

Jazz Is Life Community Dialogue: Innovation & the Art of Future Building

Speakers:

Rosanne Haggerty, founder and President, Common Ground Community

Kohei Nishiyama, founder and CEO, elephant design

Jay Weigel, Executive/Artistic Director, Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans

Moderator:

Marty Ashby, Executive Producer, MCG Jazz

-performance with **Freddy Shehadi**



Marty Ashby (l) and Freddy Shehadi kick off the symposium with a jazz performance.

On May 20, 2008, as the sky darkened with rain clouds over Japan Society, the 100+ attendees who risked returning home in bad weather were rewarded with an exceptional symposium, filled with fresh perspectives on collaboration, improvisation and innovation as key ingredients to recovery, whether it be from homelessness or a natural disaster. The sound of rain was deafened by the smooth jazz music coming from moderator Marty Ashby and Freddy Shehadi as they kicked off the evening by introducing themselves to the audience through guitar. To hear their guitars' melodies work off each other you would have never guessed that it had been almost 20 years since they had performed together in college.

Jazz, Marty explained, is unique in that no matter where he goes in the world or who he plays with, he can communicate through it.

He refers to this as "swinging," or tuning in to the "global groove."

Just as jazz is based on improvisation, life is based on improvisation, and the reason jazz musicians can pick up and play at any time and with anyone is because it celebrates community and embraces the Golden Rule, that one should treat people the way one wants to be treated. Jazz musicians learn to give the musicians they are working with what they would want to be given. Marty believes the world has lost some of its swing; however, he also believes that if people work on adopting the improvisational and collaborative qualities that define jazz then there is a real chance for the planet to build a better future together.

The skilled composer and musician he is, Jay Weigel was in tune with Marty's "jazz is life" philosophy, focusing on the role of arts and culture and community have played in rebuilding New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. In some cases innovation and collaboration seem only to follow in the wake of a disaster. Overlooked issues, such as the fragility of New Orleans' cultural infrastructure, only come to light after support systems break down, which is exactly what happened in New Orleans after Katrina hit. Its very distinct and irreplaceable music and food culture, as well as neighborhood traditions, faded as 90% of the musicians and artists fled the city. Hundreds of millions of dollars in uninsured losses had been sustained to precious, irreplaceable costumes, instruments and artwork, especially in neighborhood organizations and clubs, because they were not traditional 501(c)(3) organizations and could not claim the losses. According to Jay, traditions unique to the city of New Orleans are passed down, usually orally, in families and neighborhood clubs from generation to generation, and a break in the chain could mean the loss of a piece of New Orleans forever.



Jay Weigel

Revitalizing and rebuilding a city or community through arts and culture was not fully realized by city and government officials until after Katrina. People were clamoring for something to rally around and to relieve the stress of everyday life. Officials like the Lieutenant Governor of New Orleans, whose office oversees arts and culture in Louisiana, knew that neighborhood clubs and arts and cultural institutions created support

systems for each other and preserved traditions that are integral to successful communities. Consequently, the Lieutenant Governor asked Jay, among other cultural leaders, to think about what was needed financially to recover the artistic and cultural activities lost to Katrina. The city of New Orleans put together the "Bring New Orleans Back" commission, to which it eventually added an arts and culture sub-committee, and Jay was asked to participate to help rebuild the cultural sector of New Orleans. By collaborating with each other, New Orleans' cultural institutions, the city and state governments and private and national organizations were able to revive not only the arts and culture scene in New Orleans but the city itself. Arts and cultural activities help provide a tangible means for people to take control of their lives, provide the inspiration and hope necessary to build a better future and create stronger communities by instilling a sense of connection among individuals.



Rosanne Haggerty

After Jay's presentation, Rosanne Haggerty, who works on a more grassroots level, spoke about her organization Common Ground Community and its role in a larger national movement to end homelessness in the United States. As stated in the DVD Rosanne presented to the audience, "Common Ground creates supportive communities where individuals are connected and the human spirit is revitalized." These communities, which connect the most vulnerable people to supportive environments, are critical in providing a stable place for people to heal and take back control of their lives. Moreover, it costs far less to subsidize someone's housing and get them the support they need to rebuild their lives than it does to keep them alive in hospitals or incarcerated. According to Rosanne, homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon and it has thrown people off a little bit.

People do not know how to handle it, and instead of trying to solve it, they cover it up. A colleague of hers has described homeless as "a slow-moving hurricane that has engulfed the most vulnerable people over last 25 years."

Recovering from homelessness requires the same ingredients needed to recover from a natural disaster, and Rosanne believes the common denominator between her work and the rest of the speakers' is their ability to tap into the global rhythm. All of their innovative work, in some way or another, combines the essential collaborative and improvisational elements of jazz. In the last 20 years she has realized that in order to end homelessness more affordable housing had to be created, the most vulnerable people connected to it and communities re-fashioned into supportive environments that don't let people slip through the cracks. However, Common Ground could not do this on its own. Collaborating with other organizations enhances Common Ground's individual efforts and provides insights and connections within its own work that might not have been made otherwise.

A prime example of this can be seen with Common Ground's work in the early 90's. Although they were focused on refurbishing the Times Square Hotel and decreasing homelessness in Times Square, they routinely collaborated with the Port Authority Bus Terminal, the Business Improvement District and the Midtown Community Court, all of which enhanced each others work revitalizing Times Square. The wider community rallied around the idea of supportive housing and the tenants were excited to be a part of something future-oriented, creating a synergy that helped turn Times Square around. In the last 18 years Common Ground has developed over 2,000 units of supportive housing, helped move people off the street and started programs in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, as well as abroad. Playing a role in over 325 U.S. communities that have adopted a 10-year plan to end homelessness, Rosanne recognizes the innate desire to heal and strive for a better future within each of these communities.



Kohei Nishiyama

Following Rosanne, Kohei Nishiyama showed that he too understands the power of community in the future building process, albeit in a much more commercial way. His design-to-order company elephant design democratizes the design process by blurring the line between designer and consumer by allowing everyone in their online community to submit "wishes," or desired products, as well as product designs. When the demand for a certain wish reaches the production cost's break-even point, a manufacturer can decide to create the product without worrying about losing money. A wish by itself has

little value; however, a community with a unified voice has the power to turn a wish into a reality. Furthermore, the people in the elephant design community can tweak ideas and designs with each other to create new products, products that may appeal to a whole new demographic, thereby starting a new round of wish-making and sustaining what Kohei calls the "future product catalogue."

Through elephant design, wish-making can also be considered a business opportunity for everybody; every wish has an owner and possible future customers, with royalties going to the original owner of the wishes and

designs that make it to production. According to Kohei, this collective wish-making community provides a virtual space where people can collaborate with each other, create innovative products, build a future through business opportunities and, most importantly, live the way he/she wants. He may not be able to play a musical instrument but as one can see through his empowering design-to-order system, Kohei's ability to disseminate the joy of creation and open up opportunities for others to make a living shows he can "swing" with the best of them.

After the question and answer session and during the reception there was an overwhelming feeling that the Jazz Is Life concept had penetrated everybody's thought process. The words "swing" and "global groove" could be heard in multiple conversations throughout the Japan Society foyer. And most importantly, recovery and future building were not seen as problems afflicting the homeless and those affected by natural disaster, but as opportunities for individuals and communities to utilize the improvisational and collaborative qualities of jazz, to tune into the global groove that connects humanity, and build toward a stronger and better future.