As the sun descended over Hoboken one recent evening, Paul Sadowski, a sixty-year-old music publisher, and Emily Harris, a thirty-five-year-old Queens-based artist, sat on a wall along the Manhattan shore of the Hudson, peering at Sadowski's iPad. Both are members of the New York Mycological Society, and they were examining a list of places within the five boroughs where other members had found mushrooms.

"A stinkhorn came up near here," Sadowski, who looks like a white-haired Paul Giannatti, said. He was referring to *Phallus rubicundus*, an almost embarrassingly phallic-looking mushroom, which was not seen in New York until a decade ago but is now found wherever there are concrete planters. "The feeling is that it arrived in shipments of wood chips."

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the New York Mycological Society. It also happens to be the centenary of the birth of one of its founders, the composer John Cage—famous for his use of sounds derived from tin cans, automobile-brake drums, and flowerpots, and for his work incorporating silence. To celebrate, the Mycological Society is throwing a gala, "Roaming Urban Soundscapes," in Cage's honor at Cooper Union's Great Hall. The event, which begins this weekend, will include readings and displays on such mushroom-related subjects as psychoactivity and poisoning. Its centerpiece will be the performance of a seldom heard work of Cage's, "49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs for Performer(s) or Listener(s) or Record Maker(s)."

"49 Waltzes" was commissioned by *Rolling Stone* in 1977, to commemorate the magazine's move from San Francisco to New York. It appeared in the magazine only as a piece of visual art: forty-nine multicolored triangles superimposed on a Hagstrom map of New York City. The triangles represented a cryptic score. They were a set of instructions for collecting random ambient sound at a hundred and forty-seven locations, which were organized into groups of three to make the forty-nine "waltzes."

Cage didn't specify how the sounds for "49 Waltzes" should be collected, but he was a lifelong mushroom hunter, so for this week's performance the Mycological Society decided to record sound wherever its members had found mushrooms. The idea was to use the fruiting of mushrooms as the randomizing conceit," Sadowski said. He and Harris have been collecting recordings since February.

At the gala, the tripartite waltzes will be played over speakers in the Great Hall. Harris has equalized the sound levels, so that "if traffic noise is going on over there and a warbler is singing over there you'll be able to hear the warbler." Depending on where listeners stand in relation to the speakers, each waltz will sound different.

The New York Mycological Society emerged from a class that Cage and others taught at the New School between 1959 and 1962, which consisted largely of mushroom-hunting expeditions. What Cage wanted, he wrote, was a "fairly unorganized anarchic situation" that would allow for "pleasant hours and days in the woods" in the company of "people who spend their working hours in a great variety of ways. (I get, for instance, to be with people who aren't composers of experimental music.)"

Sadowski admitted to being "a bit foggy" about the origins of Cage's interest in mushrooms, but Cage himself left hints. In 1976, he told an interviewer, "You can play with music while you're hunting mushrooms. It's a curious idea, perhaps, but a mushroom grows for such a short time, and if you happen to come across it when it's fresh it's like coming across a sound, which also lives a short time." A Mycological Society colleague of Cage's, Gary Lincoff, has speculated that Cage's interest in mushrooms derives from the discipline necessary to be a good mycologist: "You don't want to be wrong even once."

Back along the Hudson, it was time to capture ambient noises. Sadowski produced a handheld recorder and put on earphones. He pointed a microphone toward New Jersey. "Now our focus becomes more on sound than on mushrooms," Harris said. The two of them lapsed into silence, and the ambient sound did indeed become more intense. The roar of traffic on the West Side Highway made a bass-line drone. A pedestrian pushed a squeaky-wheeled baby stroller, creating a wobbling tremolo. A jogger came by dribbling a basketball, adding a thumpy percussion. After about three minutes, Sadowski turned off the recorder.

"It's all allowable," Harris said. "Cage didn't make a distinction between the beautiful and the ugly."

—Peter Canby