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# **“Magical Expressions: The Journey of Jazz Music and the Efflorescence of Jazz Poetry”**

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Jazz Poetry”

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## ***Preface***

The publication of a series of Working Papers at Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University is a reflection of the University's sincere efforts towards the promotion of a productive research environment among the faculty members and officers of this university. Through these Working Papers, KKHSOU seeks to broaden the horizon of liberal thoughts and ideas of the faculty members and officers to take up serious academic and intellectual discussions across diverse disciplines of contemporary relevance.

Ideally, Working Papers are papers that are in progress, or under submission, or being published elsewhere. However, one may present a Working Paper to selected readers for comments. The writer may have some hypotheses and research questions, may apply some methods, which would further give an idea about what to expect when the work gets finished. Besides, a Working Paper may provoke further discussions among the targeted readers and the writer may change his/her ideas based on comments or review.

With the philosophy of promoting free flow of ideas and thoughts, the University has done away with the process of Peer Review of the Working Papers. However, each of the papers was subjected to an internal review by the editorial board, and the Committee on Publication of Working Papers took every possible measure to make these papers error-free. These papers reflect many of the theoretical methods, intellectual traditions, cultural aspects as well as current socio-political and economic discourses within and across different disciplines.

We hope that this paper entitled "Magical Expressions : The Journey of Jazz Music and the Efflorescence of Jazz Poetry" will help the general readers and aspiring researchers belonging to this region and beyond.

Dr. Rahul. S. Mazumdar, Chairperson  
Dr. Smritishikha Choudhury, Convenor (cum Editor)

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# **“Magical Expressions: The Journey of Jazz Music and the Efflorescence of Jazz Poetry”**

**Dr. Pallavi Gogoi**

## **Abstract**

Jazz Music is compelling in its own way given its syncopation, symphony, layered rhythms, playful improvisations, enigmatic quality and its lasting effect on both the listener’s mindscape and mood. Much rooted in the African American oral and folk musical traditions, jazz music holds the power to simply mesmerise and enrapture the listener by tugging at the heart strings and stirring one’s soul. Jazz music to the surrendered ears can transport a person to a different time and place, leaving him or her in a spate of emotions while also infusing whirls of energy and rekindling the spirit. Jazz brings to one’s mind not just the moving sounds of percussion, woodwind and string instruments; rising tempos and mellow musical renditions; free flowing rhapsodies and melting vocals but also that of an entire age, culture and a time that had ushered in winds of change in the socio-political, cultural, literary, artistic and aesthetic sensibilities in the context of America.

The present working paper thus takes up a descriptive study on the origins of jazz music in an attempt to trace its extraordinary development as one of the defining genres of western music and as a rich musical tradition of African Americans. Further, the paper traces the history of jazz music and also examines the ways in which it had traversed the terrain of poetry to eventually create a new form of musico-poetical expression that is also referred to as jazz poetry. Jazz music had thus poured rhythm, blues and soul into poetry as highlighted in the literary and poetical works of the Beats as well as African American poets. Therefore, the paper explores some of the striking nuances of jazz music that also characterised jazz poetry and further attempts to gain an insight into how these popular forms or celebrated genres of both jazz music and poetry had enriched and enraptured the other through their long journey.

**Keywords:** Jazz Music, Roaring Twenties, Jazz Poetry, Performance, Black Poetry, Music

*“I want a little sugar in my bowl*

*I want a little sweetness down in my soul”*

**-Nina Simone**

## **Tracing the Roots of Jazz Music**

The roots of what is known as 'jazz' today can be traced to the days of slavery in America and the traditional practice of 'call and response' that was common in the religious congregations of African American slaves. In terms of these age old practices, services in black churches had always been characterised by the free flowing elements of hymns, spirituals, recitations, dance movements, gestures, prayers and supplications as some of the common forms of worship. In fact, American Jazz is much rooted to the land and is a creative extension of the preceding African American worship practices as well as oral and folk musical traditions. Burkholder et. al in *A History of Western Music* (2010) states that New Orleans, Louisiana was the "cradle of jazz" (784) that had gradually developed with varied influences of African, Cuban, Caribbean, Creole and Haitian music. Also, the influence of "ragged" (782) or syncopated ragtime music of the 1890s was evident in what developed as Jazz during the 1910s, drawing eclectic influences from varied musical genres and styles such as rhythm and blues; soul songs and spirituals; folk and dance music. Thus, Jazz music was characterised by its harmonious polyrhythms, syncopated patterns, sudden swings, playful improvisations that broke away from structured compositions combined with scat singing, mumbling, rap and crooning.

In its early days, many classicists had appreciated jazz music but at the same time there were many others who doubted the credibility of jazz as a remarkable or influential tradition of music. Thus, it took a while before it was accepted as a rich and influential musical heritage of its own. Infact, Jerving in "Early Jazz Literature" notes that it was only in the 1990s that Jazz received its long due recognition after it had acquired a legal status and received national recognition as a distinct musical tradition of America in the year 1987 which then opened its way into being widely celebrated in the form of classical concerts, performances and broadcasts. Ironically, in the early years of the 1920s, the same tradition had also suffered an ill repute and widespread animosity given its inclination towards the underground nightclub culture owing to the prohibition on liquor by the federal government during that period. However, Jazz stopped at nothing and grew all the more popular by the day.

The present paper takes up a descriptive study that broadly engages in tracing and exploring the origins and development of American Jazz Music in an attempt to unravel the enriching exchanges between jazz music and poetry down the centuries with particular reference to the jazz influences in the poetical works of the Beats as well as the traditions of Black poetry.

## **The Jazz Age**

The winds of changes that swept across Europe and America during the 1920s following the First World War is popularly referred to as the 'Roaring Twenties' which was simply phenomenal in its wake. The times were changing and the 1920s saw a wide transition that ushered in new socio-cultural, political and economic progress together with a new consciousness that looked forward to moving ahead and keeping pace with the changes of time. Thus, the period saw an 'efflorescence' of modern cultural, intellectual, creative, artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, perspectives and practices that was revolutionary in its own way. The term Roaring Twenties itself implies the kind of charged atmosphere across the Atlantic sweeping over the modern hubs of London, Paris, Berlin, Chicago, New York, New Orleans and Los Angeles. With reference to the American context, the flourishing cultural and economic growth, material affluence and consumerism, advancement of modern technology and infrastructure, urbanisation and social circuits among other factors had also come to define the 'social consciousness' of this period before the Economic Depression had set in. It may be noted that the 1920s was also the period that witnessed the development and growth of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Roaring Twenties is also referred to as the 'Jazz Age' as it was witness to the compelling and lasting influences of Jazz music on the arts, literature, aesthetics and culture. It is interesting to note that the 1920s is also referred to as the 'Age of Wonderful Nonsense' or as the 'Age of Nonsense' which in a way celebrated the spirit of rebellion, conscious subversion, artistic liberty and spontaneous creativity that broke away from any defined standards and conventions. Infact, with regard to jazz, Burkholder et al. notes that it had become "emblematic music for that period when a new generation was cultivating a spirit of social liberation" (864). In the American context, some of the most memorable singers and performers of this era were the musical talents such as Bessie Smith, Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Joe "King"

Oliver, Bix Beiderbecke, Paul Whiteman, James P. Johnson and Bing Crosby to mention a few. Also, in the wider frame jazz performers and vocalists namely, William James "Count" Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Parker Jr., Nathaniel Adams "Nat King" Coles, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone among others are also some of the most memorable Jazz artists of their time.

### **Jazz Literature and the Efflorescence of Jazz Poetry**

Jerving traces the distinct development of Jazz Literature particularly with the publications of several such anthologies by a new crop of scholars and writers. Also with the institutionalisation of Jazz Studies that stirred the interests of scholars, it found an entry into the syllabi of several academic institutions in America. Thus, Jerving highlights how the 1990s in particular came up with several significant volumes of works in the area of Jazz Literature such as *From Blues to Bop: A Collection of Jazz Fiction* (1990), *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories* (1990), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991) followed by *The Second Set* (1996), *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* (1993), *Jazz Poetry* (1997), *Bibliographic Guide to Jazz Poetry* (1998) among others.

Wallenstein in "Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding" describes how 'music' shares a natural inclination and a characteristic spontaneity that finds expression in the form of free flowing verses of 'poetry'. Through a detailed discussion Wallenstein reveals the inevitable exchanges that occurs between music and poetry. In terms of this two-way creative process, he illustrates how the same is evident in both the old performing traditions as well as the modern collaborations of jazz music and poetry stating thus, "Minstrels, the troubadours and trouveres of Provence, and in more recent times, poets have collaborated with musicians and composers in the creation of opera, lieder, tone poems, choral works, songs of all kinds, and jazz" (595).

The enriching fusion of jazz music into poetry to form what is referred to as 'jazz poetry' today dates back to the 1920s itself. The jazz influences on poetry was evident in the works of African American poets during that time and later in the poetry of the Beats generation during the 1950s. Significantly, while discussing the varied experiments with music and poetry by Jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Parker, Duke Ellington among others, Wallenstein also traces the contributions of James

Mercer Langston Hughes as one of the pioneering jazz poets in America who had infused jazz music into his own poetry while also encompassing both serious socio-political concerns as well as light-hearted and jovial themes in his recordings and performances. Hughes' contributions to the Harlem Renaissance in the form of his literary, aesthetic and critical representations of black lives and experiences had also earned him the title of the People's Poet. "The Weary Blues" is one of Hughes' jazz popular poems that illustrates how he weaves jazz rhythm and sound into the central image or theme of the poem to create a certain mood and tone, for instance, the opening lines "Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, / Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon" or midway through the poem, "Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor, / He played a few chords then he sang some more. The following are some of the lines taken from the same poem:

To the tune o' those Weary Blues  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
O Blues!  
Coming from a black man's soul. (23)

To cite another example of a jazz poem written by Hughes one could read into the verses of the poem "Jazzonia" that captures a similar mood and musical ambience while also presenting striking images through an evocation of jazz and dance rhythms as in the opening lines of the poem:

Oh, silver tree!  
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!  
In a Harlem Cabaret  
Six long-headed jazzers play.  
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold  
Lifts high a dress of silken gold. (24)

Following the productive years of the Harlem Renaissance, jazz poetry inspired the upcoming Beat Generation, formed by a crop of writers who in their time were considered sharply intellectual, iconoclastic, subversive and self-styled. Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were inspired by jazz influences also recited their verses with musical accompaniments for instance, Kerouac's recitations were blended in with piano

music and Ferlinghetti's recitations with that of the saxophone. One of the leading jazz poets to have emerged from this Generation was Robert Garnell "Bob" Kaufman who was regarded as the Black American Rimbaud.

In Robert Kelly's conversation (1992) with the jazz poets Yusef Komunyakaa and William Matthews, the former in his discussion of jazz poetry significantly mentions the contributions of poets, Sterling Brown and Frank Marshall Davies who had also brought in elements of jazz and blues into their own poetry during the 1950s. They were followed by hard core jazz poetry practitioners like Imamu Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal in the 1960s and 1970s also referred to as "the two jazz/blues philosophers" (649). While noting the efforts of American poets as Jack Kerouac or even Maya Angelou in experimenting with jazz poetry, Huang in "Enter the Blues" also cites Sasha Feinstein's a broad definition of jazz poetry. According to Feinstein any poetical composition that ascribes to the characteristics of jazz music whether in terms of subject or musical rhythm qualifies as 'jazz poetry'. Further, Huang also refers to Baraka's reflections on how poetry and music is integral to the long struggles and experiences of the African Americans thus,

[P]oetry is a form of music... That's where poetry began, close to music, close to dance, and for those of us who are in the Afro-American community it's normal that music should be the music of our own people because that's what we come up with. That's what we're born with... (see Huang 9)

On a similar note, Mitchell and Henderson deliberate on the emergence of black voices through poetry reiterating the importance of encouraging the younger black generations to articulate themselves and channelize their experiences into creativity and self-expression. Bob Kaufman in his seminal poem "All those Ships That Never Sailed" represents the muffled voices of his people starting right from the days of slavery in the very land that their ancestors had helped to build with their blood, toil and tears in the following verse,

All those flowers that you never grew-  
that you wanted to grow  
The ones that were plowed under  
Ground in the mud-  
Today I bring them back  
And let you grow them  
Forever

It highlights the significance of articulating the distinctive black voice. Significantly, Komunyakaa describes how music is integral to African Americans for it is “intricately woven with [their] identity” (646) as he points out the historical fact that music was the sole element that had enabled African American slaves to survive through their difficult experiences of slavery.

## **Performance and Jazz in Varied Styles**

Aaron Ridley in his Introduction to *The Philosophy of Music* (2004) highlights the ever changing musical styles and practices together with the evolving musical tastes and preferences that lead to the continuous development of music defined by the changes in time and context. Ridley thus makes a significant statement that “[a]s part of life, music also shares some of life’s basic characteristics and conditions. It is, for instance, historical through and through” (2). Performance is what keeps traditions alive and rolling. Moreover, Davies in *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (2011) notes that “[t]he performance of a performable work calls for an interpretation on the part of the performers, and one goal of interpretation is to reveal new artistic values in work” (24). The entire spectrum of jazz includes varied styles and forms such as big bands led by black bandleaders like Armstrong, Ellington and Basie in the 1920s; swings popularised by its dance rhythms particularly in the 1930s; bebop or bop that emerged in the 1940s inspired by the swing era with leading musicians like Gillespie and Parker; Classical jazz that saw the formation of jazz ensembles in the 1950s and 1960s drawing from the traditional ragtime among various other forms down the years such as chamber jazz, cool jazz, free jazz, gypsy jazz and soul jazz.

As mentioned earlier, one of the defining characteristics of jazz that Wallenstein highlights is the scope of ‘improvisation’ that provides the artistic liberty of experimenting or even deviating from the defined or given set of musical compositions. It is much similar to the practice of free verses in modern poetry that clearly breaks away from conventional rhyming patterns and neatly-tied structures. In this regard Wallenstein remarks,

In a manner of speaking, poetry has always craved the company of music. Tone, rhythm and cadence, and lyricism, too, are the property of both. It is the music inside the poet’s head that determines the meter and often the

mood of the words as they fall to the page. So there is nothing odd about poets joining with musicians in the performance of their work (595).

Therefore, with regard to both jazz music and poetry, one of the common aspect that defines these creative forms is the persistent desire for “fresh expression” (598) to capture even the most difficult of human emotions, with the freedom of infusing both the traditional stylistic expressions and subjective elements into each composition or performance. It is this practice of experimentation that renders each performance with a sense of freshness and uniqueness in its own way. Further, Wallenstein refers to Neil Leotard's observation on how “jazz talk” (569) or lingo comprised everyday jargons and expressions, scat and coded words or even words without any meaning, all of which created a distinct set of expression and communication much popularised by jazz practitioners or performers. In terms of thematic concerns or subjects, music like poetry is inspired by everyday life and everything under the sun.

### **Music and Poetry as a Mellifluous Confluence**

It is difficult to ascertain and pin down the origins of music for it is likely that music is just as old as the creation of the world and the birth of human race itself. Bohlman in the opening chapter in *World Music* (2002) titled “In the Beginning...Myth and Meaning in World Music” presents thoughtful ideas on the essence of music thus,

Music may be evident in the songs of birds or communications from gods, or it may simply be ‘out there’ in the music of spheres. It is as if music awaits encounter, the transcendence of humans through perception and representation of a divine order encoded by music (2)

Music is sheer magic with immense power and intense vitality. It has a universal appeal and is the kind of human expression and communication that transcends all borders, barriers and boundaries. If we truly listen to the world around us with closed eyes and tune ourselves to both the world around us and the world within us, we shall all indeed experience how our surroundings and our own little worlds are completely saturated with a range of musical sounds each of varied decibels, intensity and variety. It could be in the form of echoes and faint whispers; as multiple rhythms and reverberations; with varied pitches and overtones; harmonic cadences and time signatures to suggest a

few. It only requires a sense of mindfulness and a keen ear to experience and soak in the world of music that surrounds us as well as defines us all. Music is essentially powerful, ever-changing, soul-stirring, omniscient, transcendent and so much more. In a similar strain of thought Aaron Ridley captures the overwhelming presence of music all around us thus,

To anyone who loves music, musical experience occupies a position right at the centre. It isn't filed away in some self-contained compartment to be visited from time to time when circumstances allow. In the form of themes running through one's head, sometimes for days; of pianos one can't quite walk past without brushing the keys; of snatches overheard, familiar but unplaceable, music can permeate the experience of even the least musical-seeming moments (1)

The wedding of jazz music and poetry is a happy one. It bears the stamp of African American history and heritage; the celebration of black identity and black consciousness; the reflections of their everyday experiences and unity in their collective resilience. Whether it is 'music' set to lyrical compositions or 'poetry' with its rhetorical elements composed with musical stress and rhythms, both are meant to be created in a way that is appealing to the ear. The main element that binds both jazz music and jazz poetry is 'rhythm' and as William Matthews states in his share of conversation with Robert Kelly, "Jazz and poetry are about what it feels like to be whole" (654).

Like its musical counterpart, poetry too is 'performable' and opens up to experimentation and innovation, critical comparison and reception, varied interpretation and appreciation. Thus, with regard to poetry Mitchell and Anderson aptly note, "[p]oetry is a universal form of literature because of the opportunities for exploration and conformation in style and the range of possibilities in voice" (28). In conclusion, the reflective lines from Bob Kaufman's poem titled "Believe, Believe" captures the significance of celebrating the jazz musical and the poetical traditions of the yesteryears for the world it has to offer "

Let the voices of dead poets  
Ring louder in your ears  
Than the screechings mouthed  
In mildewed editorials,  
Listen to the music of centuries,  
Rising above the mushroom time.

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