

“This Music Demanded Action”: A Series of Lectures
by Robert G. O’Meally

This is a course focusing on improvisation as an artistic mode or strategy, and as a set of perspectives on the world in which we live. Having a decidedly literary bias, our explorations will involve the close study of a wide array of masters of improvisation--in writers, actors, musicians, painters, photographers, cartoonists. Our search for theories of improvisation also will involve discussions of certain philosophers and artists who reflect upon the meaning of this practice of improvisation. In the midst will also be a consideration of the work of certain scientists who study some of the processes of improvisation in the human body and in nature.

On abiding concern in this course will be the sources of improvisatory skill: in a given cultural setting, in apprenticeship, in “choices of ancestors,” and through new technological media. In a sense this course itself is an improvisation: a search for a way to talk about this most mysterious aspect of creating art, one that involves spontaneity, open-endedness, contingency, and, alas, great discipline.

Lecture titles:

1. This Music Demanded Action: Ralph Ellison's Aesthetic Imperative
2. Romare Bearden: The Painter as Improviser
3. Pieces and Parts: Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones as Improvisers
4. Improvising Humor: The Comedy of Mark Twain, Richard Pryor, and Jazz
5. Ecstasy of Influence: Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday

Some Suggested Readings:

1. “This Music Demanded Action”: Ralph Ellison's Aesthetic Imperative

Living With Music: “A Coupla Scalped Indians,”* “This Music Demanded Action,” “The Devil’s Son-in-Law,” “Remembering Jimmy,” “The Charlie Christian Story,” “Homage to Duke Ellington”; *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*: John Hersey, “A Completion of Personality” and Steve Cannon, Lenox Raphael, Ishmael Reed, “A Very Stern Discipline”; *Uptown Conversation*: George Lipsitz, “Songs of the Unsung,” Robin D. G. Kelley, “Beneath the Underground”

2. Romare Bearden: The Painter as Improviser

Seeing Jazz (Smithsonian) essays on “Rhythm,” “Improvisation,” and “Call-Response”; Bearden, “Rectangular Structures in My Collage Paintings”; *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*: Calvin Tompkins, “Putting Something Over Something Else”*; Myron Schwartzman, *The Art and Life of Romare Bearden*; *Uptown Conversation*: Diedra Harris-Kelley, “Revisiting Romare Bearden’s Art of Improvisation”

3. Pieces and Parts: Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones as Improvisers

Toni Morrison, *Beloved, Jazz*; Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*; “Memory, Creation and Writing,”* *Thought: A Review of Culture and Ideas*, 59 (December, 1984), 385-90.; Thomas LeClair, “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” *Conversations With Toni Morrison*, Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie; Donia Elizabeth Allen, “The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” (*Callaloo* 25.1 (2002)).

4. Improvising Humor: The Comedy of Mark Twain, Richard Pryor, and Jazz

If I Stop I’ll Die: The Comedy and Tragedy of Richard Pryor, John A. Williams and Dennis A. Williams; Andrew Stott introduction to *Comedy: The New Critical Idiom*; *Huckleberry Finn*, Robert O’Meally’s introduction to the Barnes & Noble edition; *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays*, Lib. of America edition; Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*; Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*; Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,”* in *Collected Essays*.

5. Ecstasy of Influence: Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Billie Holiday

Robert O’Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday**; Farah Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*.

* The asterisks mark the most significant readings.