

Ray Green and Casey Jones: Inventories and Folklore

By Jeffrey Taylor

“Come all you rounders if you want to hear. The story told of a brave engineer.”¹ The engineer was John Luther “Casey” Jones, a Missouri-born railroader who represents the single casualty of a “train-on-train” collision on April 30, 1900. In a dramatic attempt to save passengers, Jones died standing his post with one hand on the whistle and the other on the brake. Nine years after the crash, a popular song detailing his story surfaced with the T. Lawrence Seibert and Eddie Newton publication *Casey Jones, the Brave Engineer*. Countless versions of the song led to a persistent popularity of Jones’s legend and cemented his status as an American folk hero.

In 1936, the folk tune inspired an American composer to create one of the earliest examples of a work written for percussion ensemble. In the pursuit to create authentic American art, composer Ray Green celebrated folklore with his “Three Inventories of Casey Jones,” an early and formative contribution of music literature for the percussion ensemble idiom.

Born in Missouri in 1908 and raised in California, Ray Green began writing music at age nine. In the years to follow, Green — the son of amateur musicians — would win a composition scholarship to the San Francisco Conservatory, attend the University of California at Berkeley, and continue his studies in Paris with Darius Milhaud and Pierre Monteux. Green returned to the United States to

begin a career of influence that “was felt in the worlds of American music composition, music therapy, modern dance, and music publishing.”²

His “Three Inventories of Casey Jones” appeared in Henry Cowell’s 1936, No. 18 edition of *New Music Quarterly* alongside five other seminal works for percussion ensemble. This three-movement piece is scored for five graduated pop bottles, two drums, two cymbals, four gongs, a large bottle containing four or five marbles, and piano.

On December 9, 1938, John Cage presented “the first complete percussion concert in America,”³ and the first known performance of “Three Inventories of Casey Jones” at the Cornish School in Seattle. The concert consisted of five works with a single sentence of explanation in the program: “Percussion music really is the art of noise and that’s what it should be called.”⁴ As detailed by dancer Bonnie Bird, painter Morris Graves attended the performance with noted artist William Cumming, who deemed the evening the “Cornish Riot.”⁵

They came early to the concert and had apparently caused a commotion outside. Morris was sitting in the back of his truck like a king, and his flunkies rolled the carpet up to the front door of the theater, which was a long distance.... They came in and took a whole row of seats in front. I had done a dance to one of the pieces that was going to be on the last part of the program; it was called

“Three Inventories of Casey Jones.” It was based on a folk tune, and Ray Green had written the music for it, which was played on toy piano and pop bottles filled with water — all tiny, crazy instruments.⁶

Notably, Bird’s description of Green’s composition details the use of toy piano. The instrument is not called for in the original publication, leading me to believe that Cage took liberties with Green’s work and adapted the piece for a congruent concert presentation. Ten years prior to his “Suite for Toy Piano” (1948), Cage substituted the instrument in “Three Inventories of Casey Jones.” The piece appeared on most of his early concerts and was included on the Cage Percussion Players’ Northwest tour in January 1940. A score for the toy piano version does not exist, and a performance with the modified instrumentation has not occurred since February 14, 1940.⁷

Jones accepted the dangers of the railroad and died to become a hero in popular culture. He ran his engine fast, challenged himself, and broke records along the way. His story inspired countless examples of inventive American art, including a contribution that helped create “what might be called programmatic music for percussion.”⁸

Green’s creative orchestration in “Three Inventories of Casey Jones,” his single percussion ensemble composition, arrived in the earliest stages of the medium. Although his “inventories” help represent

the beginnings of the percussion ensemble, they have rarely been performed since 1942 (see Figure 1).

The small number of performances from the 1930s and 1940s were spearheaded by several influential American figures in dance. For Cage's 1938 Cornish School program, dancer Merce Cunningham helped deliver Bonnie Bird's choreography, depicting Jones as "a company fellow who, having driven his famous engine too fast around a bend and crashed, found himself in 'the other place' instead of heaven because he was not a union man."⁹

Between 1940 and 1942, José Limón teamed with May O'Donnell for several interpretations of the Green and Jones tale. "José was the engineer and I was the engine! It was a romp that we enjoyed, complete with José dancing with an oil can."¹⁰ As is common with most early American percussion ensemble literature, Green's "Three Inventories of Casey Jones" is inherently associated with dance. Notwithstanding, his unique writing style combined with imaginative choreography solidified the piece as an important contributor to the growth of percussion in America.

Henry Cowell's 1936 Orchestra Series edition of *New Music Quarterly* was entirely devoted to percussion music. The volume contains works by Johanna M. Beyer, Harold G. Davidson, Doris Humphrey, William Russell, Gerald Strang,

and Ray Green. Seventy-five years after its publication, the Meehan/Perkins Duo and the Baylor University Percussion Group released a recording featuring twelve historical early works, five of which appeared in the Cowell-edited journal. The 2011 album, *Restless, Endless, Tactless*,¹¹ includes Green's "Three Inventories of Casey Jones," serving as the single recording of the piece in existence.

Green met dancer May O'Donnell in the summer of 1937 at a dance studio in California. The beginning of a successful, lifelong collaboration in marriage, music, and dance commenced with an introduction and their first work, "Of Pioneer Women." Throughout the course of their careers, the couple's artistic experimentation produced over forty collaborative works.

Their collaboration on "Three Inventories of Casey Jones" occurred primarily in the early 1940s, beginning with a February 25, 1941 performance at Fresno State College. The program, titled "On American Themes" by the Green, O'Donnell, and Limón trio, toured throughout the United States for approximately three years with "Casey Jones" consistently programmed.

In a strange coincidence, O'Donnell's father died working for the railroad in a 1931 accident, perhaps strengthening her connection with Green and his composition. The American railroad is a source of endless early twentieth-century tragedy and inspiration, and its influence was felt

and repurposed by "one of the most formidable combinations of composer and choreographer of their time."¹²

Jones was a railroad engineer known and immortalized for speed, and Green was a composer engrossed with creating a new American music. Their individual impacts on American history developed through dissimilar circumstances, yet music served as a link between the Missouri natives. While growing up in Casey, Kentucky, Jones aspired to become an engineer on the new and exciting American railroad system. As a boy in San Francisco, Green's exposure to jazz and blues shaped a lifetime of experimentation with rhythm and melodic inflection. Jones' race to glory and untimely death helped inspire Green's percussion composition, and the re-telling of United States folklore through authentic American art.

"Three Inventories of Casey Jones" is a compelling contribution to the steady rise of percussion ensemble performance. The work helped inspire Cage's early experimentations with the toy piano, it crafted years of storytelling through music and dance, and it strengthened the relationship between two celebrated American artists. The Casey Jones legend produced "inventories" of original American art and helped to accomplish Ray Green's greatest hope of all, to "make a contact and a connection, and establish a dialogue with the audience through music."¹³

Figure 1: Performances/Recordings of Ray Green's "Three Inventories of Casey Jones"

Date	Location	Musical Direction	Choreography
December 9, 1938	Cornish College	John Cage	Bonnie Bird, Merce Cunningham
January 8, 1940	University of Idaho	John Cage	Not Applicable
January 9, 1940	University of Montana	John Cage	N/A
January 11, 1940	Whitman College	John Cage	N/A
February 14, 1940	Reed College	John Cage	N/A
February 25, 1941	Fresno State College	Ray Green	May O'Donnell, José Limón
March 23, 1941	Seattle Repertory Playhouse	Ray Green	May O'Donnell, José Limón
1941 - 1942 (exact dates unknown)	San Francisco, Portland, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Detroit, New York	Ray Green	May O'Donnell, José Limón
1980 - 1989	New York	Ray Green	May O'Donnell
June 1, 2011 (recording released)	Baylor University	Meehan/Perkins Duo, Baylor Percussion Group	N/A

ENDNOTES

1. Eddie Newton, *Casey Jones, the Brave Engineer* (Los Angeles: Southern California Music Co., 1909), https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm_n0202/.
2. The O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation, "Ray Green," accessed April 24, 2020, <https://odonnellgreen.com/ray-green/>.
3. Leta E. Miller, "The Art of Noise: John Cage, Lou Harrison, and the West Coast Percussion Ensemble," in *Perspectives on American Music*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 224.
4. Barry Michael Williams, "The Early Percussion Music of John Cage: 1935–1943" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1990), 11, <http://bmichaelwilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/1990/02/MusicDissertationPDF.pdf>.
5. William Cumming, *Sketchbook: A Memoir of the 1930s and the Northwest School* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 112.
6. Peter Dickinson, ed., *Cage Talk: Dialogues with and about John Cage* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 76.
7. Laura Kuhn, "John Cage's Percussion Collection," *John Cage Trust* (blog), September 14, 2017, <http://johncagetrust.blogspot.com/2017/09/john-cages-percussion-collection-july-8.html>.
8. John H. Beck, ed., *Encyclopedia of Percussion* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), 270.
9. Miller, 225.
10. May O'Donnell and Marian Horosko, "May O'Donnell: My Life in Dance, 1931–1951," *Dance Chronicle* 26, no. 2 (2003): 205, https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/stable/1568124?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.
11. Meehan/Perkins Duo and the Baylor Percussion Group, *Restless, Endless, Tactless: Johanna Beyer and the Birth of American Percussion Music*, released June 1, 2011, New World Records Cat. No. 80711, CD.
12. The O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation.
13. "Composer/Publisher Ray Green," interview by Bruce Duffie, [bruceduffie.com](http://www.bruceduffie.com/green.html), September 1989, <http://www.bruceduffie.com/green.html>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beck, John H., ed. *Encyclopedia of Percussion*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995.
- Cumming, William. *Sketchbook: A Memoir of the 1930s and the Northwest School*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984.
- Dickinson, Peter, ed. *Cage Talk: Dialogues with and about John Cage*. New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006.
- Green, Ray. "Composer/Publisher Ray Green." Interview by Bruce Duffie. [bruceduffie.com](http://www.bruceduffie.com), September, 1989. <http://www.bruceduffie.com/green.html>.
- Kuhn, Laura. "John Cage's Percussion Collection." *John Cage Trust* (blog). September 14, 2017, <http://johncagetrust.blogspot.com/2017/09/john-cages-percussion-collection-july-8.html>.
- Meehan/Perkins Duo and the Baylor Percussion Group. *Restless, Endless, Tactless: Johanna Beyer and the Birth of American Percussion Music*. Released June 1, 2011. New World Records Cat. No. 80711. CD.
- Miller, Leta E. "The Art of Noise: John Cage, Lou Harrison, and the West Coast Percussion Ensemble." In *Perspectives on American Music, 1900–1950*, edited by Michael Saffle, 215–63. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000.
- Newton, Eddie. *Casey Jones, the Brave Engineer*. Los Angeles: Southern California Music Co., 1909. https://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm_n0202/#info.
- O'Donnell, May, and Marian Horosko. "May O'Donnell: My Life in Dance, 1931–1951." *Dance Chronicle* 26, no. 2 (2003): 189–217. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/stable/1568124?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.
- The O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation. "Ray Green." Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://odonnellgreen.com/ray-green/>.
- Williams, Barry Michael. "The Early Percussion Ensemble Music of John Cage: 1935–1943" PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1990. <http://bmichaelwilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/1990/02/MusicDissertationPDF.pdf>.

Dr. Jeffrey Taylor is a percussionist and educator living in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he teaches band, general music, and percussion ensemble for the Scottsdale Unified School District. He received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Percussion Performance from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, a Master of Music degree from Boise State University, and a Bachelor of Music degree in Music Industry from Minnesota State University at Moorhead. **PN**