

Jazz and the Beat Generation

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I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday.

Jack Kerouac¹



Jack Kerouac

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Jazz is a changing art form; and thus, throughout its history, it has been made to fulfill the larger social purposes of many different and varied masters. For Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, perhaps the two best-known authors of the Beat Generation, it became the musical accompaniment to and embodiment of their lifestyle during the late 1940's and early 1950's; it even became the model which they emulated in writing their most famous works, *On the Road* and *Howl*.

Both Kerouac and Ginsberg, writing within the different idioms of prose fiction and poetry, were largely influenced in their development by established literary figures. Ginsberg had been writing short-line, rhythmic poetry in the style of William Carlos Williams; Kerouac had modeled himself, stylistically and thematically, after the American novelist Thomas Wolfe. Both, however, felt that their expression was impeded by their adherence to their stylistic precursors; and at the formative points in their respective careers, each discovered his true voice by using jazz as a musical model for his writing.

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However, as Steven Paul Scher notes in his essay *Literature and Music*, comparisons between literature and music have traditionally tended towards oversimplification:

*From early on, juxtapositions now all too familiar, like "music and poetry," "word and tone," and "sound and poetry," recur with formulaic frequency in critical discourse. Though rarely substantiated by a precise definition, such commonplace juxtapositions lend a deceptively axiomatic aura of legitimacy to comparisons of the two arts.*²

However, the authors themselves leave many ambiguities and questions as to exactly how they incorporate jazz into their works. Kerouac, for example, compares the writer directly to a jazzman, and sums up his writing technique as "blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image," but neglects to provide specific details as to how a writer should incorporate "blowing" into his prose. Similarly, Ginsberg, whose adoption of jazz as a model stemmed from Kerouac's influence, talks of the "extraordinary influence Bop music has had on rhythm," but neglects to explain specifically what that influence has been. The statement that best reveals the ambiguity in Ginsberg's attitude towards jazz is his description of his famous poem *Howl* as "like a jazz mass, I mean the conception of rhythm not derived from jazz directly but if you listen to jazz you get the idea." Ginsberg seems to assume that his reader will know instinctively the connection between jazz and *Howl*, as he does; yet, it seems clear that the two media are different enough for the point to need clarification.

By using the devices of a jazz musician to build intensity, Kerouac designs these passages to evoke the same subjective response from his audience that a jazz performer would evoke from an audience. Moreover, Kerouac uses these devices best when he is describing jazz performances; in doing so, he models his prose after the performance he describes. Ginsberg similarly uses the devices of a jazz musician to build intensity; he combines these with his incantatory tone in *Howl* to create the desired effect of a "jazz mass" on his audience. Furthermore, Ginsberg states his intention of recreating aspects of certain jazz tunes in *Howl*; his desire to do this is analogous to Scher's definition of poetic texture that has a specific piece of music as its "theme."

It is important to remember, though, as Hayden White argues, the necessity of studying the relation of music to the social context in which it is composed, performed, transmitted, and received. In short, the discussion of music and literature should be a hermeneutic operation. In the context of musico-literary criticism, White defines hermeneutic analysis as

*intended to reveal the ways in which the social context bears upon, determines, influences, or otherwise informs the production, form, content, and reception of the musical artifact and conversely, the ways in which the artifact may affect its context(s).*³

We cannot accurately discuss the ways in which jazz, and particularly bop, influenced the Beat writers such as Kerouac and Ginsberg without considering the social circumstances surrounding the bop movement. Chris Challis's comments typify the stereotypical view of bop musicians and their era:

*Their music was the music of revolt. The Bebop era arrived in answer to the bland ballads and lush orchestras of the swing years.*⁴

To the hipsters, bop signified a complete departure from the popular, commercialized music of the 1930's. Bop, with its emphasis on extended improvisation that its small-band format allowed, and largely owing to the virtuoso soloists at the time such as Parker and Gillespie, represented to the hipsters individuality, spontaneity, and emotional intensity that was

"pure" in a way the commercial music of the 1930's and 1940's was not. As the music was consciously different, the hipsters who followed it strived to be different; they deliberately set themselves apart from the mainstream by their use of drugs, their eccentric clothing, and their creation of a "hip" language that used words such as "cat," "dig," "flip," "gone," and "groove."

Allen Ginsberg and his boyfriend, the poet and musician Peter Orlovsky
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Both Kerouac and Ginsberg spent time in New York during the post-war 1940's, when the bop revolution was at its peak; both admired the bop players such as Parker and Gillespie, and both were taken with the idea of a "bop revolution." We should remember, then, the social context of bop in considering the music's influence on the literature of Kerouac and Ginsberg; because of the pervasive social scene surrounding bop, both authors often ascribe qualities to the music not actually created by the musicians themselves.

Lastly, we should remember Scher's warning to the author who uses the metaphor of music:

*No matter how similar literature and music may appear on occasion, they are only analogous, never identical.*⁵

Ginsberg recognizes this, and uses jazz only at the level of an analogy; Kerouac, however, does not. He models his writing process directly after his ideal of the jazzman; in doing so, he sets for himself an unreachable goal.

Kerouac's envisioning of himself as a "jazz poet" was due largely to the spontaneity he perceived in both jazz and his own writing. As we shall see, Kerouac's perception of jazz is both highly idealistic and seriously flawed. The culmination of Kerouac's development is his decision to model his style and method explicitly on the medium and the resulting discovery of his individual voice. Also, his decision to use jazz as a model for his prose corresponds to its increasing thematic presence in the novel; the devices of jazz he incorporates into his prose are most successful in describing the medium of jazz itself.

Jack Kerouac reading *On the road*

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Steven Paul Scher, 'Literature in Music', p. 226.

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