



*Breath
of
Life*

INTERACTIVE ART / MUSIC IMPROVISATION
& SOLO EXHIBITION ON TA-CUMBA T. AIKEN



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OCTOBER 18, THROUGH DECEMBER 9, 2011



Photo courtesy of the Science Museum of Minnesota, 1997.

→ **When I first directed a play at the History Theatre in 1988, the same year that the theatre moved into this theatre and arts complex, I had the good fortune to meet Ta-coumba Aiken. He was then generously serving as a member of our board of directors. At that time, the building was The Arts & Science Center – home to the Minnesota Science Museum and the History Theatre. In those days, the lobby was filled with life-sized skeletons of pre-historic reptiles, including the great Triceratops! It was a great meeting place for people to gather and hundreds of thousands of children loved that great collection of bones and history.**

Across the hall, in what was then called the Crawford Livingston Theatre – was the home of the History Theatre. Since the opening of the building in 1964, the Arts & Science Center was a great gathering place for students, artists and patrons of the arts. During the mid-‘60’s and through the mid-‘80’s, the Chimera Theatre Company played to many passionate theater lovers. Every day of the week, this lobby was filled with patrons and young people who adored the world of theater and were curious about the science and history of our planet. It was a wonderful meeting place for millions of Minnesotans and visitors.

Today, McNally Smith College of Music and History Theatre share this great room and we are delighted to be a part of Ta-coumba’s extraordinary artistry and this exhibit. Congratulations Ta-coumba! You are a friend of History Theatre, and McNally Smith, and you are truly a Minnesota treasure.

→ **Martin Luther King Jr. described true greatness as the ability to serve. My dear friend Ta-coumba embodies King’s ideal of greatness. Whether it is third graders, inmates in a state correctional institution, or neighbors down the block, he always gives his time and visions freely. I have been witness to Ta-coumba Aiken’s growth as a visionary artist for over thirty years. He aspires to create artwork that honors, and inspires. The artwork Ta-coumba creates is through a vision derived from the visions of the communities and clients he serves and of his and our ancestors. It is his mission to create art that can be a source of neighborhood pride, as well as a tool for social and cultural development.**

Since the early 1970s, Ta-coumba has created public art that is engaging, exciting, and unique. In collaboration with neighborhood organizations, public works departments, city planning and development departments, schools, and sometimes other artists (including me) he has created artwork for both rural and urban environments.

As an artist who has worked in the public landscape, Ta-coumba has learned how to identify opportunities that exist in architectural, landscape, and public works projects, as well as the gaps that might exist in the spirit of a place. He is familiar with and has worked in a wide range of glass, metal, clay, wood, and landscaping materials. Ta-coumba’s recent public art projects with painted glazes on large ceramic installations have given his mural work new permanence. As a celebrated muralist, he has made a smooth transition to working in other mediums due to his eye for complicated color layers and rhythm pattern and his technical virtuosity with a brush. I feel confident in stating that Ta-coumba can paint in any medium.

Not many know that Ta-coumba is also a musician – a percussionist who plays congas with the same passion and rhythm exhibited in the works in this exhibition. His works are musical scores that reveal the rhythms of the universe.

I want to thank McNally Smith College of Music for giving us all the opportunity to open our eyes and hearts to accept the love embodied in Ta-coumba’s art. The world will benefit from his service to inspire.

Read between the lines, not just the words

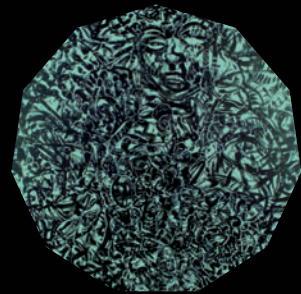
– Janet Aiken

A true artist is regarded as an individual with a life-long commitment to his or her work. Early on in their journeys, some artists recognize the power that lies in art as a medium to positively affect the lives of people. Ta-coumba T. Aiken is a perfect example of that important realization and mission. Over the last four decades he has endowed his artwork and public career with a sense of hope, acting as a conduit to inspire other artists and collaboration in communities.

→ His constant need to create and passion to carry his message have resulted in thousands of works since the artist embarked on his mission as a child. Janet Aiken, the artist's mother and guide, provided young Ta-coumba with the creative vision and moral and spiritual lessons on the power of healing. Working with discarded furniture and pieces of fabric to make dresses, Mrs. Aiken applied a dotted pattern to these surfaces as a creative outlet. Surely, unbeknownst to Ta-coumba, this inclination to embellish would influence his style forever.

The artist also absorbed his parents' South Carolinian influences. The hats [crowns] designed and worn by women of the Southwest Baptist Church in Illinois in which colors with fabrics interplayed with feathers, the strong harmonies and wide ranges of the gospel music sung at church, and the form and patterns found in two oak trees near his house, they all became important early aesthetics discoveries that would be forever implanted in his mind.

Living by train tracks made Ta-coumba reflect on the history and culture of African Americans in the US and of internal migration as a central part of it. Looking at Lake Michigan made him think of distant places, hence developing a curiosity for the world and the lives of people in other places.



Ta-coumba entertained himself with the famous paint-by-numbers kits with colors missing. These were brought to the house by his father, Eulysses, who worked as a garbage collector. Arbitrarily, no different than today, Ta-coumba filled the canvas boards with colors where he thought they should go. This created an early pre-abstract discovery for the artist. As a child, abstraction would dominate his style, only to return decades later in his matured work.

It was Mrs. Aiken who intervened to propose her son's first exhibition in the recreation room of the family house, in spite of his father's fear of allowing Ta-coumba to continue with a "frivolous" path. Ta-coumba witnessed his father work as a mason, creating mosaics and other tile work around the house. That exhibition and the influence of his parents would constitute the springboard for his life in the arts.

Say it loud, I am black and I am proud

– James Brown

Starting his career as a realist in the 1960s, Ta-coumba executed numerous drawings and paintings copying images of football star Jim Brown, Martin Luther King Jr., and musicians and singers Taj Mahal, Sun Ra, and James Brown. As illustrations to support himself, Ta-coumba did portraits for many of his female high school mates, "celebrating their greatness and beauty."

Ta-coumba worked primarily with acrylic paint instead of oil because an allergy made his hands crack. His first canvases already showed an eye-catching style and an advanced command of lines. Then, when an accident at age eleven impaired his right perception of colors, Ta-coumba turned to paint pens and ink, and opted to paint directly from the bottles when having problems seeing colors. Other techniques adopted by the artist include *sgraffito* [scratching surfaces], dry-brush, and wetting the canvas to create a wash effect. The artist has always exhausted the technical possibilities.

Artists who have had an ongoing effect on Ta-coumba include Mrs. Aiken, Charles White, John Biggers, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet, Gustav Klimt, Paul Klee, Jacob Lawrence, and Aaron Douglas. Definite influences for the artist have been the multicolored patterns of Kente cloth, the improvisational designs of Kuba cloth, and the Adinkra visual symbols of the Akan people in West Africa.

Inspired by the social vision of The Black Arts Movement in the '60s, the philanthropic work of Dr. Jeff Donaldson, Howard University's role in American history and Civil Rights Movement, and the work of painter and educator Uche Okeke in Nigeria, Ta-coumba painted [and continues to do so] with a strong sense of nationalism and pride for African Americans. These and other important references opened a universal door for his art to serve as a vehicle to bring people together.

He was not aware of the art world until the late '60s by which time he had already established his aesthetic voice. A series of

'ah ha' moments would catapult and map out a definite path in the arts from that point on.

From 1970 to 1974, Ta-coumba attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, taking a break shortly after Mrs. Aiken died. He was hired as graphic designer for Honeywell.

Ta-coumba's art can be seen as emblematic, filled with movement and symbolism, yet it is difficult to demarcate his style to a single notion. What is essentially visible in his oeuvre is a synthesis of interior and exterior realities expressed through undulant linear patterns, dotted surfaces, and a unique color scheme. Hyperrealistic models of confluent lines and layers seem to pervade his most recent work.

A prolific and active artist ever since, Ta-coumba's career includes numerous exhibitions, public commissions [most notably his murals] installations, residencies in art schools, discussions in art panels, curatorial work, political activism, national and international appearances, and numerous prestigious grants and fellowships. This past January he was a featured artist on MN Original, produced by PBS, Twin Cities Public Television (TPT).

This exhibition journeys through the last four decades with a revealing selection of his paintings and prints. These works exemplify Ta-coumba's vigorous engagement with the medium, demonstrating his early influences all the way to his most challenging aesthetics. By bringing particular attention to the rhythmic patterns of his brush and coloration in his paintings, the show invites the audience to consider and explore parallels between the visual arts and music.

Ta-coumba's talent, dedication to his career, advocacy for the arts, and ability to remain current is a true inspiration to artists in all fields. It is with honor and pride that McNally Smith College of Music and the friends of the show celebrate his life and work with an interactive art and music performance with the artist followed by a solo exhibition.



BIAFRA HOPE, 1968
Oil on canvas
24" x 36"



STEP #6, 1972
Lithograph
32" x 21"



LOVE FOR THE SUN, 1973
Print
26" x 32"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



BEAUTIFUL BETTY, 1974
 Pen, ink, marker
 40" x 26"



Ta-coumba T. Aiken



LOVE SUPREME, 1976
 Oil on masonite
 46" x 48"

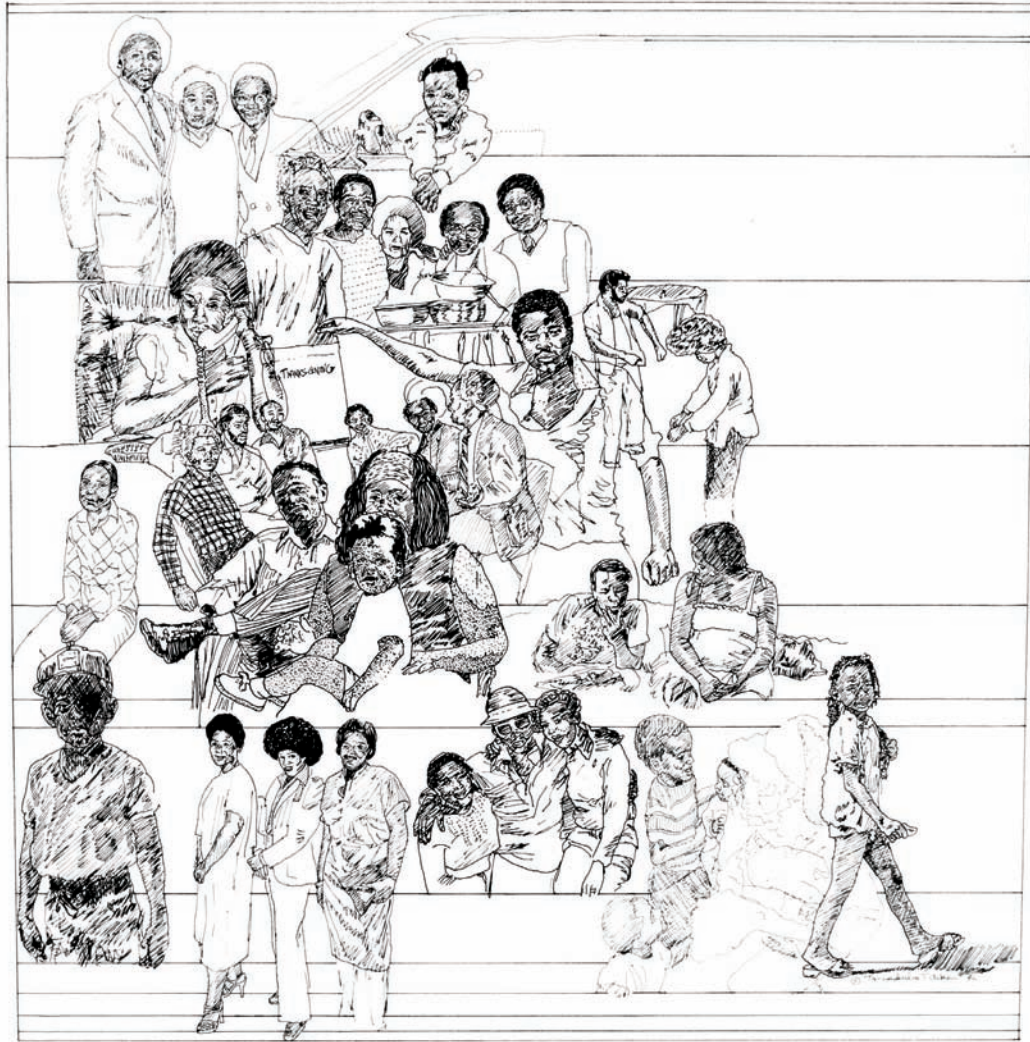


SPEAK, 1977
Oil on masonite
36" x 40"



SKATING, 1980
Print
6.25" x 22.25"

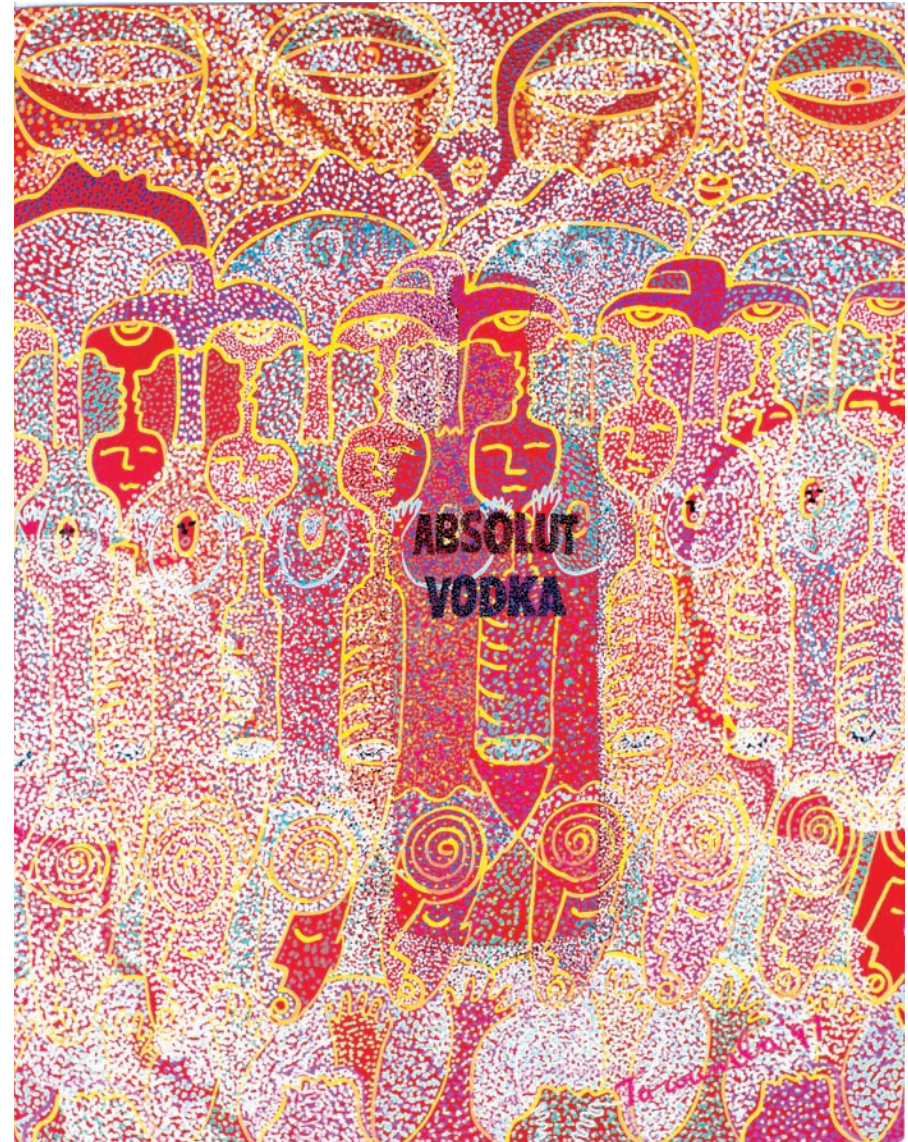
Ta-coumba T. Aiken



THANKSGIVING, 1986
 Pen & ink
 20" x 15"



Ta-coumba T. Aiken



ABSOLUTE AIKEN, 1994
 Acrylic & oil paint pen on water color paper
 19" x 24"



IN THE CITY, 1997
Acrylic and oil paint pen
12 1/4" x 16"



CAPITAL NEW YEAR, 1999
Color pencil & marker
26" x 26"



THE POWER OF..., 2002
Acrylic on canvas
8'8" x 4'8"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



SUDDEN REALIZATION, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"



OUT OF THE DARK, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
30" x 30"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken

WORKS



THE SINGER, 2006
Acrylic on water color paper
18" x 24"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



VOICES OF HOPE, 2009
Latex on cinder block wall
125' x 23'



WORKS



ANGEL SPEAKS, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
12" x 48"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken





SHE SPEAKS, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
12" x 48"



HIDDEN TREASURES, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
12" x 36"



OUT OF NOWHERE, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
12" x 36"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



ON MY MIND, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
36" Diameter

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



GRANDMOTHER'S HOPES, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
36" Diameter



CONTINUOUS THOUGHT BUBBLE, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 20"



INTO THE FUTURE, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 20"

Ta-coumba T. Aiken

Ta-coumba T. Aiken



COMPANIONS, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 20"



REJOICING THE DAY, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
20" x 20"

IMPROVESTRA/DEBUT PERFORMANCE



Jason Kao Hwang (composer, violin/ viola) has created works ranging from jazz, classical, “new” and world music. His jazz quartet EDGE has released two critically acclaimed CDs, EDGE (Asian Improv, 2006) and Stories Before Within (Innova, 2007). Mr. Hwang recently released Crossroads Unseen (Euonymus), the third CD of EDGE, and Symphony of Souls (Mulatta), performed by his improvising string orchestra Spontaneous River. Downbeat Magazines Critics Poll recently voted Mr. Hwang as #2 Rising Star of 2011 for Violin. Mr. Hwang has received support from Chamber Music America/ New Jazz Works, the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer/New Residencies, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, US Artists International, and others.



Chris Cunningham grew up amidst the rising noise floor of late 1970s American youth culture, and hit the ground running - directly into the maw of the early 1980s No Wave and downtown punk funk scenes of both American coasts. His lead guitar gig with James Chance (James White) and The Contortions (Blacks) began a 25- year period of global wandering, involving a multitude of subsequent groupings, pairings, and breakups with the likes of Marianne Faithfull, The Lounge Lizards, Gavin Friday, Boukman Eksperyans, Omar Farouk Tekbilek, Katell Keineg, The Golden Palominos, Marshall Crenshaw, Hal Wilner, and Richie Havens. His more recent Twin Cities musical cohorts include his own “micro orchestra” Mississippi Peace, Coloring Time, and Improvised Explosive Device. Mr. Cunningham currently serves as McNally Smith College Music’s of Director of Creative Partnerships and is member of its Composition faculty. His religion is improvisation, and he is a practicing changeologist.



Adam Conrad Ferguson is a composer and conductor in the Twin Cities area, and a student at McNally Smith College of Music. The grandson of the legendary film composer/conductor Allyn Ferguson, Adam’s roots are in Los Angeles, Ca where he studied composition techniques under his grandfather from the young age of eleven. Adam has created a name for himself by; scoring and conducting many short films in the Twin Cities, Texas, Indianapolis, and California; writing arrangements for local artists; and collaborating on multimedia projects with artists such as Brant Kingman, Ta-coumba Aiken, and published poet Sierra DeMulder. In the near future Adam is writing a couple of live film scores, more arrangements, and is working on a new theater musical to be performed in April.



Michelle Kinney is currently on the faculty of the University of Minnesota as Musician in Residence in the Dance Program. As a composer, she has received awards and grants from The Bush Foundation, The Jerome Foundation, McKnight Foundation, NEA/Rockefeller, Harvestworks/ Studio Pass, and the American Composers Forum. As a player, Michelle has worked with some of the most respected innovators in new music, including Henry Threadgill, Butch Morris, Jason Hwang, Brandon Ross, Myra Melford, Mary Ellen Childs, Bun Ching Lam, Shi-Zheng Chen, and in the pop world with such artists as Lou Reed, Sheryl Crow, Natalie Merchant, and Dan Wilson. Michelle performs frequently with the cello/drum quartet Jello-slave, and with her husband, composer and guitarist Chris Cunningham in the “micro orchestra” Mississippi Peace. She is a dedicated and lifelong improviser.



Schuyler Petersen has been in love with music for the better part of his relatively short life. A trained percussionist, he found his sound playing with everyone from jazz musicians to noise collagists, discovering (and continuously re-discovering) the magic of improvisation along the way. He currently records and performs under the name GREY(coyote), single-handedly combining samples, beats, guitars, drums, noise, electronics, and the human voice into a sound all his own.



As a flutist, **Janis Weller** loves working with composers and has premiered over 100 new works in her career, ranging from traditionally notated pieces to graphic notation and sculptural scores. She is excited to participate in her first experience with conducted improvisatory composition. Janis is also the chair of the Liberal Arts Division at McNally Smith and teaches career development and woodwinds.



Jessica Gates, trumpet, began her musical career in the classical world - singing opera and playing in various orchestras. After discovering McNally Smith, her focus switched more to jazz, blues, and electronica. She hopes to bring a ‘melting pot’ of influences to Improvestra and push the boundaries of musical expectations.



Chris Cote is a musician from Sugar Hill, New Hampshire. He began playing the trumpet at age six. As a songwriter, Chris is taken by the notion that improvisation is inherent in all creative works. Chris will seize any opportunity to improvise.

IMPROVESTRA/DEBUT PERFORMANCE



Ben Kelly has been a professional musician in the Twin Cities for about Five years. Primarily playing bass, Ben has also done a lot of production work along with performing film scores he has worked on and created. Ben is largely inspired by improvisational music and has played in many avant-garde free jazz combos. Ben says, "improv is letting the walls filters of your brain down and allowing your true thought, instinct and voice to come out."



David Gerald Sutton is Electric String Quartet and Electric String Quartet is David Gerald Sutton. David & ESQ perform alternative, instrumental violin music. Using his 4-foot pedal board, David can become anything from a steel drum, guitar or bass to a full, cinematic orchestra or rock band. He has utilized looping live onstage to create a whole new venue for the solo violin player. He has a 6 track album, "Dawn to Dusk" on iTunes and is currently working on his full length concept album, "The Vertical Horizon", due out early 2011. "Improv is your soul communicating itself to others through music. It should be free and it should always be you."



Tao Issaro is an Indian born percussionist and music composer. He has studied Carnatic and Hindustani rhythmic traditions since the age of 13 and plays drumkit as well. He has played and composed music for various ensembles all over India and abroad, and is now pursuing a degree in music composition.



Minneapolis saxophonist and composer **Chris Thomson** toured nationally and internationally with multiple artists including the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Since then he has collaborated with Delfeayo Marsalis and many of the Twin Cities finest musicians; Mason Jennings, Roma di Luna, and S. Carey to name a few. Thomson is on faculty at Hamline University, St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists, and MacPhail Center for Music in addition to running his own bustling teaching studio. He has two albums to his credit: 2007's "The Three Elements" an electronic/acoustic full length featuring original songwriting and performance for laptop, loop pedal, saxophone, and bass clarinet; and 2010's EP "Rustic Sky," featuring the Thomson Quartet.



Adrian Larkin was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. His first musical lessons were in piano, but he soon became interested in the alto sax at age ten. He is now a senior at McNally Smith and will be graduating this December. After graduation he plans to continue contributing to the arts in the Twin Cities with his music.

IMPROVESTRA/DEBUT PERFORMANCE



Charles Sandford has been exposed to art and improvisation his entire life. Growing up in the theater community he was exposed to improvisational acting at a young age and learned how important of a role team work plays in any improvisation. Charles attends McNally Smith College of Music to study composition, as well as trombone and guitar. His biggest influences come from jazz, hard rock, hip-hop, and folk.



With influences ranging from Bach to Hendrix and Arvo Pärt to Monty Python, guitarist **Jerry Kosak** has left no stone unturned in his musical voyage. Combined with a Master's degree in Classical Guitar and Musicology, he brings a wide sonic palette to Improvestra.



Cierra Alise Hill is currently a senior at McNally Smith College of Music, majoring in violin performance. Studying the violin for 12 years, she has taken her influences and unique musical styles to great heights, performing all around the United States, Europe and South America. Cierra is an active performer of all musical genres, a recording artist and a composer, appearing on MPR radio and television programs in the Twin Cities. In her own style, she improvises constantly, infiltrating her own passion for music and life into every note.



George Cartwright grew up on rock-and-roll and fell in love with jazz after hearing Charles Lloyd's iconic (<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=786>) Forest Flower. He loves The Fugs and Eric Dolphy equally. The Band and Captain Beefheart make him quiver and Charlie Parker gives him chills still. He wishes he had said "Music is like rain. Except music falls up," but his pal Davey Williams said that.



Billy Schoenburg is a 5th semester Music Business major here at McNally Smith. Raised playing violin, viola, and flute classically, Billy now devotes most of his time to songwriting and whatever other musical endeavors come his way.



Ross Charmoli, raised among the outer limits of sod field suburbs and colloquial culs-da-sac. Glad to have had friends and family teach him, values and truths, without them he'd had lost it all long ago. Now, he's beginning to find in phases, phrases of the soul. Quoted as saying. "Improv is liken to gathering sap from a Maple tree. Travel through the rings of time. Arrive in the centre of life, gather the pure sappy substance, return amber in hand to then cover pancakes at breakfast."

SPONSOR QUOTES

Multi-media artist Ta-coumba Aiken has compared himself to a single thread in a tapestry. In his paintings he conjures rich and cohesive surfaces. Music and words inform and guide his creations. Figurative imagery morphs into abstraction. Colorful patterns emerge, signifying the larger society. In his collaborative projects, he unites disparate communities through the common bond of art making. His work is a metaphor for embracing the differences. And his life is indeed like a continuous and convoluted thread that supports many activities and individuals. Kudos are due to McNally Smith for hosting such an ambitious multi-disciplinary and culturally enriching event.

Erica Spitzer Rasmussen

Gallery Director, The Gordon Parks Gallery,
Metropolitan State University



One of the most beautiful characteristics of the Twin Cities cultural community is the willingness to collaborate - across organizations, genres and individuals. Ta-coumba embodies this spirit - collaboration is paramount in Ta-coumba's artistic identity which joins the visual and the performing arts.

Kathleen van Bergen

Former Artistic and Executive Director
The Schubert Club



Ta-coumba is a wonderful soul and this reflects in his paintings. His paintings are appreciated by all ages as they try to decipher images and stories in all his works. Ta-coumba's art has always added color and joy to so many lives. He is a community advocate and so willing to work with children and those less fortunate. I am honored to be a patron and friend of Ta-coumba Aiken.

Carol Hunn-Gregory

Keys Café & Bakery



Ta-coumba Aiken is a cross between Lowertown's Godfather and everyone's favorite uncle. His canvases are as much rhythmic improvisation, riffing on spiritual, jazz and blues traditions as they are story portraits. His person and his body of work are key elements in the visual soundtrack of Lowertown. I don't know what will come from a collaboration between McNally Smith and Ta-coumba Aiken, but I'm betting you'll be able to dance to it.

Andy Remke

Black Dog Café



SPONSOR QUOTES

Ta-coumba is a ground breaker, a visionary, and a path forger. Ta-coumba's artistic work has been shown all over the world and is in many major collections, and he has received countless commissions. But it is his work in community, changing environments and engaging young people that makes him truly exceptional. Ta-coumba gives his time, passion and heart to teaching and mentoring young artists. His murals and other public projects engage communities and inspire hope and healing. Ta-coumba is a true community leader; he serves as the de facto "mayor" of Lowertown, a neighborhood of downtown St. Paul populated by artists and other creative entrepreneurs, that is a national model of artist-led economic development and placemaking. His quiet leadership and steady presence have contributed much to the revitalization of the neighborhood and the value that others place on the contribution of artists.

Laura Zabel,

Executive Director,
Springboard for the Arts



Throughout human history, creative people have been inspired to make artwork as a response to the world around them. Artists respond to their time and place, reflecting what they experience as well as what they learn from the other art being produced around them. No artist works in a solitary bubble, distanced from all other artwork - rather artists constantly influence each other, both within particular genre and across boundaries of style and media. Unfortunately, we often neglect this reality by experiencing art in silos - we see visual art in one venue, go elsewhere for music. It is for this reason that "Breath of Life" is exciting and refreshing. Pairing a talented visual artist together with talented composers and musicians, this project not only gives each of us a great artistic experience, but reminds us of the essential connections between the creation of music and the creation of visual art.

Suzanna Altman,

Manager of Education and Community Engagement,
American Composers Forum



Master Framers Inc. was established in 1959 as a full service studio workshop specializing in the design and creation of fine handcrafted picture and mirror frames. In 1974 the company became an anchor in the historic artist community known as Lowertown, a vibrant and growing area in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. We are proud to celebrate the career of Ta-coumba T. Aiken.

Master Framers Incorporated



CREDITS

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WEBSITES/LINKS:

Ta-coumba T. Aiken
tacoumbaaiken.com
mncoriginal.org/art/?p=2955
youtube.com/tacoumbamscm

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