just by being kind of a part of a community or adopting some kind of a behavior or following a certain few rules. But what about some essential really hot topic that is scary and exciting and risky and energetic and you have to figure it out yourself, and if you dare to step in the circle then you can be in, but if you don't step into the circle then you're not..

Nancy: I think it has to do with emphasis. Originally jamming came from a desire to practice contact improvisation. But then, in the practice, this community gets created, and you think, "oh, so maybe I'm creating community and the dancing is an excuse for community." Or is the community a result of the dancing? And the weight shifts in different places. When it shifts into community being the point and dancing being a vehicle for community, alarm bells ring in certain people—"Wait a minute, the work is not being served."

Alito: What's really particular about this jam is that all of those questions arise, a lot of them get dialogued about, and there's not one person who gives the answer. The questions formulate in the community and eventually they surface in the circle. There have been so many systems over the years to deal with what comes up at the jam. Now the system is to have a closing circle, or people talk about different issues amongst themselves, and we try to implement this discussion into what's happening. AND, it's not a perfect jam because there's nobody running it. There's no one person making decisions about it. I don't have the time to solve all the questions and complaints that everybody has about the jam.

Nancy: But that's a leadership style and a decision that is very consistent and has a lot to do with the quality of this event.

Scott: That's actually also a microcosm of the department and dissemination of contact improvisation since 1972, a model for how something begins and disseminates into the world—there's no controller, there's no certification. These decisions are decisions in some fashion, or "non-decisions," that have been made over the course of 30 some years. And this jam is like a microcosm of contact.

Nancy: You are making decisions about what to control and what not to control. For instance the "talk bell" in the studio is new—if somebody feels like there's too much socializing and talking going on in the dancing space, the bell is rung, and that's a signal to focus on the dancing. That's a solution to something that was probably solved in a lot of different ways before the bell, including frustration and people being upset about this or that. There's an invisible function that everybody who's in a leadership role in the jam is playing.

Karen: But I don't think it's only leadership. It's just so many people returning and learning how to live together. It really has its culture.

Steve: It changes from being in 50 people's hands during the jam to being in just a few people's hands—only two people's hands—during a lot of the year. If that isn't leadership, it's at least maintenance...

Danny's frustration is really interesting to me. He's pointing to something that may or may not be a matter of time sliding by an event like contact improvisation. Because when contact improvisation started it was a very different world out there! Now here's contact improvisation still chugging along, 25 years later here in this one spot. And it's all changed out there—sexuality, politics, feminism. And here's this event. Contact was a way of achieving democracy. You couldn't have democracy with just one person...that was sort of a pointless proposition. I wasn't sure that you could really have democracy with more than two, actually—two people who were really paying attention to each other so that they could really blend and create a third thing. But when you've got fifty! When people new to contact improvisation come here, when they come into a culture which encourages anarchy at the same time the culture at large is less and less familiar with it, they are not just stepping into dancing, they are stepping into a head. They are stepping into a social mind that they might never have imagined before. It's all very well to put out propositions that are edgy and that people need to dare to do. But to bring people out into the wilderness and do it to them for a week? I have seen people get a little frightened at this jam. It's not that they're not daring enough but that this wasn't at all what they thought they were daring at. In fact, they don't know exactly what they're supposed to do here. It seems basic and homey to us... They don't know what is going on. They don't know how to behave. They are derealized.

In terms of Danny talking about the daringness, one-on-one, I think that that makes a good artistic scene, that people have to push and dare and get out beyond themselves. But if we've got the Internet and we're taking anybody who signs up, I don't know if we can do that to them.

Daniel: I used the word "dare" to grab at it, but I actually think of it in a different way. I think that if the frame of the work was more clear in a person's mind, that they would have more support walking into that jam space and they wouldn't have as much complexity of how to behave and what to do. I see some people quite confused in the jam space, as to what it is that's going on and trying to do something they imagine is going on. "I don't know how to approach someone. I don't know what the topic is. Do I have to ask you to dance with me or not?" If the work were more defined, there would be more support. There's an excitement in having those limits, because you can go for it. You can focus your energy.

Scott: How much of what you say is you genuinely worrying about the people—because my impression is that people are pretty much surviving, given the circumstances. How much is simply your own aesthetics being challenged by what's going on?

Daniel: Yeah, I don't know.

Scott: I think it can be difficult for people, but I think that people freak out at really highly structured things, as well.

Daniel: I think the issue is whether people are comfortable or not.

Nancy: Someone came up to me today and said, "I'm really uncomfortable. I don't really know the work that well. Can I ask you some questions? Can we have a dance?" I mean, that's taking a big step! I sense that there are some people who are a little freaked out on the side, but *they're watching so closely*. There are so many levels of that going on, much more than we could possibly organize as a curriculum. Things are transmitted in a lot of different directions and through different means and media. So we're learning from each other.

Alito: There are a lot of eyes watching for all of the concerns that you could possibly think about in the structure of this jam. If someone's over there in the corner, someone generally gets to them and helps them. Isn't that true?

Karen: And this is just because we're old timers and everybody knows to check each other out.

Alito: That's right, there is a bigger support structure.

Karen: Yeah, the culture has learned how to help each other.

Daniel: This may be confrontational, but it's interesting to feel the topic being "how to take care of people." I do take care of people as I can. And I love to take care of people—it's natural. But I'm thinking about the articulation of the proposition of the work and the presence of that as a concept that's in the air. And it's interesting to me that that's my concern and the talking ends up being about taking care of people.

Alito: I think that comfort in people's bodies is relevant to entrance into the form. Because if the body is afraid—we'll go way out with this conversation, but I do think there's a social caring involved in the form. It's not like caretaking. It's about helping a body to be receptive to receive information.

Nancy: Then the question becomes how to address the proposition? How to example it, or model it? How does the proposition get addressed?

K.J.: I think the jam is that framework. And there's something about going to the class, that's like "Wow, I understand this!" There's something being given to people who don't know the form. This morning as soon as Karen started ringing the bell for warm up class everyone poured in. That was just such an amazing thing, to feel people were there because they wanted to really study what was happening.

Scott: I wonder if there's a lot of different reasons for people to be here. The people sitting in this circle are in some fashion implicated economically or have been at some point. And there are other people at the jam for whom it is completely a recreational proposition. They have no

intention of making theater. There's a huge variation in people's reasons, or endgames, or why they're here. And that lends itself to a kind of confusion, for lack of a better word.

Nancy: And to what degree is there a synergy between those reasons? And to what degree do they cancel out? The fact that there are a lot of professional artists here shifts the emphasis for me and shifts some of the nourishment that's going around, some of the stimulation.

Karen: Yeah, this jam is known as the "ego jam." The fall [Breitenbush] jam is less of an ego jam.

Nancy: Oh, really?

Scott: Because of the professionals?

Karen: Yeah.

Scott: Do you think that's because there are professional artists here and that that implies ego?

Karen: Yeah, could be, probably.

Steve: So wrong.

[laughter]

Scott: I just imagine that there are egos all over the place.

Karen: Well, I think they're talking about dance ego, performance ego, career ego, 'cause there are no performances at the fall jam.

Steve: This jam was set up by artists and largely populated by artists. The other people—many of whom have been here as many times as I have—if they're not artists, I don't know exactly what they are, but it's sort of irrelevant at this point, once something has this kind of momentum. I can't imagine not watching Olivia grow up. I want to see Sylvan when he's 15, what he looks like, what he's doing, and what kind of car he's dragging around.

Scott: And that has nothing to do with the form of contact improvisation, what you just described, necessarily.

Steve: No, it does. It does.... Because of the situation, because they have parents and 50 friendly, furry adults who they can mess around with, play with, or at least not be afraid of. What is that going to do? I think it's already visibly doing something because they seem unabashed by us all and it all.

Ray: And what you see is just the tip of the iceberg, because the rest of the year is also a lot of contact... at least for my kid.

Scott: So this is a window to observe them.

Steve: And I don't know Danny, I really feel torn, exactly in two, you know? Ah, what was that piece I wrote in the *Quarterly*? The matter of...

Nancy: delicacy.

Steve: "A Matter of Delicacy." It's a matter of delicacy to hold on to the identity of what it is that we have created. That we didn't want to just become a big, ambiguous, undefined, and undirected whatever. On the other hand, times are changing, people are adapting, other things are getting into it. I saw some fabulous stuff in São Paulo just now that was contact mixed with Capoeira and Parkour. It's no longer necessary for a matter of delicacy to be there because it's established. Contact exists and it also now synergizes with a bunch of other stuff that's happening around the planet, including the Internet itself. So I don't know—I also feel a personal need to keep some standards. And that other people need to be brought into resonance with what we think. On the other hand, I just wonder how loose could it get? Maybe that's my real question, not "how tight should it be? Or how informed?" But how loose could it get...?

Scott: That's what I like about coming here, that it's not a workshop. It's a chance to deconstruct certain assumptions of pedagogy...that doesn't get completely deconstructed [laughs]. It's an abstract proposition for it to get loose.

Daniel: When I hear "How loose can it get?"... I feel that the things that have been the most far out, that embrace bizarre occurrences and can go in many directions—I feel that those things are supported by some kind of framework. And when there isn't a framework and it's loose, it falls into certain conventions that then become less....

Steve: It's a real paradox whether to worry about this form or trust its momentum.

To contact the author: kristinhorrigan@yahoo.com

Contributor info: Kristin Horrigan is an improviser, choreographer, performer, and former CQ staff member recently relocated to Brattleboro, VT. She currently is dance faculty at Marlboro College and directs the intergenerational dance company, The Dance Generators.

Photo caption:

After dancing long hours, we revived our muscles in steaming stone pools, gazing across a meadow to the mountains, even as fat globs of snow fell heavy around our ears. —K.H.

