

Writing Beat in Bebop Rhythms

This article analyzes the relations between the prose discourse of the Beat generation writers and bebop jazz; it also identifies the cultural affinities between Charlie Parker's jazz and Jack Kerouac's prose. The complexity of both forms of expression lies in their duplicitous nature. Entertaining and subversive at the same time, the beat /bebop discourse relies on free improvisation and spontaneous rhythmic associations of words. Both deal with individual and collective resistance forms, transcending the ethical and rejecting social and political coercion.

Key words: Beat Generation, jazz, bebop, subversive discourse, political resistance

Formed around the creative ideas of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, the emergence and development of the Beat Generation was an evolutionary process which involved the ambivalent relation between avant-garde bohemianism and popular culture. In the 1950s, in a social and political context of imposed conformity and enforced regularity, the Beat artists assumed the cultural position of alienation. Their criticism of American culture was a complex topic, a metaphysical agenda rooted in everyday experiences. The Beat members looked for their personal "new vision" and to this end, jazz proved to be an inspiring formula and an enlightening experience at the same time.

This essay intends to identify the relationships between Beat art and jazz music and analyze the manner in which both type of discourses employ the alternation of the entertainment with the political, of satisfaction and anger, in an attempt to produce a pattern that appropriates a historical discourse while at the same time tailoring it to contemporary cultural realities.

The 1950s is abundant in forms of art belonging to the "culture of spontaneity" which includes Beat writing, bebop, abstract expressions, poetry and dance. They are all part of a strategy of counter hegemonic rebellion, a way of thwarting the mainstream culture of "corporate liberalism". (Belgrad 77-8). The postwar era employs spontaneity as a *modus vivendi* and an artistic creed at the same time. Yet, full experience and systematic rigor are nevertheless the prerequisites of spontaneity: the poetics of improvisation requires the profound knowledge of practices, processes and conventions of this artistic medium, since only a broad base of musical knowledge can ensure creative combinations of meaningful structures (Quinn 153).

The complexity of jazz music consists in the fact that it can be simultaneously imagined as a means of entertainment and as an ideological and aggressive response alluding to the political humiliations in the life of Afro-Americans. Pleasurable and subversive at the same time, jazz is a form of art and politics, a strategy of empowerment through humility and self-

assumed denial. In jazz, the freedom and spontaneity of musical association asks for a performer skillful enough to master various musical structures from which he can choose one at any moment. It assumes perfect adaptability to any situation, a special gift in preferring a certain tune to another and perfect mastery over a large range of musical possibilities and technical procedures.

For Norman Mailer, the narrative of jazz is the musical expression of hedonistic abandon and spiritual orgasm, while for Bob Kaufman jazz is more a warning of fight than a spontaneous expression of sensual energy. Black jazz acquires the hidden potencies of political actions and voices defiant attitudes of unique emotional impetus. What is not said, what is dimly implied produces a forceful impression, which is bound up both in the structure of the individual psyche and in the collective unconsciousness. This duplicitous nature of jazz transforms this musical genre into a pleasurable symphony of sounds but also into a political attempt at recovering the sense of memory and past.

The anger and frustration suffused in the black music define a certain genealogy of knowledge and annihilation and the subversive nature of jazz is ensured by the freedom attributed to the notes. Unrestrained by a set of coercive rhythmical patterns and conventional tunes, the black artist “floats” freely through notes and combinations of sounds, through structural fissures and rhythmical dissonances. The sound of jazz also represents the martyrdom of black America and the indictment of white people, standing both for destruction and resurrection. For the black artist, jazz becomes an artistic and racial category at the same time, an outlet of artistic emotions, a touchstone of national resistance and a constant reminder of ghetto deprivation, poverty, hunger and death.

The Beats praise the virtuosity of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon and Coleman Hawkins and consider that their art goes beyond the artistic vocation of a horn man, percussionist, piano player or bassist and enters the transcendent spirit of politics. For the Beats, bebop jazz is the gist of individual freedom, a “kind of wild Dionysian American music, pure emotion and frenzy”. (Kerouac, *The Town* 19) It offers them the unique opportunity to dig situations and people immediately, to become instantly aware of the self and the other. “[...]dig him, dig her, dig this place, dig these cats...” says Cody (Kerouac, *Visions* 33). Kerouac’s senior by one year, Charlie (Bird) Parker exerts a strong influence upon the writing strategy of the former. Though records prove there were no actual encounters between the two, bebop and Beat writing partake of the same improvisational technique.

Allowing for improvisation, jazz becomes an instinctual style of existence and a communal mode of expression. Both Kerouac and Ginsberg view the jazz soloist as the sole possessor of a mystique of knowledge and consider that more than a communal form of expression, jazz represents a form of sexual manifestation. Since jazz changes the subjectivity of “I” for its collective counterpart, the appreciation of jazz also presupposes the celebration of sexuality. But the sense of openness to sexuality also engenders the alteration of moral codes in an attempt to repudiate the status quo and stress the value of group representation. Therefore the propensity for sexual intimacy equals in most cases their longing for homosexual intercourses.

The detractors of the Beat generation, who accuse the Beat members of annihilating meaning and cultivating anti-intellectualism, are counteracted by advocates sustaining that the Beat culture of improvisation and spontaneity is grounded in a substantial intellectual

tradition. The latter group considers that the politics of spontaneity has implications not only for the conception of the poetic or musical material proper, but also for the staging and the presentation of the product. In this respect, improvisation conditions the removal of the artistic piece from dance halls and academic circles and its relocation in small clubs, street corners or coffeehouses. In this type of show, the audience is asked to contribute creatively to the tune, by improvising as they are listening. The listener/consumer of music is therefore engaged in a threefold process, which includes reception, internalization and production. This second stage is particularly important, since it enables the audience to make use of the music in a highly personal way, to value it individually by discovering its subjective meaning. In a similar way, Beat writing addresses both intellectual abilities and emotional resources of the listener and engages him in an interactive process of the discovery of meaning. Thus, the rigid passivity of the literature consumer attending restrictive circles is playfully replaced by the audience openly experimenting in bars, taverns and jazz clubs.

When analyzing Parker's or Kerouac's, intellectual orientations, we need to identify the knowledge of musical tradition of the former and the ideas about contemporary literary trends of the latter. Richard Quinn defines their artistic accomplishments in terms of cross-cultural projects. Parker first understood white popular songs which he projected upon the black musical tradition and converted everything into a musical tune that appealed to the whites and blacks alike. Kerouac, on the other hand, combined the stream of consciousness pattern derived from Joyce and Woolf and enriched it with the exotic flavor of black jazz tradition.

Kerouac's suggestions on how to write modern prose successfully are clear references to Parker's improvisation technique. "Blow as deep as you want to blow", or "Something that you feel will find its own form" and "struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind".(Kerouac, "Essentials" 79).Parker's pieces usually have only a few measures composed prior to performance while the rest of the sections were entirely improvised during the concert. Alternating half-chorus solos with coda and truncated final measures, Parker turns his stage performances into dazzling improvisations. An in-depth analysis of his musical tunes highlights punctuated riffs, the addition of single note triplets and repeats at the bridge, unexpected rests, arpeggiated chromatics and rhythmic displacement. This avalanche of phrases which begin and end unexpectedly in asymmetrical rhythms results in a polyrhythmic effect. His sound is the original intertwining of tradition and contemporary music, filtered originally through imaginative internalization.

This combination of intellect and emotional commitment is deployed by Kerouac's stylistic method, which uses the same polyrhythmic drive and counterpoint, and a similar swinging motion back and forth. The regression is followed by swift progressions and from time to time, this backward-forward pattern is alternated with circular movements. The listener engaged in this dialogue of deciphering meaning must establish an open-ended dialogue with African-American tradition and explore the internal creational resource.

Kerouac is relentless in paying homage to Parker and many of his texts have references to Bird, "the king and the founder of the bop generation", with his "great lungs and immortal fingers work, the kindest jazz musician there could be while being and therefore naturally the greatest" (Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* 55). This is an idyllic image of Parker, whom historical accounts depict as "destructive yet creative, farcical, ironic, suffering, lecherous, submissive, defiant but also unpredictable" (Leonard 129). Leonard also criticizes Kerouac

for his voyeuristic, objectified and oversimplified image of Parker which reduces his trans-historical talent to “kindness” and completely dismisses his enigmatic complexity by framing it exclusively in a romanticized material presence.

In some cases, Kerouac’s creed from “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose” has been interpreted as an undisciplined, naïve and individualistic mode of composition. Lines like “Blow as deep as you want, write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first” or “composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better” (Kerouac, *Selected* 79) can be deciphered as anarchic and stereotypic techniques, completely self-absorbed, partly confessional but largely irresponsible. Yet, where some critics detect lack of intellectuality and dilettantism, some others pray the inauguration of another criterion in celebrating art, namely the force of affection that arranges things in world in the sublime way of mutual interconnectedness. Far from acting on narcissistic impulses only, Kerouac envisages the dissolution of the self into the larger mass of universal joy, in which there are “no Neals, Carolyns, Allens or Jacks, but figments in a dream. Less part of a creative self-assertive process, his prose is the result of an affectionate self abandonment; permanently open to transpersonal forces and self-denial” (Quinn 156).

Rising out of the anxieties of postwar America, conformity and improvisation are complementary methods of creating meaning. If conformity annihilates the self by fostering isolation, detachment and inner-orientation, improvisation dissolves the self in the larger interstices of collective intersubjectivity. Living and constructing ideologies at the same time, the Beat artists debated ontological problems and cultural concerns in their own unique idiom, inflected with religious ideas and Marxist theories and inspired by drug and religious experiences in bebop rhythms. Though not entirely systematic, their cultural agenda was a successful enterprise.

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