



The City Wears a Slouch Hat is a wonderfully imaginative work, presented as part of the Columbia Workshop (CBS Radio) program originating on station WBBM (New York City) on May 31, 1942. (Actually, Cage's original 250-page score had to be quickly revised in one week when the engineer who had previously told Cage that "anything is possible" decided Cage's completed score was, in fact, impossible...the 250-page score has never been seen again.) This is Cage's only work to underscore a linear dramatic text, and an important development in his musical thinking because the radio medium allowed him to treat recorded environment sounds, live sound effects, and exotic and normal percussion instruments as equally musical -- the nomenclature includes tin cans, muted gongs, woodblocks, alarm bells, oxen bells, temple gongs, water gong (a gong slowly dipped in water, a technique which slowly sweeps harmonics like a high-Q filter invented by Cage), tamtam, bass drum, Chinese tom-tom, bongos, cowbells, maracas, claves, marimbula, Chinese and Turkish cymbals, steel coil, washboard, ratchet, pod rattle, whistles, automobile horn, foghorn, metronome, steel pipes, music stands, thundersheet, string piano, telephone, buzzer, and various recordings: automobile, airplane, rain, wind, variable oscillator frequencies, baby cries, and the sound of the ocean. There are also bits of music that have become interwoven into daily life; Patchen's text is surreal but normal, slangy, and "average" American in style.

The main character is known simply as 'the Voice'. He wanders through encounters and meets people who could be straight out of a film noir B-movie: a street mugger (the Voice's wallet strangely contains a picture of the mugger, or at least, the Voice convinces him of that and the mugger gets frightened), a suicidal woman who lies about her face being scarred by a broken mirror (until the Voice strikes a match in the dark) because she thinks no one can understand her problems, an attempted kidnapping (oddly enough, the Voice knows the three strangers' names), street beggars, arguing couples passing in the street ("How come every time we go to mother's you have to start in..."), odd nightclub remarks ("Listen, Al, that nanny goat couldn't win a race if they put snowshoes on the other gees"), a man sitting in the rain listening to foghorns and wondering about creameries and rice planting, the Voice's own odd precognitive abilities (on the telephone: "...the pavement's pretty wet tonight, and their car is going to skid off into a tree...all of them, even the baby... the car'll catch fire...yes, just ten minutes from now...it doesn't matter how I know...I'm sorry. Goodnight."), a fellow who has invented a laughing machine called a mirthogram, and a combo Elizabethan and proto-rap poem set in a traffic jam. Having escaped from the madness of civilization, the piece ends with the Voice eulogizing about the ocean, sitting on a rock to which he swam. He meets a man who lives on the rock and together they howl above the sound of the sea. The Voice delivers a final wish: "I think we need more love in the world...If one man fails to believe, then there can be no faith in the world -- for all men are finally one man, you, me...I am coming into your house with my hand outstretched. I am your friend. Do not be afraid of me."