

A History of the Toronto Sunday Contact Jam, 1978-2016

by Pam Johnson, jam co-organizer from 1983-2016

with John Oswald, jam founder

This archive is a history of the Toronto Sunday Contact Jam from its founding in 1978 to 2016. It is significant as both a part of Toronto dance history, but also as a part of Toronto music history of this period. The founders of the Toronto Sunday Contact Jam were a group of musicians and dancers who connected at York University and continued to collaborate creatively as part of the alternative performance scene in Toronto.

It was mainly musicians who secured the first regular jam venue, the Music Gallery, and ran the event in its early years. By the early 1980's the jam was organized by one original founder, musician John Oswald, and one dancer, Pam Johnson. We are compiling this archive.

This archive is also a tribute to the hundreds, or possibly thousands, of regular, occasional, and visiting dancers from Toronto and around the world who participated over 38 years with joy and generosity and made this an amazing weekly dance event.

CONTACT IMPROVISATION

The dance form called, Contact Improvisation (CI), was arguably the last development of the 'post-modern' period in western contemporary dance. This period, that impacted all the arts after WWII, was a response to the strictures and elitism of modernism. It was also a response to the political radicalization of the 1960's and 1970's. The anti-Vietnam war movement, civil rights movement, Women's, and LGBTQ liberation struggles all demanded a more equal, democratic, and inclusive society and this influenced both the content and the context of Contact Improvisation.

Contact Improvisation is not a codified system with a movement vocabulary. It has some basic movement principles, like the organization of gravity and momentum. It is most often practiced as a duet form and there are 'best practices' for dancing with another person that involve some physical and some relational principles which are continually developing. CI is practiced and performed improvisationally.

The early developers, who were mainly dancers or athletes, consciously chose not to trademark CI and actively discouraged creating any boundaries to the learning or practicing of the form. The spirit of inclusivity led to CI being practiced and embraced by a very broad range of people and practiced as both a performance form and a community dance form. It was this spirit that inspired the creators of the Toronto Sunday Contact Jam and continued to inform the jam organizers for thirty-eight years.

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TORONTO SUNDAY JAM COMMUNITY

The jam started with a small group of mostly regular dancers, but over nearly four decades it grew into a vibrant and busy event with a core of regular dancers, another group of occasional dancers, and many visitors who came from all over the world to drop in on a Sunday to dance. It was truly the dancers who provided the spirit that made this a thriving community dance event. It grew mainly by word-of-mouth recommendations from dancers but, the Toronto jam was also connected to the global CI network.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Inspired by the spirit and ethos of the developers of CI, the Toronto Sunday Jam was organized around a few guiding principles:

- **Dependability:** A jam will happen every single Sunday without fail.
- **Affordability:** The jam will be low cost to attend, and no one will ever be turned away due to inability to pay.
- **Welcoming:** To the best of the organizers' ability, the jam will be a space that encourages everyone who wants to dance to be able to participate.
- **No personal gain:** To reduce any entanglement with personal finances or other professional work, the organizers take no salary.
- **Support the CI community:** The jam organizers will promote and support other CI activity both locally and globally.

THE ARCHIVE MATERIAL

This archive is a collection of videos, articles, photos, posters, and other ephemera that jam founder, John Oswald and long-time organizer, Pam Johnson collected over the years. Most of the material is from the 1978-2016 period. There are also two video interviews conducted by Pam Johnson in January 2022, with original founders, musicians John Oswald and Tina Pearson about the particular historical moment when the Toronto Sunday Contact Jam was started.

JAM PHOTOS AND VIDEO NOTE: The general policy at the contact jam was strictly no photography. But there were times when opportunities were organized to photograph dancing and dancers. The photos in this archive were all taken with the permission and knowledge of the dancers. Unfortunately, the names of dancers and photographers have not been recorded in all cases, and some have been lost. We have chosen not to include names at this time because of missing and possibly inaccurate information. This could change in the future.

Use of the archive: We hope you enjoy this historical record and reference its existence in your research, teaching, and to help us keep this piece of Toronto dance and music history alive. If you wish to reproduce any part outside of this archive, please contact Pam Johnson johnson.pam1@gmail.com. Or John Oswald : pitch@pfony.com.