“Mixed-abilities work teaches me to listen differently and to move my body differently, helping me to dissolve my old habits and patterns. As my movement range has expanded, I have opened to different feelings. My world-view began to change. I began to have a much more profound respect and appreciation for my body and other’s bodies. I began to see beauty in more forms.”

Alito Alessi, Joint Forces Dance Company
Eugene, Oregon
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Earlier this year, I was asked to keynote a conference at the Lemelson Assistive Technology and Development Center of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. As I struggled to write the speech, I was forced to think about assistive technology and its relationship to the arts. Like all things in the arts, the results are varied. From rebuilt traditional instruments to refitted wheelchairs for dance, the options appeared scant and expensive. Was that because of supply or lack of circulated information? Or both? Both.

And what’s more, assistive technology as applied to the artist goes beyond technology to sometimes simple adaptations that allow the artist to document their voice and vision. What I have found is that the most valuable information is what’s shared artist-to-artist based on the modification—simple solutions that empower voice, process, and command of the chosen media.

This issue is meant to bring together our modest findings, and tell stories of adaptations that may be shared studio to studio. In a field where diversity of approach and style is key, these findings are meant to be a springboard for your work. Write to us, help us gather more information at spotlight@vsarts.org. We’ll continue to share.
Adapt and Conquer
How artists with disabilities get creative to create

Before the first note is played or the dance can be performed, artists with disabilities frequently need to tweak the tools of their art in order to achieve their vision. These adaptations are necessary but never routine. We interviewed five artists about how they harness the tools of their medium in order to create.

**Alito Alessi and Emery Blackwell**
*Joint Forces Dance Company & DanceAbility, Eugene, Oregon*
http://www.danceability.com

“Since I often work with people with ‘one-of-a-kind’ bodies, it ensures that I keep creating ‘one-of-a-kind’ choreographies.”

For fifteen years, the Joint Forces Dance Company and their inclusive dance program, Danceability, have been exposing people around the world to mixed abilities dance performance. Traditional dance is notorious for its narrowly defined concept of the human form and its rigorous standards of excellence. Companies like Joint Forces are chipping away at these limiting concepts and changing what we know to be dance.

Director Alito Alessi uses improvisation to introduce dance to people with disabilities. He said that as a choreographer, it allows him to draw from the unique movements of any individual, regardless of whether they’re ‘able-bodied’ or ‘disabled.’

“Disabilities are neither played up nor ignored, but rather just viewed as a natural part of what makes each person unique,” said Alessi.

One of Alessi’s exercises is called eye work. “It enables people with very limited mobility and people who cannot communicate verbally to direct an improvisation, but could be extended into designing choreography as well.”

Dancers take turns being director or the dancer. The director stays in one place and directs with his eyes.

Emery Blackwell and Alito Alessi of Joint Forces Dance perform on the Millennium Stage at the Kennedy Center during the International 2004 VSA arts Festival.

If the director looks to the right, the partner moves to the right, or moves one part of his or her body to the right. The director continues guiding with his eyes, and each time, the partner moves in response, and then looks back to the director for the next move. The director can first look at a particular body part if he wants the dancer to move that body part, then look in the direction he wants that body part to move.

In another method, called “interpretation,” dancers interpret and express not only the physical movement of another person, but also the emotion or feeling that they experience when they perceive someone else’s movement. “So one person might jump up in a joyful way, and the person interpreting could do many different things,” said Alessi. “They might bring a sudden big smile onto their face, reach their arms up in the air, or many other things. With interpretation, every person can do every movement.”

The experience of dancing with a mixed abilities group has shown Alessi the benefits for everyone involved. “I think the more ways of moving and thinking that we’re exposed to, the more we can step out of our personal, familiar ways of doing things, and the more freedom we give ourselves to move in new ways.”

Alessi adapted *The Wizard of Oz* for his company. Renamed *The Wizard of Odds*, his work included a performance by Alessi and Emery Blackwell, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. To convey the tornado at the start of the story, Alessi wildly spun a wheelchair in the air while Blackwell huddled beneath him on the floor.

“Since I often work with people with ‘one-of-a-kind’ bodies, it ensures that I keep creating ‘one-of-a-kind’ choreographies,” said Alessi. “I don’t follow the
International VSA arts Festival a Huge Success

The long-awaited 2004 International VSA arts Festival turned the city of Washington, D.C. into an art gallery, performance hall, educator’s workshop, artist’s community, and—most of all—a four-day long celebration of VSA arts’ 30th anniversary. Artists with disabilities exhibited their works and performed on stages in some of the city’s landmark locations, such as the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Union Station, City Museum of Washington, D.C., Gallaudet University and Farragut Square. “Throughout the city, perceptions widened and pre-conceived notions were cast aside as people experienced a diverse range of world-class talent,” said Soula Antoniou, president of VSA arts.  

Clockwise from top:
Canada’s Adrian Anantawan, recipient of the 2002 VSA arts Rosemary Kennedy International Young Soloists Award, prepares backstage before his performance at the Kennedy Center.

Seize the Day from Maryland presents a musical version of the Dr. Seuss classic The Lorax at the Family Stage at Union Station.

Forklift Danceworks from Austin, Texas, performs with canine dancers at the Millennium Stage in the Kennedy Center.

photos taken by Scott Suchman
Clockwise from top:

Ben Vereen leads a cast that includes the Matt Savage Trio, the Wild Zappers, and Finland’s RUST at Opening Ceremonies at the Kennedy Center’s Concert Hall.

Ronan Tynan, one-third of the famed Irish Tenors, performs at the Opening Ceremonies.

Singer Laura Dodd performs at VSA arts’ 30th anniversary celebration.

photos taken by Scott Suchman
mainstream form of having repertory and resetting that on new dancers.”

“Mixed-abilities work taught me (and continues to teach me) to listen differently and to move my body differently,” said Alessi. As his range of movements changed and expanded, it has changed his life in general. “My world-view began to change. I began to have a much more profound respect and appreciation for my body and other’s bodies. I began to see beauty in more forms.” Alessi now sees that dancing with only able-bodied people limited him. “I was only exposed to certain ways of moving that didn’t include the broader spectrum of human movement potential.”

Ed Chevy
Bassist, Beethoven’s Nightmare, Ewa Beach, Hawaii

“Hearing folks often say, ‘What an odd choice for a deaf person to choose to play music in a band.’”

Whether or not rock-and-roll music played at high decibels would qualify as Ludwig van Beethoven’s ultimate nightmare is impossible to say, but for bassist Ed Chevy it definitely fulfills a dream. The band is comprised of three deaf musicians on bass, guitar, and drums. “Our music is mostly hard-driving rock,” said Chevy. “You can call it hard rock, heavyset metal rock or high-flying rock.”

In addition to being the bassist for “the only American all-deaf rock-and-roll band,” Chevy teaches American Sign Language (ASL), music, and storytelling at a Honolulu community college and in the public high schools.

Rock-and-roll is definitely a more open-ended form of music than classical, but there are still notes that need to be hit and rhythms that must be kept. To do that, Chevy said that the band relies heavily on bass and drums.

“With our hearing aids on, we simply turn up the volume and start playing a different kind of music from the deaf side.”

Chevy said the band also uses alternatives to sound to enhance the music and make it more accessible to the full audience.

“During a concert, we add visual light effects from our music machine for audiences who are deaf or hard of hearing. We illustrate our music so the audience can experience the difference.”

“One of the most difficult challenges is to get people to experience the deaf band. Hearing folks often say, ‘What an odd choice for a deaf person to choose to play music in a band,’” Chevy laughed.

“There is no secret in adapting special ‘tools’ to make arts a vital part of every disabled person’s life,” said Chevy. “You have to take what you have and make the very best of it.”

David Nabb
Saxophonist, Kearney, Nebraska

http://www.unk.edu/departments/music/nabb.html

“It took me 30 years to learn how to play the saxophone with two hands. It’s going to take more than two years to learn how to play it with one.”

David Nabb has been avidly playing the saxophone since he was in the 5th grade. As an adult, he became a professional, playing in bands and teaching at the University of Nebraska. Four years ago, when he was 37, he had a massive stroke and suddenly his entire left side was paralyzed. He thought his career was over.

In recovery, he heard about a one-handed saxophone. With his longtime sax repairman, Jeff Stelling, Nabb
went about acquiring one. Stelling is a perfectionist, however, so he insisted that they not “cobble something together” and instead went about building a one-handed sax from the ground up.

On a saxophone, every finger is dedicated to a key. Nabb and Stelling needed to create a key that would perform the functions of the left and right key. So they devised a toggle switch that flips left, right, or stays neutral to play both keys. With the toggle, a sax can be played with one hand.

“It takes some practice. It’s a whole different technique,” said Nabb, who says he’s still learning how to play it.

The hardest part of playing it is conceptualizing the fingering while practicing. It requires more forethought for the player, at least in the early stages (Nabb has only been playing the one-handed sax for a few years).

“It took me 30 years to learn how to play the saxophone with two hands. It’s going to take more than two or three years to learn how to play it with one,” he said. Nabb has also played flute, oboe, and bassoon, so adjusting to new instruments is not new to him.

Being able to play again is “absolutely the greatest,” said Nabb. “It’s the most terrific satisfaction. It’s what my whole life has been about. Before I had the one-handed sax, it was life now and life before. But this has allowed me to tie my life back together again.”

Nabb credits the perfectionism and brilliance of his friend Jeff Stelling for the excellence of the instrument. Stelling took a cheap student horn apart and started from scratch. The sound had not changed, because the moving parts don’t affect the “tube.” Once they successfully created a one-handed sax, Yamaha donated parts to make another one.

The original prototype one-handed sax has been donated to a teenage boy in South Carolina who lost his arm in a plane crash. The experience has motivated Nabb and Stelling to start the UNK One-Hander Program to make one-handed woodwind instruments for people with disabilities. Stelling is currently at work on a flute, and Yamaha has agreed to donate the parts for future instruments.

Amy Parks
French Horn, Baltimore, Maryland
“I’m not about my disability. I’m about my music.”

Parks knew that she wanted to play the French horn before she even knew what it was. “I loved the sound before I knew what made it.”

Amy Parks

She first heard it as an elementary student, played during a filmstrip of Peter and The Wolf. Parks was born without a left hand, so her parents wanted to make sure she was

See Adapt, page 14
VSA arts Offers Free Web Visibility

Artists on Registry all given access to Web

VSA arts has increased its services to post the contact information of artists who are members of the VSA arts Artists Registry allowing viewers to directly connect with those interested in further supporting their work. Members of the Registry are able to post their artwork or headshot and a personal statement on the Web, and with individual approval, VSA arts will also post contact information.

The popularity of the VSA arts online gallery has prompted this change, which promises to increase the visibility of the over 1,000 artists registered with VSA arts.

A letter went to all members of the Registry at the end of 2003 announcing this opportunity. In order to have your artwork posted online, your information must be current. VSA arts will not post an artist’s contact information without a signed release agreement. The agreement was sent with the letter. If you did not receive the letter, please contact Jennifer Colaguori, artist services coordinator, at VSA arts by e-mail at jenniferc@vsarts.org or by phone at 202.628.2800 x3885.

Each artist’s Web posting will include one image or headshot for promotional purposes and a 50-word bio. Artists will also be given the option to have contact information listed to include a daytime phone, e-mail address, and a personal Web site.

“Hopefully, this will allow our artists to connect with a much larger audience, and bring about additional sales, exhibits, performances, and promotional opportunities,” said Stephanie Moore. Currently, there are 620 artists online.

With this launch, VSA arts will aggressively market the online listings to the public, at conferences, and among their partners in the arts community.

Visitors to the site will be able to search by first name, last name, state, country, media, discipline and disability.

Moore said that VSA arts will be sensitive to artists who do not feel comfortable marketing their work and handling their own art sales. In these cases, the artists can forego publishing their contact information, and VSA arts will act as an intermediary for any opportunity.

New opportunity, new application

VSA arts polished up the long-standing photocopied application to make it clean and splashy to prepare for its marketing launch.

The 5-page application asks for details about an artist’s specific discipline, media, and techniques. The application also asks artists to describe their personal motivation to create and to write a personal statement that will be posted online. The application takes about an hour to complete, aside for the time to do any slide or video duplication or gather artwork samples.

“Artists should continue to keep us informed of current projects and update artistic samples (slides, videos, CDs). Many artists keep us on their mailing lists and these materials become a part of their files,” said Moore.

Visit the VSA arts Artists Registry online at www.vsarts.org, under Artist Services, to take a peek at the progress. ◆
**VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific Means Business**

**Rejuvenated affiliate dives in to tackle artist’s biggest hurdles**

After a brief hiatus, *VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific* has returned to the islands. With the re-establishment of the affiliate comes great vigor in addressing the biggest challenges for adult artists with disabilities: economic viability, maximizing government benefits like Social Security, and developing a network within the greater arts community of Hawaii. *VSA arts* recently presented the affiliate its award for excellence in public awareness and advocacy. James E. Modrick, V.P. of affiliate and education services, commented, “Hawaii’s efforts went beyond our expectations, developing a program that was a facilitator of policy change.”

A recent statewide forum on careers in the arts was the initial breeding ground for the affiliate’s potential solutions, and their allies have expanded to include the Social Security Administration (SSA), reinforcing their objectives with the state legislature at the annual Pacific Rim conference on people with disabilities. Held in late March, the conference includes Hawaii and several Pacific countries in three days of intensive information-sharing and networking.

Because the forum allowed Susan Miller, executive director *VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific*, and her staff to travel to each of the state’s many islands, it was an ideal way to re-introduce the affiliate to untapped artists with disabilities from the state. The forums were a reason to network and build community for the affiliate.

“We needed to reposition *VSA arts* in a much more visible way,” said Miller. “We are now connected to economic development and committed to advancing the careers of Hawaii’s artists with disabilities.”

**The Benefits of Paradise**

Despite living in what many of us would call paradise, Hawaiian artists with disabilities face many of the same problems that artists on the mainland do. A limited understanding of their Social Security benefits is a chief issue for them.

Miller made building a relationship with the state’s SSA her number one priority. Creating a sense of urgency in the government agencies wasn’t hard: nationally and in Hawaii, 75% of people with disabilities are unemployed. “This has huge implications for all of our government systems,” said Miller. “People with disabilities need to navigate vocational rehabilitation, Medicaid/Medicare and Social Security, for instance. These systems need to be adjusted so that they are accessible to this audience.”

Although artists can establish themselves as self-employed and receive higher benefits through work incentives programs, few will risk losing their monthly benefits to establish themselves as working artists. Especially when it’s easy to perceive that “working artist” is not embraced by SSA as a legitimate career.

Initial research at *VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific* turned up almost 200 people with disabilities statewide who were connected to federal and state assistance (such as food stamps, Medicaid, or SSI benefits). Few, if any, knew that they could be earning up to $800/month through work incentives without losing their Social Security Income (SSI).

**Art Opens the Door**

Miller worked to find a middle ground where artists and the system could work together. Their goals started with making friends with SSA on behalf of people with disabilities. To do this, art was the ideal tool.

*VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific* invited SSA to participate in their career forum. She admits it took a while to find the right people at SSA, but when she did, the relationship bloomed.

Susie Anderson at Hawaii’s SSA office started attending all the affiliate’s events, bought artwork, and spread the word about Hawaii’s artists with disabilities.

“She even helped us paint a new arts center on Lanai,” said Miller. “In her, artists saw a problem-solver, not a problem.”

Miller is now pushing the state’s SSA office to institute more benefits planners. Hawaii’s office currently has only one benefits planner servicing the entire state.

**Rejuvenating Artists**

Ed Chevy is a bassist who is deaf. He is part of a rock band of all deaf musicians called Beethoven’s Nightmare. He has seen a change in the spirit of artists with disabilities since *VSA arts of Hawaii-Pacific* returned.
Art Supplies and Adaptive Tools

Adaptive Resources for Artists with Disabilities
This is a general and inclusive list of some of our favorite online resources for performing artists with disabilities. The list, alphabetized by organization, includes Web sites that offer access to assistive technology and other products, educational resources, networking and performing opportunities in the artistic community, and general information about the disability community. If we’ve left off one of your favorite Web sites, please let us know: e-mail us at spotlight@vsarts.org.

Ability Hub
http://www.abilityhub.com/
Assistive Technology (AT) simplifies the lives of artists with disabilities, but AT is not necessarily simple. This Web site offers an easy and organized way to find adaptive equipment, answers to questions about AT you might already have, and features a host of resources for alternative solutions to using computers.

Ability Magazine
http://www.abilitymagazine.com
Ability Magazine focuses on issues from the perspective of the disability community, with a focus on arts, current events, and entertainment.

Alimed
http://www.alimed.com
This site is predominantly medical and generalized orthopedic and rehabilitative supplies, but many of these adaptive tools could be useful. A free catalog is available.

The American Association of People with Disabilities
http://www.aapd.com
This is the largest national nonprofit organization of people with disabilities, dedicated to ensuring economic self-sufficiency and political empowerment for people with disabilities. Membership is inexpensive, and includes benefits like New Mobility magazine, membership in a federal credit union, and a mail-order prescription drug benefit.

Arts as a Force of Healing, Building, & Empowerment
http://www.artslynx.org/heal/index.htm
This comprehensive site contains well-researched links and several subheadings for artists with disabilities, both to share their work and to learn about resources. Explore the listings of your peers, and post your own.

Backstage
http://www.backstage.com
Calling itself the “complete online performing arts resource,” click on the “Performers Resource Service Directory” for a directory of Web links and listings for the various needs of performing artists.

Blindskills, Inc., and Dialogue magazine
http://www.blindskills.com
The Web site and magazine are designed for people who are blind or have low vision. It includes promotions for job-hunting resources and information on large-print books.

Coalition for Disabled Musicians
http://www.disabled-musicians.org
Click on “adaptive gear” for information about modified instruments and check out their national referral service.
Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation  
Paralysis Resource Center  
http://www.paralysis.org  
The home page of this extensive Web site can lead you to many pages of information and resources about paralysis in general. Click on “tools and technology” to reach information on adaptive resources that extend beyond the arts.

Damon Brooks Associates  
http://www.damonbrooks.com  
Damon Brooks is a talent agency that specifically represents performers and speakers who have disabilities. The Web site includes a list of the performers they represent as well as their clientele. Contact them directly for information about joining their roster.

Dance Magazine  
http://www.dancemagazine.com  
The Web site includes an extensive “dance finder” to locate classes and schools, and an online classified section with listings for jobs, workshops, and studio rentals.

Dance Spirit Magazine  
http://www.dancespirit.com  
Directed toward a mainstream audience, Dance Spirit includes many online listings, classifieds, and general information for professional and amateur dancers.

Deaf Nation  
http://www.deafnation.com  
Aiming to be the online resource for the deaf and hard of hearing community, Deaf Nation provides news, video clips with sign language, and “the latest in deaf sports.”

Dramatics Magazine  
http://www.etassoc.org/publications/dramatics.asp  
The Web site of the magazine of the Educational Theatre Association, Dramatics provides an insight on the professional theatre life.

Gold Violin  
http://www.goldviolin.com  
Don’t let the name fool you: the target audience of this Web site is older Americans, not musicians, but many of the adaptive tools and gadgets are useful and could serve your professional and artistic needs.

Half the Planet  
http://www.halftheplanet.org  
Founded by former VSA arts President John Kemp, Half the Planet’s Web site offers a wealth of information on nearly any topic you could think of. Under “departments” click on “arts” where there is a very full list of art organizations for people with disabilities.

The International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers  
http://www.igodap.org  
The guild is a collective of artists and performers with disabilities. It’s free to join, and it’s a great resource for networking and finding information about international disabled arts festivals. Click on the “profiles” link to find out about interesting organizations, festivals, and artists worldwide.

Mainstream Online  
http://www.mainstream-mag.com  
Mainstream is a longstanding advocate for the general disability community. The Web site offers news, commentary and information on technology, products, and resources for people with disabilities.
Madenta
http://www.madentec.com
Madenta makes trackers for head pointing that work with a tiny dot taped to your forehead.

Media Access Office
http://www.disabilityemployment.org/med_acc.htm
Primarily West coast-based, the Media Access Office “promotes the employment and accurate portrayal of persons with disabilities in all areas of the media and entertainment industry.” The Web site includes links to job and networking opportunities, news, and other resources.

Mobility Store
http://www.mobilitystore.com
This Web site offers adaptive tools for every aspect of daily life. Some might apply to your artistic and professional pursuits.

National Association for College Admission Counseling
http://www.nacac.com/fairs.html
By going directly to the link above or clicking on “college fairs” on the home page, link to information for prospective attendees and a comprehensive list of performing and visual arts college fairs nationwide.

National Arts and Disability Center
http://nadc.ucla.edu
The NADC Web site is a deep resource of information about opportunities, classes and services, and funding for artists with disabilities and organizations that serve them. Contact NADC about posting information about your own work on the Web site.

National Endowment for the Arts Office for AccessAbility
http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/index.html
The National Endowment for the Arts’ Office for AccessAbility resource center is extensive—a good place to start looking for just about anything related to arts and disability.

National Resource Center for Blind Musicians
http://www.blindmusicstudent.org
On the home page, click on the link to the table of contents for connections to education information, like the Summer Institute, and perspectives from professional musicians.

New Mobility Magazine
http://www.newmobility.com
This general disability community magazine’s Web site is very easy to navigate, with links to recent articles, an “expert online” section, and a classified section.

Northcoast Medical
http://www.ncmedical.com/
While not specifically related to the performing arts, the online catalog features many tools and devices that might be useful to daily life.

The Disability Rag
http://www.ragged-edge-mag.com
A progressive, edgy, and interesting Web site with interesting news and viewpoints on the disability community. Not specifically for performing artists with disabilities, but interesting and informative.

Sammons Preston
http://www.sammonspreston.com
The equipment and adaptive resources available from this site and free catalog are general, but can be a resource for you.
Jennifer Jacques, a recipient of the award of excellence sponsored by VSA arts and Volkswagen of America, Inc., demonstrated her wheelchair painting technique. Jacques uses a power wheelchair and a facilitator to create works that layer paint and collage.

Students at Hampshire College displayed their assistive technology projects as part of the conference’s “Invention Showcase.” These projects included toys, weighted vests for children with autism, accessible Web site design guides, adjustable wheelchair trays, and a robotic mount for using a digital camera.

“We teach our students not only how to problem solve but also to need find,” said Lauren Way, the forum director.

With the Center’s prototype lab now next door to the college’s sculpture studio, the designers and engineers are primed for an interdisciplinary spirit.

This is the 6th year the Lemelson Center has held an AT forum, and the first time art has been the chief focus. The forum tackled issues like how technology innovations can make art more accessible to people with disabilities, and how disability and AT are portrayed in the arts. The topics are balanced between philosophical discussions and real-world issues.

To find out more about the Lemelson Center and the conference, visit their Web site at http://lemelson.hampshire.edu/.
Adapt, continued from page 7

committed to music before they set about adapting an instrument for her. (French horn traditionally requires both hands to play.) They first gave her a flugelhorn on which she could play French horn music.

It was clear by high school that Parks was sticking with it, so her father took an old French horn to the school metal shop and flipped the valve mechanism. “It was awkward to play,” said Parks, “but it worked.” (Horn valves don’t affect the sound but just control the air shifting through the horn.)

Her first adapted horns were rudimentary but effective. She went on to study music at the University of Delaware and her professor, acclaimed French horn player Francis Orval, was impressed with her playing but dismayed at the sight of her horn. He insisted she upgrade. Orval used his influence to get an instrument custom-made for Parks by the prestigious Alexander Company in Germany.

Parks worked two jobs over the summer and scored a grant from the Philadelphia Arts Foundation to pay for the horn. Alexander charged an additional $500 to customize the $4000 horn.

“It was actually very reasonable. They make all horns by hand, so customizing this one wasn’t that big a deal,” said Parks. Hornmakers like Conn that use an assembly line to manufacture their horns often find customizing one horn is too cost-prohibitive.

Parks still uses the horn her professor helped her acquire, but purchased a new one with the money she received as a VSA arts Panasonic Young Soloist in 1995.

This time, she bought a Yamaha off the shelf and had it customized after the fact. This way, she was able to test the horn before she bought it. She can’t really play a conventional French horn; as a result, her system of testing a horn is unorthodox but in a way more reliable.

“Since the horn is technically unplayable for me in the store, my tests are very scientific,” said Parks. “I play one note, then check response tone and intonation. It’s different than playing songs on it.”

She brought the Yamaha to fellow horn player Bill Kendall and legendary Baltimore hornmaker Walter Lawson. They converted it for Parks.

“The difference is ingenious,” said Parks. “They moved the linkages without altering the tubes, but it’s not awkward, like in high school.”

French horns also have a bell mute to change the horn’s intonation, which leads to her other adaptation—the hand in bell affects the intonation of the horn. Parks uses a myoelectric prosthesis with her left hand so she keeps her mute on a string that she hooks on to her prosthesis. She needs to rehearse and plan her mutes in advance, but luckily, mutes are rare in French horn parts.

Parks, a freelance musician with regular gigs with symphonies in Arlington, Key West, and an opera company in Baltimore, is conflicted about identifying herself as a musician with a disability. “I choose not to draw attention to it. I don’t want the extra special attention or marketing. I’m not about my disability. I’m about my music. You can pigeonhole yourself. I travel in competitive, professional circles; there’s no room in there if you can’t just do it.”

Bill Shannon

Street Dancer, Skateboarder; New York City, New York
http://www.virtualprovocateur.com
http://whatiswhat.com

“The dance I perform is pretty much my own invention.”

One of Bill Shannon’s Web sites is called virtualprovocateur.com, and provocative is an ideal description of this multi-talented performer whose artistry simultaneously thrills, entertains, challenges, and moves anyone fortunate enough to experience it.

Shannon dances and performs using skateboards and roller-bottom crutches. He has a frequently painful bone disorder called Legg-Calve-Perthes disease that affects the end of his femur that meets his hip. As a result, he uses crutches. He says he has always danced, but never been trained, and the free-form iconoclastic performance that he does is hard to define.

“Art wasn’t a choice,” said Shannon. “It’s bigger than I was. It happened to me.” He performs as a dancer but his artistic training was in interdisciplinary video and images at the Art Institute of Chicago.

He calls himself an outsider artist and on Shannon’s virtual provocateur Web site, he attempts to define what he does: “I have invented a new form, profoundly different from anything you may have seen. This invention is rooted in the hip-hop/skateboard tradition of street
improvisation yet has a formal timeless quality beyond the boundaries of its roots... In the end I am an artist.”

The impact of his performance—which he frequently does guerrilla-style on city streets—is matched by the extensive content of his Web sites. Shannon’s opinions, definitions, and classifications range from the nature of life with a disability to specific crutch-dependent dance techniques that are carefully defined and demonstrated on his whatiswhat.com Web site.

From the age of 12 to 24, the pain associated with Shannon’s bone disorder lessened enough for him to take up skateboarding. When he returned to crutches in his mid-twenties, he did not give up the skateboarding, instead combining the two into a way of moving that is thoroughly unique.

He does not consider the disability an obstacle to his dance. “It’s not a burden,” said Shannon. “It is what it is. It’s limiting, but it’s not the end of the world.”

Because his performance is so specific to Shannon’s personal experience, adaptations related to it are hard to identify. “By nature, I have selected a more low impact form of skateboarding, so I guess that could qualify,” said Shannon.

In keeping with this individualism is one element of his online manifesto: the “Concept of Creative Necessity.” He says that artists are creative by choice. “But in your day-in-day-out lifestyle, creative necessity is part of your life. You might encounter something that’s never been there before, and you react to it in the moment. You create or fail. It’s how you get from point a to point b.”

Shannon takes the notion of creative necessity to the extreme by performing improvised works on the streets of New York City. His street dancing and skateboarding become part of the environment itself, using the steps, sidewalks, and streets, and even pulling in passersby and onlookers in sometimes challenging ways.

For instance, as anyone who has seen skateboarders perform their gravity-defying stunts know, falling is part of the game. But because Shannon is on crutches, falling takes on a unique social relevance.

“I can’t fall because I have a responsibility to the public to not put myself at risk. People’s Good Samaritan responses are triggered when I fall,” said Shannon. But Shannon says that his performance creates a dialogue with Good Samaritanism as a social force. Often in his daily life, he finds gestures of helpfulness to be just the opposite, so in his performance he plays with what it means to be helpful.

Shannon does not practice or rehearse in a conventional way because the physical demands are too high. He skateboards daily as a form of transportation, and he dances out at New York’s clubs at night. As a result, he is always innovating and creating new steps and techniques.

His performances are purely improvisational, and never the same twice. “It might be the same framework, but it’s always evolving,” said Shannon. “And I am never stumped.” He stays in the moment and reacts to whatever is happening, be it a passerby, a siren, or a thought that pops into his head.

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“VSA arts of Hawai’i-Pacific not only re-opened doors but rejuvenated every artist with a disability on the islands statewide who long to achieve recognition and a career in arts,” said Chevy. “But the biggest bonus is bringing self-esteem to Hawai’i’s disability culture—a movement that embraces and enriches the value of people’s lives.”

For more on Chevy, see “Adapt and Conquer,” page 6.