Fred Ho ’79 has never owned a car, nor is he “married with children.” No boss dictates his workday, and he buys very little. He has not even stepped into a clothing store in more than 12 years because he designs his own apparel, though he generally prefers to be naked. “What I create is better than Armani, better than Ralph Lauren, better than these boring mass marketers,” says Ho, whose signature piece is a fire-engine-red silk duster patterned with white cranes, made from a recycled Japanese wedding kimono. “I am not a Luddite and I don’t subscribe to purist positions regarding consumer capitalism. I just choose to consume something better.”

Who is Fred Ho? A Chinese-American jazz saxophonist, composer, and writer—and self-described “radical, revolutionary artist.” His genre-busting music is an artful, arresting mix of African and Asian traditions peppered with iconic American notes. He creates jazz suites that incorporate Chinese folk songs and Duke Ellington-style swing, and epic musicals with martial arts, vampires, and mythological monkeys. He also writes articles, essays, and speeches, and has edited books, such as Sounding Off! Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution. Based in Brooklyn, Ho has a full performance schedule. He tours regularly (most recently out West with one of his bands, the Brooklyn Sax Quartet) and has been reviewed by the New York Times and Jazz Times, among others. Commenting on a production of Ho’s operatic homage to female rebels, Warrior Sisters, the New Yorker called him “a musician who joins a protean range of talents.”

One fan is Myra Mayman, former director of Harvard’s Office for the Arts, who oversaw Ho’s week-long campus stay as the Peter Ivers Visiting Artist in 1987. “Fred came on with this enormous saxophone and made the most amazing sounds—sort of exploding burping sounds,” she says of the first time she heard him play at Sanders Theatre. “It was among the most aggressive, awakening music I’ve ever heard in a concert hall, and it grabbed you by the back of the neck. He was trying to explode things, to tear the tops off of ordinary experience. It was very different. Sounds of protest? Anger? Aggression? Or all of that. He didn’t want to be doing what everyone else was doing. That was quite clear.”

he explains, “whether the artist is conscious of it or not. I subscribe to the interpenetration of ideas and material life. I talk the walk.”

Growing up near the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where his father was a Chinese political-science professor, Ho immersed himself in the political unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. “As a teenager I was trying to find an example of something that was not part of the white world. The catalytic impact of the Black Power movement, and Malcolm X, and the Black Arts movement sought to challenge white supremacy in America,” he told the Village Voice in 1997: “I came of age during the Asian-American movement of the early ’70s, and am trying to forge a unity between the two great social movements that had an impact on my life. Music that has been called ‘jazz’ said a lot to me because it came out of the experience of an oppressed people. At the same time, it spoke to the beauty and passion of people who in spite of their oppression affirmed their humanity.”
Ho took up the baritone saxophone—its booming, guttural sound, when played at the lower register, can fit into both the wind and horn sections—because it was free and available: nobody else in the high school band liked it. His friends included the sons of experimental musicians Archie Shepp and Max Roach (both on the university’s faculty at the time), and he never had no social response to that oppression,” is how Ho explains it. “He was extremely feudal, Confucian, in his thinking, so he internalized it all and took it out on those at home, rather than on his white colleagues. One of my first insurrections was to defend my mother against his physical beatings and give him two black eyes.” The experience “made me a militant in the sense that I’ve never subscribed to turning the other cheek, or to pacifism.”

After high school, Ho and a friend, confused over their paths in life, joined the U.S. Marines in 1973. It was the Vietnam era, and Ho says he was continually targeted during training exercises—“This is what the gook looks like.” That was a “very tough, alienating experience,” he says, “an experience of turning pain into power [a phrase he used as the title of his 1997 jazz suite]. I became very good in hand-to-hand combat, trained to fight and sanction my enemy in close quarters without the use of firearms so there would be no forensic evidence.” In 1975, he was dishonorably discharged after clocking his commanding officer over a racist slur. He successfully contested the discharge and his record was expunged.

Since then, Ho has returned to a military milieu on several occasions, most recently last fall, in Cambodia, where he trained security forces for the newly installed king, Norodom Sihamoni, the son of the country’s former leader, Norodom Sihanouk. Ho had met Sihanouk as part of a small group of Americans sympathetic to his efforts to stabilize his country and halt U.S. incursions. “He liked me a lot,” Ho notes. “I agreed to help train his security forces then, and returned when he transferred power to his son.”

Ho says he has now retired from that kind of work. He also no longer carries a gun; licensing is too expensive, and gun users are “cowards.” “I understand their right to bear arms for self-defense, but the use of a gun requires no wisdom,” he explains. “But I do believe in knives.” A Filipino machete and a bowie knife hang on the back of his front door—his “home-security system.”

By the time he entered Harvard, at 20, Ho had already joined, and left, the Nation of Islam (he considered it too insular, and never got an answer about why his name had to be changed to Fred 3X when his ancestors were not slaves). Ideologically, he was a “yellow nationalist” until the summer after his freshman year, when he joined the I Wor Kuen, an Asian-American radical group, initially modeled after the Black Panthers, that morphed into the League of Revolutionary Struggle. Ho painstakingly converted to Marxism and quickly came to regard the IWK as his family. (More than a decade later, he was thrown out because of ideological differences; he says the group, which disbanded in 1989, was jettisoning Marxism.)

Meanwhile, he concentrated in sociology. He organized the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian-American Association and the Harvard-Radcliffe Task Force on Affirmative Action; and worked to end the University’s ties to apartheid. He played with the Harvard Jazz Band, but avoided the music department and its “cultural indoctrination of Eurocentric conservatory training.” If anything, he says, “Harvard taught me by negative example and changed me by convincing me of what I didn’t want to become: a functionary or manager in the system...part of the elite. And I developed a disdain for the mainstream culture I considered to be a polluted pond, a pond of racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalist commodified culture—so I can imagine an ocean of possibilities and not have to settle for any stream.”

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“My philosophy is ‘Either my clothing designs or no clothes,’” says Ho. “I prefer to live my life as if I lived in a rainforest. [Generic] clothes are unnecessary and burdensome.”

“Without an opportunity to watch the men perform, or to audit Shepp’s classes. Within several years, Ho was performing semi-professionally.

At home, he and his sisters (Florence ‘80, a doctor, and Flora ‘87, a lawyer) coped with domestic violence. “Though successful, my father faced discrimination and
tionaries, but that's usually because of their musical accomplishments,” says Bill Shoemaker, a jazz critic and journalist who has followed Ho’s career. “Fred is a revolutionary who uses jazz as his medium.” Since 1981, when he moved from Boston to New York City to pursue music full time, Ho (who changed his name from Houn) has produced a wide range of works, from haunting, melodic, experimental and/or fierce jazz compositions, such as The Black Nation Suite, to works in collaboration with Latino/a poets and singers, to operas like the martial-arts extravaganza Voice of the Dragon, which toured the country in 2003 sponsored by Columbia Artists Management Inc. Among his wilder creations is Night Vision: A First to Third World Vampyre Opera, which “tracks a 2,000-year-old female vampire who runs to pop music stardom, hyped by a diaboli-cal technogenius, the spin doctor.”

Perhaps Ho’s most personal work, composed in the wake of his emotional split with the IWK, is his Monkey Trilogy. Based on the sixteenth-century Chinese novel Journey to the West, the opera tells the story of a monkey (the rebellious “androgynous trickster”), a pig, a monk, and an ogre who defy the gods and travel for 17 years from China to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. In Ho’s version, the four are successful but so enrage the gods in the process that the latter colonize Monkey’s once idyllic homeland. Monkey, also a creature of great integrity, decides to return home and fight for liberation. “Monkey starts out as a soul dissident,” Ho explains, “but finds others who are not happy with the situation—and that begins the long road of organizing.”

Some music reviewers have taken issue with his heavy-handedness, especially the “agitprop” in Warrior Sisters. “But Fred is not an ideologue who produces stilted art,” Shoemaker asserts. “His music has all the prerequisites of swing, of heat, of excitement—especially in the improvising he does.” And Ho appreciates the value of popular entertainment (as in: for and of the people). Shoemaker saw a Sunday matinee of Ho’s Voice of the Dragon in Fairfax, Virginia, and reports that the “long, narrative piece with a lot of really fast-flying martial arts” attracted “tons of kids who had come in on the martial-arts hook and they just completely dug it. Fred understands that. And with The Monkey Trilogy opera, he shows that he’s also hip to that kind of comic book, imaginary, science-fiction sphere that can be brought to bear allegorically for his agenda.”

Ho has also picked up on a powerful, political aspect of jazz—the empower-

“The best music is both soulful and raw, and sophisticated and daring.”

Harvard@Home

The University-wide on-line learning initiative, Harvard@Home, has released several new programs.

“Living Healthier, Living Longer: Part III” presents the final segment of a two-day Alumni College event that examined the latest research on cancer, nutrition and dieting, exercise, and stress management. In the new segment, Daniel Federman, Walter Distinguished Professor of medicine, moderates two panel discussions: one featuring Kenan professor of psychology Daniel Schacter of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (on the seven categories of memory “sins”) and associate professor of psychology Robert A. Stickgold of the medical school (on sleep, dreams, and memory); and the second on the risks and benefits of alternative medical care, with professor of medicine and of ambulatory care and prevention Julie Buring and associate professor of psychiatry Andrew A. Nierenberg.

Are you curious about what undergraduates have to say about their experiences at Harvard? “Students Speak” includes 10 students who candidly cover a wide range of topics: from study groups, libraries, interacting with faculty members, and competition among students, to living with roommates, living in Boston, finding time for extracurriculars, and political involvement on campus. The site will be updated with additional interviews over time.

Harvard@Home offers desktop access to a wide range of intellectual happenings throughout the University. Programs, which range from 10 minutes to three hours long, are free and available to the public. For more information, visit http://athome.harvard.edu.
missions, and artist-in-residence positions at schools or art colonies. (He recently returned from working with musicians in Alaska as part of the CrossSound Festival.) He cannot apply for grants because his company, Big Red Media Inc., is a for-profit venture.

Ho also credits visionary arts promoters, such as Harvey Lichtenstein, for his success. Lichtenstein, who transformed the Brooklyn Academy of Music into one of the country's top forums for contemporary performing art, founded The Next Wave Festival, in which Ho performed in 1997 and 2001. “Here’s the conundrum,” according to Ho. “If the Establishment embraces you for even a second, there’s something to be gotten because they are the mafia, they are the power, so the fact that I got into the Next Wave put me on the map.

“And how did I get there? People are cynical: ‘Did you schmooze? Did you sleep with someone?’ No, this is what really happened—and why I still stay optimistic, though with a critical edge. There are still people who are open-minded and who seek something genuine and creative and experimental, and Harvey Lichtenstein is one of them. He called me into his office and wanted to spend an hour just talking about ideas—not about money, not about budget—but whether my ideas were of interest to him.” People like that, Ho says, like Alvin Ailey and Joseph Papp, “have made their compromises and their deals, but they’ve also had to understand the pulse of what’s new and fresh to do what they did.”

Today, many young impresarios and artists accept “The Apprentice mentality. They don’t want to be entrepreneurs. They want to be hired. They want a gig. They don’t want to be self-reliant, to start from scratch, and carry out a vision no matter how unpopular or uncommercial it might be, but driven by the belief that our culture, our society, needs it,” he says. “[Art] is about risk-taking on a maximum level where everything is put on the table—your reputation, your career, your credibility, and your own personal money.”

The Brooklyn sax quartet’s newest CD, Far Side of Here, was released in March at a free concert at a church in Ho’s predominantly Polish Greenpoint neighbor-