

IMPROVISATION AND LITERATURE: a brief guide

by Rob Wallace

Oral, Aural, and Written Traditions

Improvisation and literature have a rich, shared history. Improvisation implies a process rather than a product, and thus it is also sometimes difficult to determine the degree towards which a *written text* is the result of a process of improvisation: it is after all, written down, to some extent “fixed” on the page. So we might consider two general categories of improvisation in relation to literature: improvisation in oral linguistic practice and improvisation in written texts. Both occurrences exist along a spectrum of more or less “pure” improvisation vs. fixity, with the understanding that improvisation usually entails some amount of pre-planning and “fixity” no matter how spontaneous it seems. Written and oral texts can also both be performed, crossing lines between aural and visual sensation.

Poets and story-tellers from many different cultures have historically used improvisation in performance—we might think of bards performing epics like [Beowulf](#), for example—although there are debates as to how much of the performances in some oral traditions are improvised versus strictly memorized and repeated (for a wealth of information about oral traditions, see [The Center for Studies in Oral Tradition website](#)).

This kind of oral performance is not only an ancient tradition, however; many improvisational oral practices exist around the world today, such as the Basque tradition of *bertsolaritza*, profiled in this [short film clip](#).

In written texts, improvisation is sometimes used as a *technique* employed by writers, as well as a narrative *theme* (i.e., poems about jazz and jazz musicians). This is also a feature of many oral traditions, reminding us that a distinction between the oral/written is sometimes difficult to ascertain. A poet may be improvising about improvisation, as in [freestyle rap](#) battles where the rapper might rhyme about how good her rhymes are. Again, even if the text is pre-planned or written down, it can be altered in the moment of performance.

Jazz poetry, often associated with the [Beat Generation](#) and the [Black Arts Movement](#)—and earlier in the 20th Century, with [The Harlem Renaissance](#)—is perhaps the most well-known example of literature about jazz. Because the Beat poets and fellow travelers often gathered for public readings and [happenings](#), the performative aspect of improvisation was implied in the spirit of the written texts, even if they were read aloud word for word. [Allen Ginsberg](#) and Jack Kerouac are just two examples of poets known for their dramatic readings. Earlier poets like [Sterling Brown](#) and [Langston Hughes](#) had experimented with African-American oral traditions and written text, and had performed and recorded their poetry, sometimes with musical accompaniment.

Other literary movements feature techniques associated and/or analogous to improvisation. Some relevant examples include: the surrealists' interest in [automatic writing](#); the dadaists' fascination with [sound poetry](#) and primitivist notions of African and African American performance; the [Black Mountain Poets](#)' interest in the voice and the breath, aleatory composition, and jazz; the work of the [Negritude](#) movement, itself influenced by the Harlem Renaissance and surrealism; even the constraints and language games of [OULIPO](#) can contribute to a sense of improvisational and spontaneous writing (OULIPO author [Georges Perec](#) was a fan of free jazz). The concept of [the stream of consciousness](#), coined by William James and later applied to a variety of literary examples, is also a way of describing improvisatory techniques and themes found in many of the above examples.

Writing is/as Improvisation

In [James Baldwin's](#) short story "Sonny's Blues," the narrator asserts

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. (76).

Ironically, Baldwin uses words to capture the essence of a procedure he claims to be unnamable. What we see throughout the work of many writers interested in improvisation is a similar struggle to use language to express the ineffable, and to chart lived realities as they are transformed by the creative power of the imagination. This process requires a wholesale reevaluation of the semantic potential in language itself, which is why writers often turn to music as a practice and as an analogue to their work. The interaction between music and text frequently displays the tension in trying to make meaning out of words which are inherently difficult to communicate with. In everyday communication and artistic representation alike, meaning in language has the potential to be destroyed or transformed into something unrecognizable from moment to moment.

Telling Your Story

Jazz musicians themselves have often been writers, and many musicians describe the process of improvising in terms we normally associate with linguistic practice, as in "I was telling a story in my sax solo." Verbal expression is obviously crucial to vocal improvisation—a classic example is Billie Holiday's performance of her blues song "[Fine and Mellow](#)" from CBS' "Sound of Jazz" program—and many improvising musicians have included verbal/textual elements in their performances: for example, [Cecil Taylor](#), [Sun Ra](#), [Anthony Braxton](#) and [Oliver Lake](#). Along with several autobiographical works on music,

Wynton Marsalis has published a book of poems about jazz musicians; while humorous and perhaps not as well-known as his music, the poetry volume in particular nevertheless contributes to Marsalis's own version of jazz historiography, canonizing certain figures while remaining silent on others, thus framing the debate about who and what count in representations of jazz music and musicians.

The connection between narrative and improvised music-making thus can take the form of “story-telling” or “conversations” between musicians (as in the Billie Holiday clip above where she seems to understand exactly what Lester Young is “saying”), as well as the form of texts written by musicians: autobiographies, interviews, poetry, etc. As Ajay Heble has detailed, such autobiographical projects have been a contested site of identity politics and identity (re)formation. As in musical improvisation where a musician can potentially find her unique “voice” on an instrument, jazz writing has been important location of identity formation for improvising musicians.

Writing Between the Lines

Improvisation allows for constant change and adaptation within a predetermined structure. In jazz and other music which employs improvisation, the tension between the structure and the possible ways to develop ideas within that structure (or even “break the rules” and go beyond the confines of the structure) not only keeps the audience attentive, but also demands that the artist be constantly aware of his or her surroundings and own limitations in the process of making music. Thus, improvisation implies a deep connection between the personal and the communal, self and world. A “good” improviser successfully navigates musical and institutional boundaries and the desire for self-expression, pleasing not only herself but the listener as well; or to paraphrase Henry and William James, the improviser skillfully maneuvers between the poles of control and freedom in the stream of consciousness.

Writing as a process of charting reality thus becomes analogously as fleeting and ephemeral as a jazz performance, in that its expressive powers are no more able to “fully represent” reality than music—precisely because reality itself is contingent, provisional, metamorphic. Like a “frozen” or “captured” recording of a jazz solo which itself is both the product of predetermined, structural and aesthetic demands as well as spontaneous decisions, literary improvisation demonstrates that even the supposedly stable, fixed ink of text can be a place where author and reader alike are faced with the ever-shifting imagination of reality and the reality of the imagination.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

There is a substantial amount of work on orality and performance in various linguistic traditions. Perhaps the most influential of these works are the two volumes that laid out the theories of Albert Lord and his mentor Milman Perry, based on their ethnographic and textual study of ancient and modern epic poetry traditions: *The Singer of Tales* and *Epic Singers and the Oral Tradition*. A book stemming from the Perry/Lord lineage and offers interesting connections between the oral poetics of various times and cultures (from Tibetan shamans to Newyorican spoken word) is John Miles Foley's *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Foley heads [the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition](#). While these books are primarily concerned with the roots of Greek epic poetry, they have a refreshingly diverse range of reference compared to the more Euro-centric scholarship surrounding music and literature studies in general. Poet and critic Charles Bernstein has done much to further interest in aural and oral poetics: he edited the volume *Close Listening* as well as being instrumental in establishing the Pennsound [archive](#) of recorded poetry. Another useful website along these lines is [ubuweb..](#)

Two books that offer little information on improvisation specifically but are nevertheless valuable in contextualizing the long history of musico-literary connections are: John Hollander's *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700*, and James Anderson Winn's *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music* (but again, these focus almost exclusively on European subjects). Hollander is also a practicing poet. Similarly, while not focusing primarily on jazz, Daniel Albright's work on the intersections between literature and music are wonderful: *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* and the edited volume *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*. And Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* establishes an interesting canon of "avant-garde" writers who from another perspective might be viewed as improvisational poets.

For work on the intersections between jazz and literature, there are more and more books every day. A short list of useful starting points includes the two volumes co-edited by Robert G. O'Meally, growing out of the Jazz Research group at Columbia University, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* and *Uptown Conversation: the New Jazz Studies*; essentially any book by Albert Murray; Ralph Ellison's essays on jazz; Farah Jasmine Griffin's meditation on Billie Holiday, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*; Charles O. Hartman's *Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song*, Jon Panish's *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*, Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar American Culture*, and Ann Douglas's epic cultural history of the Jazz Age, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. David Yaffe's *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* draws on many of these other works

to look at a number of interesting texts both about jazz and by jazz musicians. Ajay Heble's book, *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* reveals the complicated terrain of improvisation and improvisational discourse as it manifests in a number of cultural forms (autobiography, criticism, etc.), and is a useful entry into issues at the heart of the [Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice](#) initiative. Two interesting essays which have much to say about jazz and literature are Dick Hebdige's "Even Unto Death: Improvisation, Edging, and Enframement," and David Sterritt's "Revision, Preview, and the Aura of Improvisatory Art." Philip Pastras's dissertation on improvisation and modernist literature (including an interesting section on Greek poet Yannis Ritsos) has never been published, but it is available through most university libraries: *A Clear Field: The Idea of Improvisation in Modern Poetry*.

[The Columbia Center for Jazz Studies](#) is an invaluable resource for jazz/literature material, including an extensive bibliography of Jazz and Poetry texts.

Books on jazz written from an ethnomusicological perspective which address the linguistic aspects of improvisation and the ways in which jazz artists talk about improvising include: Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Jazz Improvisation* and Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. There is also the seminal anthology of reportage, criticism, interviews, musical analysis, and other texts edited by Robert Walser, *Keepin' Time: Readings in Jazz History*.

There are many texts by jazz musicians themselves, some of which can be read as examples of literary improvisation, and some of which discuss improvisation at great length: autobiographies by Baby Dodds, Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus among others. Two important collections of poetry and prose, featuring material by the musicians themselves, include *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, and *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* edited by Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey. Sun Ra's writings are becoming more widely available, too, thanks to the work of John Corbett and others.

For work by the Beats and fellow travelers, a good starting place is an anthology edited by Ann Charters, *The Penguin Beat Reader*.

Aldon Lynn Nielsen has done important work on the aural and the scripted traditions of 20th century African-American writers, often intersecting with improvisation: see *Black Chant: Languages of African American Postmodernism* and *Integral Music: Languages of African American Innovation*.

Finally, there is a large archive of recorded performances which include language and improvisation, or improvised language (sometimes it's hard to tell the two apart). For example, improvised music and text performances, such as those by Langston Hughes and Charles Mingus; Jack Kerouac and Zoot Sims/Steve Allen;

Amiri Baraka's work with a range of different jazz artists; and recordings by Cecil Taylor, Milford Graves, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, et. al