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Bop Prosody, Jazz, and the Practice of Spontaneous Poetics

By Albert DeGenova

The first true artists I met were jazz musicians . . . They were a living example to me that you could live your life on your own terms, you could do your art, & you could tell the great American nonsense to go its own way. They were a model of truth & grit when I needed it most. – Philip Levine. (Feinstein and Komunyakaa 264)

Jazz poetry? Bop prosody? Neither term will be found in *The Making of a Poem*, Norton's anthology of poetic forms. In fact, *The Making of a Poem* does not even use the term "free verse" in its chapter on open forms. No surprise then that this anthology does not mention the sub-category of free verse "jazz poetry." The *New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* includes extensive explanations of "free verse" and "vers libre," but again, there is no mention of "jazz poetry."

Just as jazz music allows the musician to "solo" a freely improvised spontaneous composition, the freedom allowed the jazz poet is based on spontaneous emotional expression. It is understandably difficult for an editor to formalize a category of poetry that defines its prosody as spontaneous writing representing spontaneous emotion. For the same reasons that many people cannot appreciate or understand abstract expressionism in visual art, many people cannot understand free jazz improvisation. Something that seems to have no form produces discomfort in those accustomed to conventional structure and tradition. Yet both abstract expressionism and free jazz have form that is based on highly developed technical skills and structures that in most cases

have evolved from traditional themes or styles. So too with jazz poetry but in this context it is more correct to refer to this writing discipline as “bop prosody.” Defining a form has everything to do with the making of the poem and not at all with its subject as is the problem with the general term “jazz poetry.”

There are numerous anthologies of jazz poetry currently in print, but one of the most widely known and studied is *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa. As the editors make clear in their introduction, jazz poetry is not defined by any specifics of poetic style. Beyond writing in free verse, there is little commonality among the poems of Sonia Sanchez, Kenneth Koch, or Robert Creeley (for example) except specific references to jazz musicians. *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* represents jazz poetry as poetry inspired by specific jazz musicians or jazz songs; poetry written to jazz music, poetry that tries to imitate through words the instrumental sounds of jazz music; or poetry that meditates on the essence of jazz music as an art form. In this accepted representation of jazz poetry, the term is defined by subject matter rather than by writing style and technique. In this representation, jazz poetry becomes a category, a convenient basket to throw any poem that references jazz music.

Jazz music today takes on many forms and styles. As an art form, it continues to evolve, but the one constant (before rhythmic considerations and its blues music ancestry) that defines jazz music is spontaneous improvisation by the musicians performing the music. This elemental characteristic of jazz music should, if keeping a logical parallel between the two art forms, be a fundamental aspect of jazz poetry as well. Bop prosody, defined as spontaneous writing by Jack Kerouac, is the technique of writing using the same spontaneous, improvisational expression as that of a jazz musician.

Though stream of consciousness writing was not a new technique, the Beat writers of the 1940s and '50s were the first to identify this technique in terms of the jazz musician. In an interview for the *Paris Review*, which is included in the collection *Beat Writers at Work*, poet Ted Berrigan asks Kerouac about his jazz and bop influences. Kerouac replies:

Yes, jazz and bop, in the sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made . . . That's how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind. (Kerouac 116)

In his essay "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac explains further the spontaneous procedure: "Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image" (69).

Kerouac's aesthetic in terms of spontaneous writing has to do with purity. Pure ideas and pure emotions moving directly without a preconceived notion of correctness from the artist's soul (for lack of a better term) and becoming the work of art. Kerouac's close friend, fellow Beat writer, and collaborator on literary theory was the poet Allen Ginsberg. Lecturing at the Naropa Institute, Ginsberg summed up the spontaneous writing process in typically simple Zen terms: "First thought is best thought" (qtd. in Tonkinson 106). Ginsberg went on to explain in the same lecture that getting to "first thought" is the true challenge.

This aesthetic, however, did not originate with Kerouac or Ginsberg. For whatever anthropological reason, whether it be the dehumanization of society by

corporate power or be it the atom bomb, stark spontaneous emotionality characterizes twentieth century art.

Poet and jazz musician Hayden Carruth writes extensively on jazz music and jazz aesthetics. In his essay “A Possibly Momentary Declaration in Favor of William Butler Yeats and Charles Ellsworth Russell” included in the collection *Sitting In*, Carruth writes:

The individual, recognized by style, which in turn is a function partly of convention and back-reference but more significantly of personality, is the master artist of our time: not a romantic ego or a thumping ideologue, but genius in and of humility . . . it would be silly to say that jazz had a direct influence on Yeats or on any other particular artist of our century. Yet I believe there is a connection. I believe it probably springs from prior complexities of cultural evolution too obscure for us to see with clarity. But improvisation is the mode, as independence and freedom are the conditions, of great art in our time. (48)

As an improvisational art form, jazz was representative of twentieth century aesthetics, but became especially important to the writers of the 1940s and '50s when jazz itself broke away from the mainstream of popular dance music and symbolized a cultural revolution in the making. In his essay “Kerouac’s Blues” published in the *Antioch Review*, James Campbell discusses the attraction of young writers of the period to jazz: “The ‘something rebel and nameless’ that [John Clellon] Holmes refers to was the aspect of black life that had hitherto been concealed from whites, and which was now revealed through jazz. Black music seemed to young white people ‘to express all sorts of inexpressible exuberance and energy’ ” (364).

Lawrence Lipton's book *The Holy Barbarians* is a study of 1950s bohemian or "beatnik" culture published in 1959. Though he has a slightly dated perspective, Lipton describes jazz as "both a therapeutic and a sacred ritual" (212) to his holy barbarians. But he goes on to make a point about jazz that could easily be attributed to rock music of the 1960s:

To the beat generation it [jazz] is also the music of protest. Being apolitical does not preclude protest. It was the sex, not the protest, that the youth of the twenties looked for in jazz. The youth of the thirties looked for protest in the Negro jazzman as a member of an oppressed and disfranchised minority, rather than the music itself. To the present generation of nonconformist youth the simple existence of jazz itself is protest enough. They see it pitting its spontaneous, improvised, happy-sad, angry-loving, ecstatic on-the-spot creativity against the sterile antiseptic delivery room workmanship of the concert hall that the squares take for musical culture. And they whisper – coolly, quietly but intensely – ‘Say it, Satch!’ ‘Tell ‘em, Gerry!’ ‘Blow a great big hole in the walls they have thrown up to keep man from man’. (212)

William Carlos Williams recognized that American poetry of the twentieth century was evolving into a unique voice distinct from its European predecessors. He said, "We poets have to talk in a language which is not English. It is the American idiom. Rhythmically, it's organized as a sample of the American idiom. It has as much originality as jazz" (Feinstein and Komunyakaa 276). On the same point, but from his own first person standpoint in *The Holy Barbarians*, poet Lipton adds: "We turned to jazz

music because jazz is the musical language of America in our time. Modern poetry was born at the same time as modern jazz was born and both have had similar history. Both have had the same friends and the same enemies . . . They belong together” (222).

Put it this way: Jazz is a good barometer of freedom . . . In its beginnings, the United States of America spawned certain ideals of freedom and independence through which, eventually, jazz has evolved, and the music is so free that, man, people say it is the only unhampered, unhindered expression of complete freedom yet produced in this country – Duke Ellington. (Mullenweg)

Anyone from any culture could write poetry about being touched by jazz music or the life of a specific jazz musician, but being able to write poetry in the same way a jazz musician improvises his solos takes a much deeper understanding of the music and the execution of improvisation.

Jazz music is recognized as an original American art form developing directly out of the blues folk music tradition created by Africans brought to America as slaves (rock ‘n’ roll music, another original American musical form, also grew out of the blues). As such, blues music incorporates the emotional as well as literal experiences of living as a slave in American society; but from a musical standpoint blues represents conflicts between European scales and African scales, between European dance rhythms and African polyrhythmic drumming. This conflict may be better explained as the incongruity between two musical cultures trying to speak to one another (i.e. African drum rhythms would never fit with a European waltz melody) and the result was a new musical

language. This new American musical language, blues, could have only resulted through the unique slave culture of the United States (Carruth, "Inadequate Blues" 54 – 55).

Blues at the beginning of the twentieth century took on urban influences as freed slaves migrated to cities such as New Orleans. Rural blues combined with the musical influences of other immigrant groups (especially in terms of instrumentation and European song forms) to foster the birth of jazz. The emergence of jazz, however, is also reflective of political and racist elements in American society. According to generally accepted musicological history:

The standard legend is that jazz was born in New Orleans and moved up the Mississippi River to Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago . . . For much of the nineteenth century, black Creoles of color in Louisiana enjoyed a social status somewhat higher than that of other African-Americans in the South. Of particular significance was their access to European culture; most Creoles could read music, were familiar with European art music as well as popular songs, and many had instrumental training. However, with the passing of Jim Crow laws after the Civil War, their social standing fell to a level only marginally better than that of other African-Americans. By the end of the century, the music of the black Creoles and African-based 'folk' (or blues) music were gradually combined, and a synthesis of the two emerged. (Nelson)

This is, of course, a simplified history of blues and jazz music. The point most strongly relative to the relationship between jazz music and jazz poetry is that the two elements of blues and jazz music that distinguish it so strongly from other musical forms,

especially Western European, are its dependence on strong rhythmical patterns and improvisation. Both of these elements represent freedom within the context of music. Not the freedom white Americans are so proud to attribute to the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but the freedom that slaves could not enjoy and, after slavery was abolished, the freedom a racist society would not afford an African-American in either the North or South of this country.

Poet/historian LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) in his book *Blues People* explains that the origin of blues music is the slave work song: Africans were used to singing as they labored and this tradition continued in America. The song form developed into what is known as the “call and response” in which a lead voice would sing a line answered by a group response. The lead voice could sing the accepted words to a work song or could freely improvise his/her own words (often words of protest would be veiled with Christian religious references).

The one African cultural element that was never successfully erased from the African-American slave was the tradition of using drums in music, dance, and communication. Jones writes:

The most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music are its rhythms: not only the seeming emphasis in the African music on rhythmic, rather than melodic or harmonic, qualities, but also the use of polyphonic or contrapuntal, rhythmic effects . . . Westerners thought the music ‘primitive.’ It did not occur to them that Africans might have looked askance at music as vapid rhythmically as the West’s. (25)

Despite the fact that slave owners forbade drumming, recognizing that the slaves used this as a form of communication from one plantation to another, slaves would meet under cover of night and “beat their homemade drums under washtubs to muffle the sound ... the tradition of percussive polyrhythms has persisted in the hand-clapping and stomping of the spiritual-singing in the churches, in the jazz band, and, in one form or another, in all Afro-American music” (Lipton 210-11).

What makes jazz rhythm distinct from its predecessors in European musical forms is the use of syncopated patterns imposed on fundamental meters. Where European music used syncopation in melodic contexts, the meters were in most cases fixed. Complicated African rhythms were applied (unconsciously, instinctively through dancing) by American slaves to the common 4/4 and 3/4 European musical meters allowed them by slave owners and clergymen. The result was a slightly off-tempo sense of European meter which in the twentieth century came to be known as the dance rhythm “swing.”

This sense of rhythm is where jazz music first finds its way into poetic terms. The earliest blues lyrics, by necessity of fitting within a musical context, match the swing rhythm. W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues,” credited as the first blues lyric to move from the oral tradition to the written (sheet music), fits the fundamental rhythm of the musical form, but is also written in traditional iambic pentameter. Here is the first stanza of “St. Louis Blues” as represented in dialect in the anthology *Blues Poems*:

I hate to see de ev’nin sun go down

Hate to see de ev’nin sun go down

‘Cause ma baby, he don lef dis town. (Young 63)

Langston Hughes is widely considered one of the first jazz poets and was among the first to title his poetry as blues. In the powerful closing lines of “The Weary Blues,” Hughes uses iambic tetrameter with anapestic and trochaic substitutions (the meter as indicated with slashes is added to the text from *Blues Poems*):

And far / into the night / he crooned / that tune.

The stars / went out / and so did / the moon.

The singer / stopped playing / and went / to bed

While the/ Weary Blues / echoed through / his head.

He slept / like a rock / or a man / that’s dead. (Young 20)

There is no question of the pulsing meter of these lines. In fact, by clapping on the second and fourth foot of each line (the accentual pattern known as a “back beat” in 4/4 metered jazz/blues/rock music where the second and fourth beats of a measure are accented) the true rhythm of blues can be emphasized. Hughes is obviously using stronger word sounds to create the accents of the music he is emulating. Consider the accentual weight of the words “out” and “moon” or “rock” and “dead” (the second and fourth feet) respectively in lines two and five as quoted; these lines could be danced to. But despite the fact that these lines, this poem, has a strong musical sense, it was not written as a song lyric, but as a poem.

In his essay “Jazz and Poetry” for the *Antioch Review*, poet and jazz drummer Richard Frost discusses the iambic relationship of jazz rhythm and traditional English poetry further:

I do know that jazz and poetry have a common basis in meter, and I suppose that the same parts of my brain that let me feel and understand

impulse patterns in music are also responsible for my grasp of meter and rhythm in poetry . . . Probably we all remember Leonard Bernstein's famous explanation that twelve-bar blues choruses consist of three rhyming lines of iambic pentameter . . . and you can take any rhyming pentameter couplet, Shakespeare's or Pope's or anyone's, and by doubling the first of the two lines turn it into blues:

Love is a babe; then might I not say so.

Love is a babe; then might I not say so,

To give full growth to that which still doth grow?

Shakespeare, Sonnet 115. (397)

Robert Pinsky builds the foundation of his book *The Sounds of Poetry* on an understanding of the iamb as a basic rhythmic unit of the English language. He uses musical terminology throughout the book to metaphorically relate linguistic concepts to the reader's more easily accessible sense of singing. Pinsky uses "pitch and duration" as terms to understand accented and unaccented syllables; "syntax and line" to explain meter, line break, enjambment; and his term for rhyme in all its forms (consonance, assonance, etc.) is simply "like and unlike sound."

As was seen with the earlier examples from W. C. Handy and Langston Hughes, an iambic line matches the basic rhythm of jazz meter. Parallel to the iamb's unaccented to accented rhythm is the eighth note articulation used by musicians to create "swing" rhythm. Traditionally, eighth notes in music are equal units of time and are played as such. In jazz, eighth notes are played as unequal units of time. Because of this slight variation, the second eighth note (of a single beat) is slightly shorter and feels late,

thereby creating the syncopated feeling of swing rhythm. In bebop jazz, where the music is played to feel more emphatic, ahead of the time (or meter) instead of behind, the articulation of these eighth notes is in effect reversed to sound unaccented to accented, an upbeat to a downbeat, creating a musical iamb.

Pinsky explains trochee, spondee, anapest, and other traditional rhythmic descriptors in terms of the iamb. Variation of the basic rhythmic unit is what can create interest for the reader. Of course, this variation of the basic rhythmic unit is known in musical terms as syncopation. Again, syncopation in rhythms is one of the defining principles of jazz music.

The jazz metaphor applies again and again throughout *The Sounds of Poetry*. In making the distinction between meter and rhythm, Pinsky says “rhythm is the sound of an actual line, while meter is the abstract pattern behind the rhythm, roughly analogous to the way 4/4 time in music underlies the actual dotted eighths and sixteenths and so forth. Rhythm is the reality, in this distinction, and meter (a term derived from the Greek word for ‘measure’) is the ruler-like symmetry” (52).

Similarly, musicians believe that it is not the drums to which people dance, it is the bass line. The drums measure the time while the bass creates the syncopations within the measure or meter. As Pinsky points out, though the basic form of a poem may be pentameter and you could beat out the rhythm just like a drummer, it is the rhythm of the syncopated iambs within the meter that create the music of the poetry. An understanding of the fundamental rhythms of jazz is the first level of bop prosody.

During the twentieth century, jazz music evolved quickly, as did society in general, due in large part to technological advancements such as radio, television, and

movies, but in particular in the area of recorded sound. With the ability of the masses to play jazz in their homes, the music was accepted and adopted by Americans from all regions of the country and by people from around the globe. But it is the personal, emotional aspects of jazz relative to African-American experience (or the sympathetic understanding of that experience) expressed through improvisation and melodic interpretation that have established jazz as American classical music.

One general definition that attempts to go beyond the superficial elements of rhythm states that jazz is “music characterized by strong, prominent meter, improvisation, distinctive tone colors and performance techniques, and dotted or syncopated rhythmic patterns . . . Most genres of music involved the listener into the realm of the completed work as it was scored. Jazz draws the onlooker to a deeper league, that of a partnership so to speak, of being along when each new phrase is created, when each inspired motif is often the interactive result of audience involvement. Jazz music’s dynamic is its ‘newness’ which can be attributed to the defining component – improvisation” (Dowdell).

Relative to writing jazz poetry is an understanding of how a jazz musician develops improvisational skills. A given is that the musician gains technical proficiency on his/her instrument. After that, improvisation is, in general terms (not taking into account “free” or “avant garde” jazz, or drumming technique), a mastery of music harmony. The musician first learns all traditional European scales and arpeggios, followed by the construction of alternate and substitution chordal harmony. Along with this fundamental knowledge, the jazz musician learns/creates melodic scale patterns that can be used harmonically in a given musical tonality and become the first elements of an

improvisation. The musician then develops riffs (or motifs) of his/her own construction that will be used in conjunction with particular chord patterns. In general, the jazz musician will learn all of these riffs and scale patterns in all keys. Parallel to this study is the necessity to learn the melodies and chord progressions of standard jazz repertoire.

Since most jazz improvisation is built on the chord pattern of a given song, the solo (or improvisation) begins with the melody of that song. The melody can be interpreted (changed) to suit the performer – even the harmonic structure can be amended. With each repetition of the song's chord pattern the soloist will use the practiced riffs and patterns to construct a new melody on the established chord pattern.

I can't stand to sing the same song the same way two nights in succession, let alone two years or ten years. If you can, then it ain't music, it's close-order drill or exercise or yodeling or something, not music. – Billie Holiday. (BrainyQuote)

Just as the jazz musician must learn the fundamentals of a given instrument and harmonic theory, so too the jazz poet must become expertly sensitive to the rhythms created within his/her lines. The way in which a jazz musician or singer improvises variations to a given melody and then moves away from the melody is parallel to the jazz poet being acutely aware of the shape the poem is taking.

In the earlier reference to Handy's "St. Louis Blues" lyric, the words are written in lines to fit the musical form of the song. However, to attempt to present the lyric as it would have been sung is the second level of bop prosody. For example, in an early recording of Bessie Smith singing "St. Louis Blues," she sings the opening line "I hate to

see the evening sun go down” holding the words “see” and “sun” much longer than any other words in the line.

To represent interpretive singing in lines of poetry is extremely difficult. Carruth in his essay “The Blues as Poetry” attempts to tackle the problem:

In one of her early blues, for instance, Billie Holiday sang the line: I ain’t good-looking, and my hair ain’t curled. The ‘I’ is held for something more than six beats, a beautifully effective musical maneuver. But in literature no punctuation, no typography, not even Robert Duncan’s innovative spacings and markings (though they function pretty well in his poetry), can force the reader’s eye to linger that long on a single syllable . . . within the boundaries of literature-as-such, however, considerable rhythmic and phrasal variation can be created . . . The most critical part of the blues line is the caesura. Very few lines consist of a single syntactical unit. Hence variation from the first line to the second in each stanza can best be accomplished by moving the caesura, indicating a pause that is either metrical or ametrical . . . But a comma will not suffice in a printed blues, nor will any mark, especially as one reads stanza after stanza. A line break is more effective. (112-13)

As Carruth explains further, there are no rules for representing the idea of the “sung” jazz line in a line of poetry. The subtleties of bop prosody constitute the craft of this form. The beauty of the form, as with a jazz performance, is found in the individuality with which the artist accomplishes a unified composition. Kerouac attempts an explanation of the method of this poetic crafting in his essay “Essentials of

Spontaneous Prose”: “No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas – but vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases) – ‘measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech’ – ‘divisions of the sounds we hear’ – ‘time and how to note it down’ ” (69).

In the report “The Craft of Poetry: A Semester with Allen Ginsberg,” poet Allen Ginsberg offers a further perspective to Kerouac’s idea with comments on Kerouac’s novel *Visions of Cody*: “It’s broken down into sections like jazz sessions. It might mean one sentence, or it might mean pages. Each section is written in a session of writing like a jazz musician. It’s like blowing until the energy is gone” (qtd. in Schappell 256).

In the same piece, Ginsberg describes the writing process of poet Gregory Corso:

Corso’s method is to write on a typewriter with two fingers, one phrase at a time, breath-stop in the lines, a mental or physical breath. Spontaneous composition, little revision. It makes incremental mental sense verse to verse, so there are surprises to the reader as well as to him. You can see his mind working line by line. Corso composes out of an idea or a conception turned inside out. (qtd. in Schappell 242)

Ginsberg’s description of this writing process can easily be paralleled to the jazz musician building riff upon riff to create a solo. It is this process which truly begins to differentiate bop prosody from the category of jazz poetry. Recreating the rhythms and phrasing of jazz music in poetry is imitative, but a technique that requires skill and practice. Using jazz music or musicians as subject matter is referential, but often reverential. Neither action is wrong, ingenuous, or invalid, nor is this to say that

anthologies (such as the *Jazz Poetry Anthology*) that include such types of poetry are not worth the read. Poets (prose writers as well) who are included in “jazz poetry” anthologies are not to be diminished in any way, nor is their sincerity regarding the impressions that jazz music has made on them in question. It is in the making of the poem that distinguishes a jazz poet (or bop prosodist) from a poet writing jazz poetry. Just as it is the spontaneous improvisation of jazz music that distinguishes it as a unique musical form, so too, it is the spontaneous composition of poetry that distinguishes bop prosody.

It is a rare occasion when a jazz musician plays a solo to a chord progression that he has never seen before. And in performance, the musician has played and rehearsed the given songs and their solos. So where is the spontaneous aspect of the jazz improvisation? It comes from the emotional state of the musician, the attitude of the audience, the environment in which the music is being played . . . all the elements that would explain human mood and attitude.

Carruth explains in his essay “The Main Thing About Improvisation”:

Spontaneous does not mean impromptu. Far from it. Nor does it mean new. It means something more like occasional, i.e., springing from an occasion; in effect, thoroughly worked out, or on the verge of being thoroughly worked out, revised, improved, brought to its own fullness of expression; self-consciously and self-confidently experimental; brilliant in its clarity of achieved articulation. Jazz musicians work out their improvisations in jam sessions, but not only there; they do it too on the stand, in rehearsal halls, in studios, at home by themselves, and sometimes

– many have testified to this – while walking, driving a car, performing actions distantly related, if at all, to jazz; sometimes even dreams, which are, no matter what anyone thinks, work. In this way improvisations grow. And as long as they contain any fresh input . . . they are spontaneous . . . Improvisation is the privilege of the master, the bane of the apprentice. (100-01)

Jazz aficionados recognize truly spontaneous musical improvisation for the sincere expression of emotion that it should be. These same jazz fans would instantly recognize a solo that is practiced or copied and consider it boring. What draws listeners and players to jazz is its emotional immediacy, which is why most jazz aficionados prefer live performances to recorded performances. In live performance, the master jazz musician is technically polished; he makes no more technical mistakes than a classical musician. However, the jazz master has learned to apply spontaneous emotion derived from any number of outside stimuli (as described by Carruth above) to his improvisations and interpretations. By definition, spontaneous means that a jazz solo cannot be changed and should not be copied or repeated which implies that every jazz solo (because it is an untouched, unique artistic expression) has a certain level of purity or honesty. It is this same spontaneous emotional immediacy and honesty that is the goal of bop prosody. In *Beat Writers at Work*, Allen Ginsberg describes the spontaneous writing process:

The poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feeling. The feeling is like an impulse that rises within – just like sexual impulses . . . It's a feeling that begins somewhere in the pit of the stomach and rises up forward in the breast and then comes out through the mouth and ears, and

comes forth a croon or a groan or a sigh. Which, if you put words to it by looking around and seeing and trying to describe what's making you sigh – and sigh in words – you simply articulate what you're feeling . . . if it's at all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes.

Sometimes I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying.

Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. (Ginsberg 42)

The sincerity or honest emotion expressed by the jazz musician and perceived by the listener is in large part due to the element of surprise: surprise in the sense that the listener cannot anticipate what the jazz musician will play next during a solo improvisation. The reason the listener doesn't know what to expect is because the musician (if he/she is being true to his/her art form) doesn't know what he/she will play next. The listener is drawn into the performance by the excitement of the surprise. Similarly, the technique of spontaneous writing also has the element of surprise. The writer begins with a phrase, an idea, an emotional state and writes line by line without a preconceived notion of where the poem will end or what the poem will inevitably "say." The reader is taken on the same emotional ride experienced by the poet because neither poet or reader know what response the emotions will evoke . . . tears, a smile, anger, sympathy.

Describing poet Robert Creeley's technique, Ginsberg says, "Incrementally, almost monosyllabically, the meaning of a Creeley poem accumulates, changing everything that goes before it. His method of writing is to put paper in the typewriter and begin with whatever phrase or insight he started with, a retroactive small instance of

feeling, and then accumulate detail and reach for common ground” (qtd. in Schappell 249).

Of all the Beat writers, Jack Kerouac spoke and wrote most emphatically on the subject of spontaneous writing. In his essay “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Kerouac explains the “Center of Interest” of spontaneous writing:

Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion – Do not afterthink except for poetic of P.S. reasons. Never afterthink to ‘improve’ or defray impressions, as the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind – tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow! – now! – your way* is your only way – ‘good’ – or ‘bad’ – always; honest. (‘ludicrous’) spontaneous, ‘confessional’ interesting, because not ‘crafted.’ Craft *is* craft. (70)

The preceding Kerouac quote captures not only the heart of bop prosody but also the energy and passion that Kerouac was able to express through spontaneous writing, a writing technique he used whenever he composed whether writing essays, prose, or poetry. The following Kerouac piece was first published in the Spring 1959 issue of the *Evergreen Review* and is also collected in *Good Blond and Others*. It is presented here in its entirety as an example of the effect of honest sincere passion that Kerouac was able to create by relying on spontaneous technique:

Belief & Technique for Modern Prose a List of Essentials

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better

23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear of shame in the dignity of yr experience, language, & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In Praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven
(72)

Kerouac's list of beliefs and techniques reverberates with his deep faith in the spirituality of the creative process. Lines such as "submissive to everything, open," "believe in the holy contour of life," or "struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind" are thinly veiled descriptions of Buddhist meditation technique that Kerouac had studied and practiced, and had written about extensively in his novels and poems. Allen Ginsberg was a practicing Buddhist for most of his life and uses this sensibility to describe some of the writing process of his poem "Howl" in his *Paris Review* interview: "The problem is then to reach the different parts of the mind, which are existing simultaneously, the different associations which are going on simultaneously . . . in the moment of composition I don't necessarily *know* what it means, but it comes to mean something later, after a year or two . . . because we're not really always conscious of the entire depth of our minds" (Ginsberg 47).

In his book *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel explains how the flow of the mind, similarly described in Kerouac's "Beliefs and Practices" piece, is a moment of transcendence, "The soul is brought to the point where it vibrates of itself in itself – a serene pulsation which can be heightened into the feeling, otherwise experienced only in rare dreams, of extraordinary lightness." Echoes of Kerouac's "Blow as deep as you want to blow" can be heard further as Herrigel describes the importance of breath control in the meditative art of archery, a state called "presence of mind": "This state, in which nothing definite is thought, planned, striven for, desired or expected, which aims in no particular direction and yet knows itself capable alike of the possible and the impossible, so unswerving is its power – this state, which is at bottom purposeless and egoless, was called by the Master truly 'spiritual' " (37).

In a lecture entitled "First Thought, Best Thought" given at the Jack Kerouac School of Diembodied Poetics, Naropa Institute, July 29, 1974, Allen Ginsberg relates the Buddhist concept of breathing through mantras in terms of poetry. He believes that the mantric aspect of breath (breath being the basic measure of a poetic line as described earlier) has been sorely misunderstood by the poetry of Western cultures. He describes the meditational breathing tool of the mantra as "an articulation of breath" and the most natural, most easy way to express the self. "Just like the wind in the leaves," Ginsberg said. "So if you take that approach, that your singing or your chanting or your poetics is as neutral, impersonal and objective as the wind through the black oak leaves, then you wouldn't have to be afraid of expressing yourself because it's not yourself, it's just the wind, it's just wind, it's just breath going through you" (qtd. in Tonkinson 102).

The process of learning jazz music improvisation begins with the absorption of technique; however, it is only after years of practice that the master can use that technique to truly express spontaneous emotion. The pianist Bill Evans played on and wrote the liner notes for Miles Davis's landmark album *Kind of Blue* (to date the best selling jazz album of all time) and described the spontaneous creative process in terms of Zen sumi painting:

There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere. The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see will find something captured that escapes explanation. This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful of reflections, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician. (Evans)

Again, the relationship between both spontaneous jazz improvisation and spontaneous writing to Zen meditation practice is related in the sense of an art form or practice that becomes so internalized that its performance requires no conscious thought, "no mind" in Zen terminology. It is the moment of transcendence that artists relate in any number of ways. Poets often speak of "poems that write themselves" or that came

out of a dream state. Musicians describe this same state when it happens during performance as being “gone.” In his introduction to *Big Sky Mind*, Stephen Prothero states that “the Beats, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, aimed to make contact with the sacred in moments of indescribable intuition and then to transmit at least some of what they had experienced into words” (19). This cannot happen if the mind/body has not prepared through constant practice. Transcendence occurs when the body, soul, and mind become one expression. Herrigel explains the process: “the right frame of mind for the artist is only reached when the preparing and creating, the technical and the artistic, the material and the spiritual, the project and the object, flow together without a break . . . the pupil sees himself on the brink of new possibilities, but discovers at the same time that their realization does not depend in the slightest degree on his good will” (43).

Herrigel introduces the concept of “It” as the culmination of the practice of becoming a Zen master. He describes the Master practicing his art “like a flash of lightning from the cloud of all-encompassing Truth. This Truth is present in the free movement of his spirit, and he meets it again, in ‘It,’ as his own original and nameless essence” (80).

In her book *Kerouac’s Spontaneous Poetics*, Regina Weinreich puts forward the concept that Kerouac’s most famous novel *On The Road* is really a “series of heightened moments of excitement . . . Kerouac himself describes these as moments of ‘IT’ ” (52). She further asserts that *On The Road* is really a quest novel; the characters being on a quest for “IT.” Weinreich explains how Kerouac defines “IT” in terms of the improvisations of jazz musicians:

The analogy of “IT” with the action of the jazzman is made explicit in the text [of *On The Road*]. The alto player is described: “He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas . . . All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he gets it – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops.” But as the description goes on, Kerouac describes a movement in space: “He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back to do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT.” (53)

Kerouac’s personal quest for “IT” was manifested in his dedication to the concept of spontaneous poetics or bop prosody, both terms coined by him. He believed more and more passionately that the only honest expression was spontaneous, that revision was dishonest. Loyalty to “IT” or his creative soul meant that he would eventually refuse to accept any editing or suggestions for revision. In his essay “The Last Word,” Kerouac lays out a philosophical stance that will carry through the rest of his career: “If you don’t stick to what you first thought, and to the words the thought brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others? What I find to be really ‘stupefying’ in its unreadability is this laborious and dreary lying called craft and revision by writers” (145).

Ginsberg explains this Kerouacian notion further in his interview included in *Beat Writers at Work* by describing his reaction to Kerouac’s ideas: “And I saw opening up

this whole universe where people wouldn't be able to lie anymore! They wouldn't be able to *correct* themselves any longer. They wouldn't be able to hide what they said" (Ginsberg 67).

But Weinreich debunks Kerouac's own assertions of never revising by explaining his unique revision process. Kerouac kept extensive notes on just about everything he experienced and thought, writing constantly in small pocket notebooks. He related his ideas and stories to his friends both verbally and in letters. And since almost everything that Kerouac wrote was autobiographical, a re-living of his own experience, by the time he sat down to "spontaneously" compose, he had already shaped his words many times over. As Weinreich puts it, "to get to the truth about things, forced Kerouac's mind over the material again and forces the reader to recognize that by such repetition a stage of revision is already built into the supposedly 'spontaneous' prose. Repetition in fact becomes Kerouac's control . . . As Kerouac wrote spontaneously, the elements of past experience were revised in the act of being recorded" (5).

Weinreich builds her explanation of Kerouac's spontaneous poetics on the notion that his revision was actually a re-write. She argues convincingly that Kerouac's novel *Visions of Cody* is really a re-write of the experiences of the novel *On The Road*, and further that *Desolation Angels* is yet a further refinement of the same story (92). Weinreich asserts that "we take Kerouac's renunciation of revision as not precluding expansion" (60).

This revision process contained within Kerouac's idea of bop prosody is the same type of revision that a jazz musician employs. A musician may play the same song every night of the week, but every night his improvised solo in that song is a new spontaneous

expression of the complete sum of that moment . . . emotions, audience, environment, fellow musicians, new riffs developed by listening to other musicians, etc. For this reason a listener can return for several performances and enjoy a completely different emotional experience through several renderings of the same piece of music.

What Kerouac called the “Dulouz Legend” was the story of his life told through his novels. The telling of the story changes with each re-writing, making each Kerouac novel a new experience . . . a spontaneous composition over a well-worn tune as per the jazz musician. Kerouac wanted the reading of his stories to sound like someone telling a friend a story over drinks in a bar, breath being the only punctuation. In conversation no one goes back to change one’s phrasing, but subsequent tellings of the story may well see certain variations.

Allen Ginsberg reconciles revision and spontaneous writing with less of the stubbornness seen in Kerouac, “less courage” as Ginsberg puts it. Ginsberg’s term for spontaneous poetics (his “first thought best thought mantra”) was “mind-writing.” In the *Paris Review* article summarizing one of his classes at New York University in 1995, Ginsberg admits, “At the time of writing I don’t rewrite . . . The first thought is the purest thought. The purest stuff is spontaneous. But sometimes I do rewrite. Why not make it better?” (qtd. in Schappell 246). Ginsberg faces this seeming contradiction by explaining that the poem must maintain its “original skeleton,” that maintaining the first words and breaths of the lines is how the poet maintains the integrity of spontaneous writing (Schappell, 272).

Ginsberg explains his notion of “first thought” further:

The first thought isn't necessarily the first thought you notice, it's the first thought you sub-notice. People edit their awareness of what is underneath their minds . . . First thought does not necessarily mean don't correct at all, it just means that your model should be the interior form that you glimpse, rather than the superficial level of mind. If the mind is shapely, the art will be shapely." (qtd. in Schappell 273)

Ginsberg offered his class at NYU a list of *Fourteen Steps for Revising Poetry* (Schappell 266) that made key points of condensing language, reviewing through several people's eyes, dating each revision, and reading aloud to hear breath pauses. What Kerouac and Ginsberg both feared in revision was the loss of the mind's spontaneous representation of emotion. Over-thinking or crafting or polishing or workshopping or whatever term is applied represented a betrayal of the writer's inner voice. To Kerouac, revision was nothing more than a lie.

For Kerouac and Ginsberg the point of their prosody was to maintain honesty and sincerity. But the ability to create a first draft that is nearly finished and true to the poet's voice is the skill of a practiced, master writer. Both would argue the need of the apprentice to write continuously, but in their minds one wouldn't need to tell a true writer to write continuously. Hayden Carruth supports this point in a discussion of Robert Duncan's poetry: "For Duncan's at-home-ness in language bestows on him a power to enforce his music . . . (perfectly natural and perfectly beautiful) . . . without violence. Nor is it craft, because 'craft' suggest wiliness . . . but only the kind of spontaneous expressiveness that ensues upon complete absorption of technique" ("Duncan's Dream" 160).

What bop prosody aspires to, as manifested through its fundamental tenet of spontaneous writing, is purity. This means more than being honest, for honesty can be set within a framework. Purity means untouched emotion not unlike the spontaneous tears of a father witnessing the birth of his first child, or the spontaneous gasp made when someone is startled; either of these emotions become severely diminished when the emotion is explained or retold. Purity is the jazz improvisation when the musician closes his eyes, transcends the physical reality of the stage, and moves into the realm of pure sound.

Expressiveness in art is not a function of substance. Not at all. Originality of thought and feeling, novelty of event, cogency of allusion, and all other elements of substance are, in the best sense of the word, literary; they are what poets *do*. The sensual and conceptual elements are, so to speak, what poets *are*: the conditioned and/or instinctive skill within which they exist. Expressiveness is what draws poets to poetry in the first place . . . Does this mean a work can be done with no substance at all? At one time or another workers in all the arts have tried it, but I am certain it is impossible except in music. I believe that, speaking theoretically and analytically, a musical pitch is pure and has no meaning . . . Practically speaking, pure music may be impossible as pure art in general, pure expressiveness. Nevertheless music *tends toward purity*, and to my mind Schopenhauer was right when he suggested that the other arts aspire to the condition of music . . . A great many artists from all times and places have attested that the inception of a work of art, its origin, its “inspiration,” is

an event of simultaneous, mutually reinforcing emergence of substance and its expressive means, both sensual and conceptual. This is particularly evident in the improvisatory art of the twentieth century, whether it be a solo by Cannonball Adderley or a circus by Peter Schuman's Bread and Puppet Theater. (Carruth, "Mystery and Expressiveness" 128)

How then does the reader or editor of an anthology of jazz poetry judge whether a poem was written using the practice of spontaneous poetics? How does one recognize a truly literary improvisation? As discussed earlier, jazz poetry is a category; it is poetry about jazz music. A jazz poem may appear to incorporate easily identified elements of bop prosody – a rhythmic sensibility reflective of jazz syncopation, musical sensibility (the accents and sounds in words), a natural "breath" as the determining factor of line and caesura – but was it written as a spontaneous expression of emotion in the manner of a jazz musician? Does the reader take the poet's word for it?

In terms of spontaneous poetics, it is not the subject of the poem that matters but how it was written. In the same way that a jazz musician can use improvisational skills to turn a Broadway musical piece into jazz, the bop prosodist can use his/her skills at spontaneous writing to create a poem on any aspect of human experience. What matters is how much of the spontaneous composition of the first draft and its organic form was respected and maintained through the revision process, how much raw emotional immediacy is left on the page. Something done spontaneously, improvised, implies some level of imperfection. This does not imply imperfection in the sense of technical or mechanical mistakes, but in the sense of the imperfection or ambiguity of human emotion and human nature as effecting imagery, syntax, line, etc. These are imperfections that

Ginsberg and Kerouac would argue that if “crafted” would constitute a literary lie. For the practitioner of spontaneous poetics, imperfection in this sense is a representation of honesty. Because of this acceptance of imperfection (just as the sound of a jazz clarinet or saxophone would be considered raw and unrefined in a classical music context), a “masterpiece” of spontaneous writing often appears less polished than a poem written in traditional prosody, yet it can be equally or more powerful. Jazz is, of course, not suited to every ear, so too with poetry born of bop prosody.

The poetic representation of spontaneous emotion will elicit a spontaneous emotional response from the reader. Unfortunately, there is no quantitative measurement device available for this response. Just as the jazz musician is guided by the reactions of his/her audience, so too the poet can only trust in the honesty of his/her reader. Listening for the “ooo” when the poem turns a surprising corner of metaphor; waiting for the sighing exhale at the end of the poem that reveals that the reader hasn’t been able to breathe, that the poem has literally taken the reader’s breath away; hearing the “yeah” when the poem finishes with a twisting punch; looking for the tear, hearing the lump in the throat: these are emotions expressed physically, reflexively. These are sincere reactions to sincere emotions, both are mindless, selfless, spontaneous. Both are true.

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