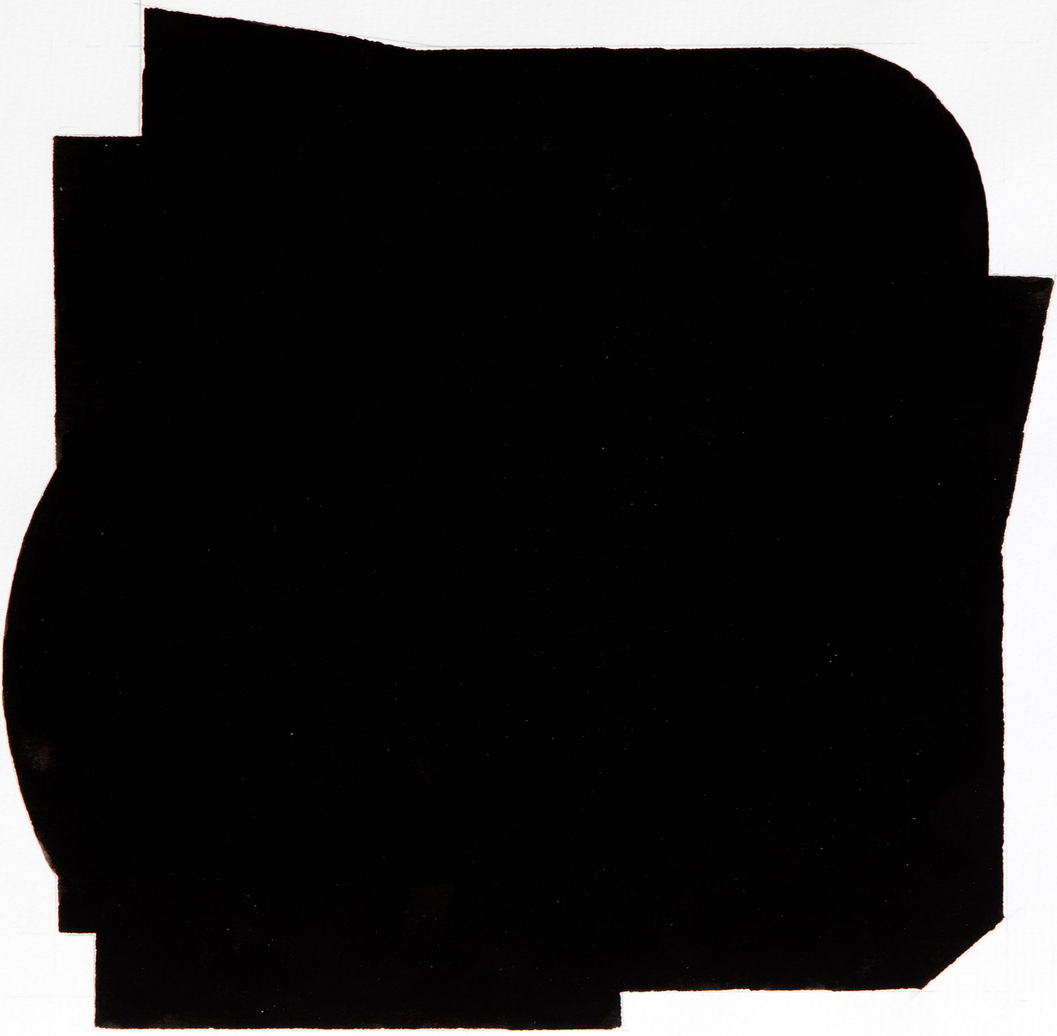
PENTATONE

Cerrone
Don’t Look Down
Sandbox Percussion



Leif Kath, Untitled (2018)

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DON'T LOOK DOWN

Christopher Cerrone

(1984)

Sandbox Percussion

DON'T LOOK DOWN

Christopher Cerrone (b. 1984)

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Conor Hanick, piano
Elspeth Davis, mezzo-soprano

Sandbox Percussion
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PERSONAL STATEMENTS FROM THE ARTISTS

The compositions on this album represent a decade-long journey—from the first sketches of "Goldbeater's Skin" in Rome during the fall of 2015 to the final mastering touches in November 2024. Yet the collaborative relationships that shaped these works stretch back even further.

My connection with Ian Rosenbaum began in 2005 when he was a talented young marimba player at the Manhattan School of Music. Our paths crossed again as graduate students at Yale School of Music, where we forged a friendship that led to numerous collaborative projects. When Ian formed Sandbox Percussion with Jonny Allen, Victor Caccese, and Terry Sweeney—three equally gifted and adventurous percussionists—I knew something special was taking shape.

Over the years, I've composed

multiple works for percussion quartet, all of which Sandbox has either premiered or performed. What draws me to this formation is its inherent freedom—unlike a string quartet or wind quintet, a "percussion quartet" implies little beyond four trained percussionists. The possibilities are boundless.

"Don't Look Down" (2020), a work composed and premiered during the Covid pandemic, opens the album, spanning traditional percussion instruments like drum set and vibraphone alongside found objects—beer bottles, bike pumps, sandpaper blocks—and Conor Hanick's prepared piano.

"A Natural History of Vacant Lots" (2017), taking its title from an environmental study of spontaneous urban vegetation, explores both physical and sonic space, positioning two percussion duos across the stage against an electronic soundscape made from reversed piano sounds,

evoking sparks of creation in a melancholic landscape. The work's spatial arrangement and ethereal electronics create a contemplative dialogue between performers and environment.

"Goldbeater's Skin" (2016) unites perhaps the two most ancient forms of music-making: the human voice (performed by Elspeth Davis) and percussion. The quartet's arsenal ranges from tuned wooden slats and pipes to cowbells and restrung acoustic guitars, demonstrating the versatility of percussion. The piece sets the abstract, beautiful poetry of my friend GC Waldrep, who graciously allowed me to set his words to music.

The album closes with "Ode to Joy" (2023) —a nod to both Beethoven and one of my favorite poets, Frank O'Hara. It's the only piece written specifically for this album, born from the realization that joy was the missing emotion

in the collection. Written while living in Switzerland as an ode to New York City, the work brims with bittersweet celebration as performers whistle major chords, play harmonicas, stomp kick drums, and return to traditional percussion instruments like marimba and vibraphone.

This album, created over several years, transcends simple documentation of live performance. Through careful use of overdubbing, panning, reverb, and compression, we've crafted a distinct sonic experience. This artistic vision was realized through the dedication of my longtime collaborator and friend, Mike Tierney, who has recorded nearly all my recent albums and brought unwavering commitment to this project.

Christopher Cerrone

Christopher Cerrone
© Jacob Blickenstaff

This collection is a testament to nearly 20 years of friendship between Christopher Cerrone and the four of us in Sandbox Percussion. Chris and I met in school in 2005, and I was instantly drawn to his music. Chris has a way of expressing emotion in his work that I had never experienced before, and I was struck by the honesty in Chris's writing. When I heard Chris's music, it felt so clear to me that Chris was wearing his heart on his sleeve for all the world to see - and that bravery inspired me.

I quickly learned that Chris had something special to add to the percussion repertoire. While so much of the music that I was playing dealt first and foremost with rhythm and groove, Chris began his explorations with melody and harmony.

We worked together on his seminal electroacoustic percussion work Memory Palace, and together we

started to discover the beautiful and expressive potential in homemade instruments like tuned wooden slats and tuned metal pipes. It wasn't long before he got to know everybody in Sandbox, and so we tore through his existing works, and started to commission him to write new ones. In this album you'll hear Chris' versatility - he writes beautiful music for traditional and unorthodox instruments, invents new playing techniques, blends in electronics, and pairs Sandbox with two amazing collaborators.

Over the past many years, we have grown as musicians and as a group through learning and performing these pieces, and we hope that you enjoy listening to this music as much as we enjoy performing it.

Ian Rosenbaum
Sandbox Percussion

© Noah Stern Weber

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LINER NOTES

Don't Look Down is an accidental diary of having lived through the worst pandemic of the last hundred years. When I started writing this piece in February 2020, it would be inconceivable to imagine the world we live in now. The one thing that kept me sane during this period was clocking into work—that is, working on this piece. So looking back, it's not at all surprising the piece would wind up reflecting both the strangeness and the instability of the world we live in.

The title of the work takes its name from an article by the economist Paul Krugman, himself referring to the moment when the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote would look down and suddenly realize he'd fallen off a cliff, at which point he would actually drop. The first movement, "Hammerspace," is the world before: all grooving and relentless energy. The pianist hammers away at the high notes

of the piano which have all been muted with putty. I imagined his part as like a drum solo performed in an echo chamber—the rhythmic muted notes create unique and fantastic sympathetic resonances with the lower strings of the instrument when the pedal is held down. A variety of percussion instruments support him, from the more traditional to drum set to other oddities like a bicycle pump and sandpaper block.

The piece "looks down" at the start of the second movement, "The Great Empty," when all of sudden, all of the energy stops and we are left with an uncertain and static soundscape: instead of playing the piano, the pianist "bows" the instrument by drawing fishing tackle over the strings. The percussionists play cheap harmonicas and blow over the tops of wine bottles alongside other instruments to create a dissonant and deliberately out-of-tune sound world. The piano

part that interjects halfway through is similarly out-of-tune: the pianist has placed small pieces of putty, causing the piano to sound as out of tune as the percussion instruments. The title of the movement is drawn from a photographic series that was shown in the *New York Times* of city centers devoid of people.

The final movement, "Caton Flats," refers to a construction site active on my block in Brooklyn. When I was working on this movement in my studio, my partner, Carrie, walked into the room and remarked that the music "sounds like the construction going on outside"! I loved the idea so much that I had to include it in the piece. I also loved the idea that the things that most drive us crazy—like noisy construction on our street—could become a thing of nostalgia when it's gone.

Don't Look Down was commissioned by Elizabeth and

Justus Schlichting for Conor Hanick and Sandbox Percussion, with additional support provided by Sandbox Percussion.

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Having discarded several more bathetic titles, ***A Natural History of Vacant Lots*** struck me as providing a perfect analogy for this piece, originally composed for Third Coast Percussion. I took it from the title of a book by Matthew Vessel and Herbert Wong describing the secondary flora and fauna found in abandoned lots. Subtitled

“ambient music for percussion quartet and electronics,” the work begins in an unusually stark manner: single notes are struck on two vibraphones (one with motor, one without) against an electronic soundtrack of the same pitch.

Much of the piece grows out of this initial note, first becoming a chorale, then slowly transforming into a dense forest of figuration over a period of about nine minutes. Though the growth of the material is extremely gradual, the things that emerge from the cycle of chords are sometimes surprising and veer quite far from the original material.

Around the time I was composing this piece, I had the pleasure of viewing photographs from the series “Intimate Portraits” by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, a beautiful series of black-and-white self-portraits of the artist, nude, and in near darkness. Deeply inspired by the emotional

vulnerability of these photographs, I began to imagine a connection to the way my work could be performed. Since the precise alignment of live and electronic components of *Natural History* would require the musicians to play to click tracks, I also wondered if there was a way to use this technology as more than a simple performance aid – to work in musical events that would instead be intrinsically linked to it. This could allow me to separate the performers as much as physically possible while maintaining perfectly rhythmic ensemble playing, so creating a physical analog to Moutoussamy-Ashe's barren photographic compositions.

-

I met the poet G.C. Waldrep at the MacDowell Colony in 2015 and was immediately drawn to him as both a poet and person—friendly, unique, and for a poet, deeply musical. In addition to his study of poetry, he

was trained as a countertenor and professed his love for composers like Meredith Monk and David Lang. We bonded over our shared love for the books of Italo Calvino and the poetry of James Wright. So naturally I was curious about his work.

I tore through his many published volumes, and was drawn in particular to his first collection of poems, ***Goldbeater's Skin***, written twenty years ago, when he was about my age. I found it to be particularly pregnant with musical possibilities (actual

musical allusions abound), so I decided to craft a new work for voice and percussion quartet around these poems. They are often deeply imagistic; the source of each reference would be impossible to trace; yet each poem leads inexorably to a potent and dramatic conclusion. I constructed music that functioned similarly—music that is billowing yet always headed towards some kind of denouement. As I sifted through the whole collection, I chose poems whose references overlapped to create connective tissue; some references are more specific than others, but almost all of them are concerned with companionship—whether deep friendship, or love.

The challenge of writing a work for voice and percussion quartet is obvious: four drummers are much louder than one voice, and I wanted the musicians in the quartet to have moments to shine as well. I constructed a series of interludes (two proper and one faux

interlude), each focused on a single kind of idiophone—wood; metal; then, appropriately enough, skin.

-

Ode to Joy is my sixth composition to feature a percussion quartet, but my first for a solely acoustic quartet (the other pieces featured piano solo, voice solo, or electronics). It was written at the behest of Sandbox Percussion, who asked for a relatively short, relatively simple piece in terms of instrumentation that they could take on tour without a soloist or sound system.

To that end, I endeavored to use a maximum number of traditional percussion instruments—vibraphone, marimba, glockenspiel, crotales—while limiting the "special" instruments to those that can be carried in a small bag or suitcase.

Six is a lot of percussion quartets. When surveying the prior five, I

found a relatively wide range of emotions: from contemplative to dramatic to mysterious to elegiac. But one felt missing: joy. This composition—through its use of simple, optimistic harmonies and pulsating rhythms—seeks to remedy that. Its title playfully references the iconic Beethoven tune, but the source is one of America's, and one of New York City's, great joy-havers: the poet Frank O'Hara. His poem of the same name iterates an enthusiastic passion for the city I have long called home—a passion I felt more urgently while living in Europe on a residency.

One more thing about joy: Joy is hard. It's much easier to feel anger, sadness, or nothing. That hardness is part of the piece. While writing, I set these harmonicas in unison against bowed crotales and vibraphones. Despite the best efforts of these excellent musicians, none of these instruments will ever sound entirely in tune with one another. These imperfections,

these distances between the joys I have in my life and the joys I aspire toward, are something I have come to embrace.

Ode to Joy is jointly dedicated to Sandbox Percussion and to Blow Up Percussion, a group from Rome who have been wonderful champions of my music in Italy and beyond and who co-commissioned the work. The work was created with the support of a residency from the Stiftung Laurenz-Haus in Basel, Switzerland.

Christopher Cerrone

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All music by **Christopher Cerrone**

Performed by **Sandbox Percussion** (**Jonathan Allen, Victor Caccese, Ian Rosenbaum, Terry Sweeney**)

with

Conor Hanick, piano ("Don't Look Down") **Elspeth Davis**, mezzo-soprano ("Goldbeater's Skin")

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January 5–6, 2023 at Bunker Studio, Brooklyn, NY: "Goldbeater's Skin"

March 24–25, 2023 at Shiny Things Studio, Brooklyn, NY: Additional "Goldbeater's Skin"

June 7 & 17, 2023 at Shiny Things Studio, Brooklyn, NY: "Natural History of Vacant Lots"

November 8 & 15, 2023 at Sandbox Percussion Studios, Brooklyn, NY: "Ode to Joy"

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