Parker, Kerouac, and Innovative Sound:
The Rhythms of Bebop in Beat Writing

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Honors Senior Thesis
April 20, 2007
## Table of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Measures 33-34 of “Koko”</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Measures 1-17 of “Koko”</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Measures 8-14 of “Koko”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Measures 39-45 of “Koko”</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Literature often influences music, as composers throughout history have frequently set texts to music and have also been inspired by them to create programmatic works. However, although the literary world has nearly always influenced music, it rarely occurs that music has an impact on a movement of literature. Certainly music in a broad sense has inspired literature, but I would argue that up until the mid-twentieth century, no musical movement had inspired a literary one so much as bebop influenced the writing of the Beat Generation. They, as well as myriad writers and poets, have written about jazz, but more interesting is how the nuances and stylistic tendencies of bebop—particularly the sound of this music—affected the entire writing style of a group of poets and novelists. A large part of this is, of course, improvisation, but breath and pacing have much to do with it as well. The influence of improvisation also carried over into Beat performance art, as it was not uncommon for writers to perform poetry or sections of novels, either previously written or made up on the spot, with a jazz band. Charlie Parker, as one of the main innovators of bebop, had an obvious impact on the Beats. Parker's innovations in bebop can clearly be seen as an influence on Beat writers and on Jack Kerouac especially, both in his writing and in his method of writing. Kerouac’s new jazz-writing style, in turn, influenced many writers of his generation. The concept of bebop’s spontaneous improvisation and the sounds it produced, both on
intellectual and emotional levels and as a representation of a vibrant form of rebellion, had a radical impact on the sound of a generation of writers.

But why did spontaneous improvisation in the musical and literary arts seem so radical? To understand this, one must first briefly examine post-World War II American culture. America had by this point assumed the burden of Western leadership. This was the time in which the Central Intelligence Agency, NATO, and the Warsaw Pact were created, and the nuclear arms race, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the Communist scare were on the forefront of everyone’s mind. An unprecedented number of veterans returning from the war took advantage of a government that paid for their higher education, and they helped create a new middle class that married, produced the “baby boomer” generation, and “was trapped in large corporate organizations and bland suburban developments where ‘sameness’ was the prevailing doctrine.” Suburbs, of course, led to more automobiles, which begat the creation of new roads and highways, some of which were immortalized in Kerouac novels such as On the Road. Citizens had more freedom to move around and achieve their version of the American Dream: a good job and a nice house in a nice suburb for the wife and kids.

However, many teenagers were disillusioned by their parents’ materialistic lives and turned away from this dream. Adults were concerned about how these teenagers were going to turn out, as children growing out of World War I became the Lost Generation of the 1920s, which consisted of, in the words of writer Ken Smith, “young people who viewed the world through skeptical eyes, who abandoned traditional values

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1 Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond* (15).
and responsibility for shallow, hedonistic pleasures." They tried to prevent something similar from happening in their children by enforcing conformity and upholding traditional values through mediums such as the “mental hygiene” classroom films. These films were “social guidance” short subjects about proper date behavior, good manners, and the dangers of fast driving, drugs, and sex, that were made between 1945 and 1970 and shown in American classrooms. Adults were worried about delinquency and so through these films and other means promoted cleanliness, lawfulness, citizenship, consumerism, and the status quo. They generally opposed independent thinking, nonconformity, sexual freedom, and, most of all, beatniks. “Beatnik” was a derogatory term used to describe those who belonged to an alternative society in New York or San Francisco, and it was coined by a newspaper columnist who combined the phrase “beat” and the Russian satellite, Sputnik, in a 1958 article. These teenagers grew up in a nation that feared their rebellion (in addition to fearing communism and nuclear annihilation), and their response to this fear and sterility can be found in all of the arts.

As a reaction against the prevailing conservative faction in American society, there developed bebop, Beat writing, abstract painting, “method acting” (typified by actors such as Marlon Brando and James Dean), and other alternative art movements. These rebellious counter-movements defied previous traditions by advocating spontaneity and creativity in contrast to dry, unthinking, routine intellectualism. In each of these movements, the creative process was often more important than the work itself. The

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nonconformist, expressive energy that went into these works appealed to intellectuals alienated by orthodoxy and the disillusioned, malcontented young adults.6

Jazz, as one of the most widespread and well-known art forms in American culture, typified both the establishment and the counter-movement. Lawrence W. Levine states in *Jazz and American Culture* that “leaders and representatives of the white community, especially those who concern themselves with ‘public morality’ and education, opposed the acceptance of jazz music…[because of] the identification of jazz with crime, vice, and greater sexual freedom than is countenanced by the common rules of morality.”7 This reputation of jazz was in part stereotyped by the behavior of its performers (and, in the case of rebellious teen fans, helped increase its popularity). Some types of jazz, however, were more mainstream than others. Swing, for example, had been a major ambassador for American propaganda and ideals as it was broadcast during the war to troops all over the world. However, bebop, which was characterized by rapid tempos and improvisation based on harmonies rather than on melody, was, in Amiri Baraka’s words, “a reaction by young musicians against the sterility and formality of Swing as it moved to become a formal part of mainstream American Culture.”8 There was something in this new form of jazz that reflected the accelerated modern life of postwar America, something that made it different from the sedateness of earlier generations—new performance practices, slang vocabulary, and rapid experimentation of ideas, while they did not appeal to the majority of the population, caught the attention of a small group of cultish aficionados. Bebop musicians achieved this by pulling riffs (short

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6 *Ibid* (34).
8 Amiri Baraka, *Jazz and the White Critic* (1963), as found in *Riffs & Choruses* (94).
repeated rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic figures) from American popular music such as Tin Pan Alley standards, modern neo-classical composers such as Stravinsky, and their own ideas about the world around them into their in-the-moment improvisations.

As Burton W. Peretti wrote as he reviewed the cultural and historical implications of jazz music, “jazz improvisation almost epitomizes the American ideal of individual expression.” In an age which frowned upon non-conformity, bebop’s form of improvisation was a direct contradiction to conservative values. Speaking of jazz as a whole, in Notes to Make the Sound Come Right, T. J. Anderson suggests that

Mainly, though not exclusively, rooted in spontaneous improvisation, jazz music is more concerned with presenting various musical ideas and possibilities through the agency of sound and gesture. The physicality of the musician, whether on the bandstand or off, plays a key role, for jazz becomes an attitude, a way in which one defies conformity and creates new ways of presenting oneself to the world. Although certain elements in a musical performance may be similar, no solo is played the same way twice.

If jazz is an attitude, the musician personifies this rebellious, non-conformist attitude, and the listener therefore also must be changed by this attitude in order to understand the music. This is especially true in bebop—though all jazz involves improvisation, the unique and complicated sound produced by bebop musicians required more attention from the listener than previous forms of jazz. Since through improvisation no sound would ever be exactly the same way twice, bebop necessitated a new kind of listener, one who could respond empathetically to the music as it was being played in the moment. The sense that something once played is gone brings to mind the Japanese Buddhist phrase mono no aware, meaning the ephemeral beauty of things—the fleetingness of jazz improvisation is the aspect that demands the most attention, and it is perhaps what makes

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9 Ibid (185).
10 T. J. Anderson, Notes to make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry (7).
it so highly attractive. This spontaneity in sound, and the uniqueness of each solo as it occurs in the moment, was emulated in writing by listeners like Kerouac. Likewise, in Beat writing, it becomes important for the reader to respond to the emotions being conveyed by the sound and rush of the words on the page. It was also important that the listener—and reader—be rooted in musical traditions, as bebop musicians and beat writers, despite the seemingly meaningless technical virtuosity and spontaneity of their music and poetry, often quoted other works and composers as well as thematic ideas from other pieces. Parker even quoted an Irish folk tune in his 1948 recording of “Au-Leu-Cha,” and he frequently quoted George Gershwin’s classic “I Got Rhythm” in his improvisations. According to Richard Quinn, “Bebop employs spontaneity as a significant element, but equally important is an intellectual mixture of past and present in which improvisers call upon musical traditions and practiced riffs.” This combination of the past with the immediate present as found in the bebop solo was a new form of individual expression, and there are few better ways to study this than to look at the life and music of one of its chief innovators, Charlie Parker.

Parker was born on August 29, 1920, in Kansas City to Charles Parker Sr., a traveling singer, dancer, and piano player, and Adelaide, who worked as a domestic cleaner and nanny. As his father’s presence was intermittent, and evidence suggests that he drank away most of his earnings, it is likely that Addie was both a single parent and the sole breadwinner of the family. Addie bought her own house, took in lodgers, and worked a night job to pay for it, so Parker was alone at night, likely leading to his interest

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in the musical night scene of Kansas City. He did not seem to have much music in his early life, and the age at which he first encountered jazz is the subject of much debate. It is known that his mother bought him a second-hand forty-five-dollar alto saxophone, but his interest in it at that time was apparently short lived.

His real musical interest likely developed in high school, where he started playing the baritone horn at the age of twelve. Parker participated in both marching and symphonic band, and he befriended trombonist Robert Simpson, a budding jazz musician who played by ear. At the age of fourteen, Parker was playing with Simpson and pianist Lawrence “88” Keyes in a band called The Deans of Swing.\textsuperscript{14} Although his mother was short on money, he had her buy him a new alto saxophone, for which she paid some $200 over several years of installments. Parker learned a little harmony from Keyes on the piano, and he devoted himself to performing and rehearsing. When he had to join the musician’s union, he pretended to be eighteen and dropped out of high school without graduating. Some of the time he spent not attending school was occupied by visiting places like Kansas City’s Reno Club, where he listened to Count Basie, Oran (Hot Lips) Page, drummer Jesse Price, and saxophonists Buster Smith and Lester Young, the latter of whom he idolized.\textsuperscript{15}

The forum for being heard as a new musician was the jam session, where individuals would take turns playing extended improvisations backed by all the other performers waiting their turn to improvise. It was likely that these jam sessions were the first places he heard musicians improvising in double time (twice the tempo) and integrating melodies of other tunes into their improvisations. Early bebop was often

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid} (13).
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid} (14).
extremely fast, and Parker was unprepared for such rapid tempos. He attempted to play in one such jam session, but his limited knowledge of keys, popular standards, and his underdeveloped technical skills led to him being laughed off the stage. He did not play in public for three months. Instead he practiced, seemingly intent on becoming a virtuoso. According to Parker, he “put quite a bit of study into the horn, that’s true. In fact, the neighbors threatened to ask my mother to move once…She said I was driving them crazy with the horn. I used to put in at least 11 to 15 hours a day.”¹⁶ His practice must have paid off, because after he returned to the scene he played with various groups in Kansas City. He learned harmony by navigating his way on a keyboard with the guidance of older musicians, and he listened to Lester Young’s solos until he could repeat them note for note.

Parker had several life-changing experiences in a short amount of time. At fifteen, he married Rebecca Ruffin. Both of them, and later their son, Francis Leon Parker, lived with his mother. He was involved in a car accident while traveling on his way to a performance with other musicians on Thanksgiving Day in 1936, leaving him with three broken ribs, a spinal fracture, and a broken alto saxophone. Insurance fortunately paid for a new alto, but it might have been after this accident that he began using heroin for the pain.¹⁷ By this point he was already using marijuana and alcohol, as did many other musicians in Kansas City. One night he attacked a cab driver with a knife and spent 22 days in prison. Later, he pawned his saxophone and boarded a train to Chicago, where he impressed the musicians by coming in off the street, borrowing someone’s horn, and playing with his already-developing characteristic sound. His travels brought him to

¹⁶ Ibid (17).
¹⁷ Ibid (20).
New York, where he lived with Buster Smith and took a job washing dishes at Jimmy’s Chicken Shack, where he could listen to Art Tatum, the legendary jazz pianist, until the local musician’s union could transfer his membership from Kansas City. Art Tatum was unique in that he did not fit easily into any style of jazz and also in that he most often performed as a solo player. Although musicians did not often emulate his style, he was quite influential in his extraordinary technique, and it was likely that Parker used this opportunity to listen and absorb aurally as much of Tatum’s technique as he could.

Parker soon became bored with the stereotypical changes and chords of typical jazz tunes, and it was while working on the popular standard “Cherokee,” the theme song of band leader Charlie Barnett, with a guitarist in 1939 that he hit upon altering the chord by adding extended intervals. He would use these higher intervals of a chord as the melody line and back that line with related, more complicated chord changes. Parker discovered that improvising on extended intervals such as the 7th, 9th, and 13th of a chord greatly extended his possibilities. For example, instead of using an F7 chord, he could play a solo starting on the note D, the 13th of that chord. The more dissonant sound of these compound chords (in addition to the use of the flatted 5th, which was already being used by other bop musicians such as trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie), radically altered the sound of the music, and it in fact sounds quite similar to many of the chords used by the neo-classical European composers of the time. This discovery is considered by many to be the beginning of bop. Parker and Gillespie often played together at a club in Harlem called Minton’s Playhouse, known for its pioneering jam sessions, where they worked on synthesizing Kansas City and New York styles into bebop. The Kansas City style which

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Parker brought to the table was predominantly blues-based, which meant it was modeled from a scale that frequently employed flatted thirds, fifths, and sevenths. Parker’s evocative use of phrasing is also reminiscent of blues. According to Gillespie, Parker’s major contribution to bebop was phrasing, which I think was the most important part of music, any way. When you phrase something like someone, you are copying them, whether you’re playing the same notes or not…we’d been playing a lot of things, we [the New York experimentalists] had all our rhythm and our harmonies all ready, and then Charlie Parker came on the scene demonstrating how it could be done. And then all of us fell in behind that.20

Soon after his revelation he returned to Kansas City for his father’s funeral and a temporary reunion with his wife and son. There he rejoined Jay McShann’s band, the recordings of which are some of the earliest records of his solos. Jazz historian Gunther Schuller suggests that these early recordings “offer considerable evidence that Parker was well in advance of Gillespie as regards musical consistency, technical poise, and cohesiveness of conception…Nothing quite like it had ever been heard before on the saxophone, and, for that matter, in jazz.”21 Parker had both instinct and technical capability, and he seemingly took inspiration from everything he saw and heard.

He eventually quit McShann and returned to New York. Both Parker and Gillespie performed in pianist Earl Hines’s band. Although he was focused during the informal jam sessions he played at Minton’s, drugs and alcohol made him unreliable on stage, and his reputed unreliability plagued him the rest of his life. Around this time he married Geraldine Scott and joined singer Billy Eckstine’s band (a subset of the Hines band) along with Dizzy Gillespie and the young trumpet player Miles Davis, who would later become famous in his own right. The band was not especially popular, however, as

the American public was not quite ready for this new form of music. It was too fast, and they could not dance to it. Indeed, the musicians did not want their listeners to dance—they wanted them to closely attend to the rhythms and sounds that they were creating and actively engage in the music.

Parker left the Eckstine band and returned again to New York to join a quintet at the Onyx Club on 52nd Street. Gillespie later hired him for a quintet at the Three Deuces, in which drummer Stan Levey interacted with the soloists instead of keeping the rhythm at a steady 4/4. Although he was not the first to do this, a drummer who could play around with the rhythm to match the soloists was still something of a novelty at the time. This was important to Parker, who stated that “the beat in a bop band is with the music, against it, behind it…It has no continuity of beat, no steady chugging.”

He reportedly preferred working with smaller rhythm sections which could provide this interactive beat than with big bands.

It was around this time that Parker embarked on his own recordings. The first recording under his name was the album *Now’s The Time* (1945), which contained his masterpiece “Koko” with its astonishing speed and its inventive, “Cherokee”-based introduction and coda. However, the record was negatively received and consequently suffered from low sales. Parker went to the West Coast with Dizzy Gillespie and others, but they had to hire another saxophonist to cover his drug-related absences. He was given a return plane ticket to New York but exchanged it for cash and ended up stranded in Los Angeles. While out west, he did some recording sessions for the Dial label, during which “Moose the Mooche” was composed and recorded, named after his heroin supplier. In addition to heroin, Parker was also reportedly drinking port and whiskey and taking

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22 *Ibid* (43).
Benzedrine. It was probably on the West Coast, where drug connections were more
difficult for an out-of-towner to find and more expensive, that he realized that he could
not do without hard drugs. His breakdown can be heard in his Dial recording sessions; he
was arrested and incarcerated in the California State Mental Hospital at Camarillo for six
months, leaving there at the end of January 1947.\textsuperscript{23} Although seemingly recovered from
his drug addiction for the time being, he soon got back into alcohol, and he married yet
again in 1948, this time to Doris Sydor.

Although bebop had no mainstream popularity, there were small groups of fans
devoted to bebop and to Parker in particular. He was a mentor to a number of younger
saxophonists, and in addition he created disciples on every other instrument because of
his innovative way of playing music. Parker made his way back to New York and
unfortunately back into addiction, and he used alcohol to dull his desires for heroin. He
was frequently seen nodding off on stage and only waking up to play his own solos.
Although notorious for drug and alcohol use, he admonished young musicians who
looked up to him against being under the influence:

Any musician who says he is playing better either on tea, the needle, or when he
is juiced, is a plain, straight liar. When I get too much to drink, I can’t even finger well,
let alone play decent ideas. And, in the days when I was on the stuff, I may have \textit{thought}
I was playing better, but listening to some of the records now, I know I wasn’t.\textsuperscript{24}

Parker seemed to have a preference for smaller groups as opposed to big bands, so
instead of joining yet another big band he formed his own quintet, consisting of Max
Roach on drums, Miles Davis on trumpet, Tommy Potter on bass, and Bud Powell (later
Duke Jordan) on piano. Whatever his talents may have been, he was reportedly not the
best of bandleaders. Their warm-up would often be the fastest piece they would play all

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid} (54-55).
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid} (69).
night, and it would exhaust the others. He made some of his greatest recordings—some
of the greatest recordings in the history of jazz—between October 1947 and September
1948 in six sessions split between the Savoy and Dial labels, featuring around twenty
original Parker compositions. The pieces on these recordings “constitute the most
impressive written work of the bebop era.” Parker’s composing was almost as
spontaneous as his improvisation. He would often compose a piece right before
recording at a session; frequently he would write out eight bars for trumpet, tell the
harmonic progression to the pianist and bassist, and begin recording.

In May of 1949 he played at the second Paris Jazz Fair, at which he was very
popular. He became more interested in European music and occasionally incorporated
quotations from Chopin or Debussy into an improvisational solo when there was
someone in the audience who he thought could understand it. In later recordings he tried
to capitalize on the popularity of ballads but was disappointed in the lack of public
response. Gillespie and his big band, on the other hand, were more popular, but Parker
was unwilling to dilute bebop in exchange for entertainment, and he thought that a big
band was too slow. Although he might not have been as popular as Gillespie (who,
though more popular than Parker, was still not widely accepted by the mainstream), it
was clear that others recognized his merit. Perhaps the first jazz club named after a
musician was called “Birdland” in his honor. It was located on Broadway near 52nd
Street. There are various stories about how he acquired the nickname “Bird.” One
involves him being called “Yardbird” while in the Jay McShann band because of his
fondness for chicken. Parker himself traced it back to his school years as a progression

\[ \text{\cite{Ibid} (64).} \]
\[ \text{\cite{Ibid}.} \]
\[ \text{\cite{Ibid} (77).} \]
from Charlie to Yarlie to Yarl to Yard to Yardbird to Bird.\textsuperscript{28} He continued performing as a soloist in the tour of “Jazz At The Philharmonic,” and he played Symphony Sid’s Xmas Eve Concert at Carnegie Hall, which was broadcast on the Voice of America, “soon to influence a generation of music fans in Europe.”\textsuperscript{29} Parker became well known for playing a white plastic saxophone (he could not pawn it, so he always had it). He and Doris separated, and he began living with Chan Richardson, with whom he had a daughter, Pree, and a son, Baird. Parker returned to another Paris Jazz Fair, but he overdid himself drinking in Paris and came back with a bleeding ulcer.

Things continued to go downhill for him, as his cabaret card was rescinded after being arrested for possession. He wanted jazz to be taken as seriously as the modern classical music he admired, so under the influence of Hindemith’s woodwind quintet \textit{Kleine Kammermusik}, he did a session with woodwinds, harp, a choral group, and a full rhythm section. This unique combination of instruments did not gain much popularity. Unable to perform for pay in New York’s clubs due to his rescinded card, he played with Gillespie, Powell, and Roach at the Massey Hall concert in Toronto in 1953 and toured with the “Festival of Modern Jazz.” While he was on tour, his daughter, Pree, died of pneumonia at the age of two, which had a very sobering effect on Parker (although he still drank heavily). He had a tendency to get himself fired, and after one such instance he tried to commit suicide by swallowing iodine, which got him committed to Bellevue Hospital. He was in and out of that institution a couple of times. Parker was increasingly unable to perform, and one night he stumbled into the apartment of his friend Baroness Nica de Koenigswarter in bad shape. He refused to go to the hospital, so she and her

\textsuperscript{28} Ira Gitler, \textit{Charlie Parker and the Alto Saxophonists} (1997), as found in Carl Woideck’s \textit{The Charlie Parker Companion} (30).
\textsuperscript{29} Brian Priestley, \textit{Chasin’ the Bird : The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker} (79).
daughter took care of him at their home. Parker died there on March 12, 1955, at the age of 34, although the doctor estimated his age to be 53 due to the state of his body.

On the day of his death, Jack Kerouac was across town celebrating his thirty-third birthday.

Despite Parker’s early death, it was obvious that his music would have lasting influences (not even including all of the ‘Bird Lives!’ graffiti art). Gary Giddins wrote that “Parker was the only jazz musician since Louis Armstrong whose innovations demanded a comprehensive reassessment of all the elements of jazz.”

Giddins also noted that Parker brought the modernism he admired in composers such as Stravinsky, Hindemith, Schönberg, and Bartók into jazz. Like the modernist classical composers, Parker incorporated the more dissonant extended chords into his pieces. Parker, like other jazz musicians, wrote new melody lines to chord sequences of standard pop songs by improvising on the chord sequence. Musicians have always improvised from pop songs and blues, but “Parker and his confederates radicalized the procedure by disguising the material they appropriated almost beyond recognition, in an abstract of sleek harmonic lines and daredevil rhythms that gave the impression of blinding speed even at moderate tempos.”

Nearly all of his fame, of course, comes from his wondrous inventiveness in improvisation. According to Martin Williams,

Improvisation has a meaning of its own; if we know that a piece of music is being at least partly made up for us on the spot, that we are attending the act of creation, we hear that music with special receptivity. But in the final analysis, an improvised music needs to be improvised well, and the final defense of improvisation in jazz is that the best

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32 Francis Davis, *Bebop and Nothingness: Jazz and Pop at the End of the Century* (31).
jazzmen can improvise superbly; they can compete with less spontaneous melodists and even surpass them.\textsuperscript{33}

Parker’s music both took from the jazz tradition and substantially added to it.

Part of what he added to the jazz tradition was his music’s ability to communicate to his listeners via his expressive tone and varied articulation and rhythm.\textsuperscript{34} Ross Russell described his tone as having a “double edge, the two tones combined in one, the thin transparent tone and the fat thick tone, one on top of the other, blended into a single textured sound. It is at once veiled and clear, cloudy and incandescent.”\textsuperscript{35} His music had the emotional feel of the blues in its “speech-like variations of timbre, especially the slightly strangulated tone and vibrato on the final note of the phrase.”\textsuperscript{36} However, it was his unique rhythm that was his true innovation. He would play just a little behind the beat, which produced a sense of tightness in the rhythm, and he would accent and/or push harder on eighth notes that were in between the beat, producing cross-accents. At first his rhythmic tendencies put the listener at a loss, but his innovations are indisputable. Another inclination he had was to double the feel of the piece to sixteenth notes or even thirty-second notes. Beat poet Amiri Baraka said of Parker that he took jazz “from the quarter note, as the main tongue, to the eighth note. As the new conversational form. The point being to make sense at higher and higher speeds!”\textsuperscript{37}

Harmonically, he would run through chromatics and go through the key-cycle using substitutions.\textsuperscript{38} His music demonstrates a sophisticated use of harmony, and what

\textsuperscript{34} Brian Priestley, \textit{Chasin’ the Bird: The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker} (111).
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid} (110).
\textsuperscript{37} Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], \textit{A Tribute to Bird} (1987), as found in Andrew Clark’s \textit{Riffs & Choruses: A New Jazz Anthology} (93).
\textsuperscript{38} Brian Priestley, \textit{Chasin’ the Bird: The Life and Legacy of Charlie Parker} (115).
seem to be substitute chords in his solos are often anticipated or delayed chords. The rhythm section would change chords, but Parker would still reference the previous chord in his solo. In his self-discovery of the higher intervals, he extended and altered chords to include the flat fifth, ninth, and thirteenth chords, playing the top notes of these extended chords as well as the basic chords.\textsuperscript{39} Parker would also often make a temporary reference to an alien key-signature, introducing bi-tonality, just by using extended intervals of the underlying chord. Although not always referencing the blues scale, his music maintains a blues feel by falling off at the end of the third or flat third of the scale. The creative possibilities of his music seem to be endless, as “his combination of European and African elements was more complex than any previously achieved, and [his music] was capable of infinite variation.”\textsuperscript{40} Most of what he did harmonically, however, can be found previously in the history of jazz. Rhythm is perhaps the most important part of his music.

His innovativeness in music can be seen in the following transcriptions of Parker’s solo in the first chorus of “Koko.” Before performing this extraordinary work as recorded on November 26, 1945, Parker had only composed the first and last eight-bar sections of the introduction (a total of sixteen measures). The remaining sections of this piece were entirely improvised. He employs several of the techniques I have discussed above in this selection. Harmonically he makes use of arpeggiated chromaticism in measures 33 to 34:

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid (117).
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid (121).
The chord progressions themselves are not especially innovative, but he does make use of his "discovery," that is, playing a melody based on the extended intervals of the chord. He does this from measure 1, where he plays an A as the first note of his solo, the major seventh of a B♭ chord.

41 Charlie Parker’s solo from the first chorus of “Koko,” as found in Jennie Skerl’s *Reconstructing the Beats* (158-159).
42 Ibid.
Also, in measure 7 he begins with a $G^b$, the minor seventh in an $A^b7$ chord. He does the same thing again by playing a $B^b$ as the seventh of $C$ minor in measure 13 and again in measure 14, beginning the measure on a strong beat with an $F$, the seventh of a $G7$ chord. In measure 16, he begins with a $B^b$, the $13^{th}$ of an $F7$ chord. There are many other examples of his beginning the measure of a chord change with an upper interval of that chord. This stands out prominently, as the first beat of a measure is the strongest beat.

Parker also uses many of his characteristic rhythmic techniques in the following example. He makes use of unexpected rests between measures 8 and 9 and again in measure 13:

Figure 3, measures 8-14 of “Koko.”

The beginnings and ends of his phrases are often unanticipated, and he frequently ignores the traditional strong and weak beats by employing asymmetrical accentuation. A good example of his asymmetrical accents occurs in measure 39 and again in measures 44-45.

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These accents fall on traditionally weak beats or in the middle of a beat, and they occur in seemingly random patterns. In a way, however, these excerpts from his notated solo are limited in what they can show of Parker’s music. As poet Amiri Baraka said,

Strict musicological analysis of jazz…is also as limited as a means of jazz criticism as a strict sociological approach. The notator of any jazz solo…has no chance of capturing what in effect are the most important elements of the music…A printed musical example…tells us almost nothing except the futility of formal musicology when dealing with jazz. Not only are the various jazz effects almost impossible to notate, but each note means something quite in adjunct to musical notation. The notes of a jazz solo exist in a notation strictly for musical reasons. The notes of a jazz solo, as they are coming into existence, exist as they do for reasons that are only concomitantly musical.45

What cannot be shown here as an example is the expression of significant feeling and meaning that lies behind the music, which for many writers seems to have been the most important part of jazz.

The intellectualism and emotional depths behind this new form of jazz, as well as its rebellious attitude, are perhaps what made it attractive to poets and writers. American poets in particular had long responded to jazz as an especially American art form, and something in its sound appealed to writers who felt the need to respond to, imitate, or chronicle jazz. Among the first poets who wrote about jazz were Carl Sandburg and

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44 Ibid.
45 Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], *Jazz and the White Critic* (1963), as found in Andrew Clark’s *Riffs & Choruses* (93).
Langston Hughes, the latter of whom is credited with being the first to embody a jazz aesthetic in that it affected his poetic language.\textsuperscript{46} One of Sandburg’s jazz poems is his “Jazz Fantasia,” which is in many ways typical of early jazz poetry (as published in his book \textit{Smoke and Steel} in 1920):

\begin{quote}
Drum on your drums, batter on your banjoes, sob on the long cool winding saxophones. Go to it, O jazzmen.

Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy tin pans, let your trombones ooze, and go husha-husha-hush with the slippery sand-paper.

Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome treetops, moan soft like you wanted somebody terrible, cry like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle cop, bang-bang! you jazzmen, bang altogether drums, traps, banjoes, horns, tin-cans—make two people fight on top of a stairway and scratch each other’s eyes in a clinch tumbling down the stairs.

Can the rough stuff . . . now a Mississippi steamboat pushes up the night river with a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo . . . and the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars . . . a red moon rides on the humps of the low river hills . . . go to it, O jazzmen.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

This early jazz poetry does some imitation of the sound of jazz, and the way he begins each stanza with a command conveys a sense of immediacy, but there is a lonely violence which is perhaps stereotypical of a jazzman’s life that also crops up in this poem. While it imitates the sound of jazz, it does not really capture it (nor, perhaps, was it meant to).

Compare this to Langston Hughes’ “The Weary Blues,” published in 1926:

\begin{quote}
Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light He did a lazy sway….

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\textsuperscript{46} Kevin Young, \textit{Jazz Poems} (12-13).
\textsuperscript{47} Carl Sandburg, \textit{Smoke and Steel} (1920), as found in his \textit{Complete Poems} (179).
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!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.48

Langston Hughes gets closer to the feeling of jazz in his poem, perhaps because of his own shared racial experiences. His poem emulates the blues chorus (which has the pattern AAB, where B rhymes with A), but more than that, it captures the emotion of blues. His rhyming, the rhythm of his poem, and his word choices all contribute to the overall bluesy feeling of the work.

Poets who were inspired by jazz tried to recreate the experience they felt while listening to the music, and their poems often took on more experimental forms as they tried to capture the exact language of jazz and the feeling of risking it all on stage.

48 Ferguson et. al., The Norton Anthology of Poetry (822-823).
“Risk” was important to bebop especially, as creating new and innovative melodies and rhythms at breakneck speeds involved a great deal of personal risk on the part of the musician, who was trying out ideas for the first time in front of other musicians and in front of an audience. Another less risky element of jazz in poetry is found in poets’ elegies to jazz musicians that they admired (for example, Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died” is an often anthologized elegy for singer Billie Holliday). Poets had other ways of honoring their favorite deceased jazz musicians. One Beat poet, Bob Kaufman, even named his son Parker, in honor of Charlie Parker.

In *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose*, the editors note that “it is particularly unsurprising that a music which so frequently and characteristically aspires to the condition of speech…should have provoked and proved of enormous interest to practitioners of the art of the word—writers.” Writers have drawn on jazz’s tradition of invention to expand the traditional boundaries of components of literary form including structure, language, and character voice. These various forms of so-called “jazz poems” create a synergy between music and text, word and performance, as “literature’s jazz aesthetic creates a verbal semblance of jazz’s sound.”

This desire to create “a verbal semblance of jazz’s sound” is perhaps nowhere as apparent as in the writing of the Beats, particularly in Jack Kerouac’s “spontaneous bop prosody.” As Andrew Clark argues, the 1950s Beat writers made a more self-conscious attempt to develop an analogy with the jazz model, notably in Jack Kerouac’s experiments with composition and creation of a referential jazz fiction. The Beats’ “action” style—the long, confessional line, full of cadence and additive

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49 This poem can be found in Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* (25-26).
50 Bob Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar* (12).
51 Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey, *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose*.
52 Ibid.
To fully understand the impact of Kerouac’s “spontaneous bop prosody,” however, it is necessary to understand something about his life and the beginnings of the Beat generation.

Jack Kerouac was born on March 12, 1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts, to a family of French-Canadian immigrants. His father was a printer. Oddly, he did not speak English, the language in which he wrote, until he was five or six. Kerouac came to New York City on a football scholarship, first to the Horace Mann School and then to Columbia College. According to John Swenson, Kerouac came to New York “with an ear for rhythm and an advocate’s enthusiasm for jazz.”

Like other writers of his generation, he had the shared experience of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, and anti-Communism. Their literary models were not the white American writers of the past; instead, they admired bop musicians like Parker and Gillespie and the anarchistic West Coast poets. The word “beat” itself was a slang term used by jazz musicians to mean down and out. It was introduced (along with heroin) to William Burroughs, a Harvard graduate living in New York, by hustler Herbert Huncke, and he introduced it to his friend, Columbia College freshman Allen Ginsberg, as well as Ginsberg’s writer friend, the Columbia dropout Jack Kerouac, who was serving as a merchant marine seaman based in New York. Kerouac later explained “beat” as also

54 *Ibid* (365).
55 Morris Dickstein, *On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel*, as found in David Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond* (40).
having the connotations of beatitude or the beatific. For him, the word contained a spiritual dimension. The writers of this generation, like the musicians, had a new vision for their art form. According to West Coast poet Michael McClure, “We wanted to make [poetry] new and we wanted to invent it and the process of it as we went into it.”\textsuperscript{58} Their writing, much like the new bop music, was not overtly popular, however. According to Kerouac biographer Ann Charters, “The fiction and poetry by Beat writers like Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, and McClure probably offended more Americans than it found readers over thirty years old who agreed with its attack on such cherished institutions as capitalism, consumerism, the military-industrial complex, racism, and ecological destruction.”\textsuperscript{59} The Beats can be viewed as a group of loner rebels who found in their counterculture community of writers a shared theme of outsider status as well as similar creative tastes.

The Beat heyday lasted from around the publication of Kerouac’s \textit{On the Road} in 1957 to about 1964.\textsuperscript{60} The physical manuscript of \textit{On the Road} was produced on a single long roll of paper in three weeks of supposed nonstop Benzedrine-driven composition in April 1951. Kerouac took a 120-foot-long strip of tracing paper and recorded upon it a frenzied flow of spontaneous memory. This monumental work is, according to English professor Morris Dickstein, “shapeless at its worst, incandescently evocative at its best…a landmark in the poetics of improvisation that gave the counterculture its special rhythm and its founding myths.”\textsuperscript{61} By example, Kerouac taught the writers of his

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid} (xxvii).
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid} (xxx).
\textsuperscript{60} David Amram et. al., \textit{Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond} (3).
\textsuperscript{61} Morris Dickstein, \textit{On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel}, as found in David Amram et. al., \textit{Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond} (45).
generation “to ride the shape of their own breath...as the jazzmen instinctively practiced.”

Kerouac encapsulated his revelations in a short essay written for his friends Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs entitled “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” reproduced here in its entirety*

SET-UP The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

PROCEDURE Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.

METHOD No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)—“measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech”—“divisions of the sounds we hear”—“time and how to note it down.” (William Carlos Williams)

SCOPING Not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash)—Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

LAG IN PROCEDURE No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing.

TIMING Nothing is muddy that runs in time and to laws of time—Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue—no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting).

CENTER OF INTEREST Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing, and

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62 Ibid (46).
* As found in Ann Charters’s The Portable Beat Reader. Rights held by Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Permission to reproduce this essay in its entirety pending.
write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion—Do not afterthink except for poetic or P. S. reasons. Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind—tap from yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is your only way—“good”—or “bad”—always honest, (“ludicrous”), spontaneous, “confessional” interesting, because not “crafted.” Craft is craft.

STRUCTURE OF WORK Modern bizarre structures (science fiction, etc.) arise from language being dead, “different” themes give illusion of “new” life. Follow roughly outlines in outflanning movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, once) arriving at pivot, where what was dim-formed “beginning” becomes sharp-necessitating “ending” and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle—Night is The End.

MENTAL STATE If possible write “without consciousness” in semitrance (as Yeats’ later “trance writing”) allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so “modern” language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich’s “beclouding of consciousness.” Come from within, out—to relaxed and said. 63

This, as well as his Belief & Technique for Modern Prose (which I shall examine below), is a concrete summary of Kerouac’s jazz-inspired writing techniques. The influence of jazz can be seen in his “blowing” of long phrases and in his belief that punctuation should be used like breathing (as in a jazz solo). As in music, timing is essential to his writing, as is the discipline of rhythm. Kerouac disliked revisions because they interfered with his desire to best capture the in-the-moment feel of a live jazz performance. Like a jazz solo, there is a pivot from beginning to end, and his writing was done in a similar way to how the bop musicians played: “excitedly and swiftly.”

His Belief & Technique for Modern Prose is a bit more cryptic, but it still embodies his ideals in writing. Among the advice to “try never to get drunk outside yr [sic] own house” is his suggestion to be “submissive to everything, open, listening,” just

63 Jack Kerouac, Essentials of Spontaneous Prose, as found in Ann Charters’ The Portable Beat Reader (57-58).
as Parker gained inspiration from everything he heard and saw.64 His improvisation can be seen as a “struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind.”65 Another of the “essentials” on his list is the composition of things “wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better.”66 The sounds of jazz can be found for him in writing from the subconscious.

In addition to his jazz-inspired writing methods, Kerouac also often wrote about jazz. Both Kerouac’s writing style and his interest in the history of his inspiration can clearly be seen in his essay “Jazz and the Beat Generation”:

…nostalgia of alcohol, human mouths chewing and talking in smoky noisy jazzrooms, yeah, yah, yeah, yah, last Sunday afternoon and the long red sunset, the lost girl, the spilt wine—Charlie Parker leaving home and unhappiness and coming to the Apple, and meeting mad Monk and madder Gillespie…67

As can be seen in this prose example, Kerouac worked hard to imitate the improvisational flow of jazz riffs in language in order to sound like the musicians that he admired.68

Kerouac’s further interest in the origins of bebop (and thus the origin of the sound he imitates in his writing) is explored in his essay entitled “The Beginning of Bop,” which imaginatively recreates the conditions under which the three innovators of bop (trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie, saxophonist Charlie Parker, and pianist Thelonius Monk) discovered their sound. As he writes in that essay,

Dizzy or Charley or Thelonius was walking down the street, heard a noise, a sound, half Lester Young, half raw-rainy-fog that has that chest-shivering excitement of

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Jack Kerouac’s “Jazz of the Beat Generation,” as found in Richard N. Albert’s *From Blues to Bop: A Collection of Jazz Fiction* (167).
68 Morris Dickstein, *On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel*, as found in David Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond* (44).
shack, track, empty lot, the sudden vast Tiger head on the wood fence rainy no-school Saturday morning dumpyards, ‘Hey!’ and rushed off dancing.\(^69\)

He writes later in that same essay that he could not

believe that bop is here to stay—that it is real, Negroes in America are just like us, we must look at them understanding the exact racial counterpart of what the man is—and figure it with histories and lost kings of immemorial tribes in jungle and Fellahin town and otherwise…the band realized the goof of life that had made them not only misplaced in a white nation but mis-noticed for what they really were.\(^70\)

Like the musicians he so admired, Kerouac also felt out of place in white America as well as “mis-noticed” by his contemporaries. Perhaps this is why he identified with the sound of rebellious jazz musicians.

Many have picked up on this correlation between Kerouac’s writing and bebop. As essayist Clark Coolidge noted when reading Kerouac’s books, “There’s a momentum of mind-voice that otherwise might be found only in Proust or certain Bop musicians. A speed of pick-up on the fly that includes so much, a poet’s energies to make of every thought of the world a great ringing edifice.”\(^71\) Coolidge was a big fan of Kerouac and used to lend his books to friends, but they did not understand Kerouac’s punctuation (or lack thereof) or use of dashes. To help them comprehend, he would put on a bop record, and most of them “would go away saying, ‘Oh yeah, I got it. Yeah, right.’ and then they could read [Kerouac] without any trouble.”\(^72\) Part of the congruity between the two artists is evident by the longer lines in both Parker’s and Kerouac’s artistic styles. In bebop’s evened-out four beat bars, it was easier to hear a long line, and from his extremely long sentences, often without the aid of much punctuation, it is clear that Kerouac believed that the long phrases of bebop could be successfully carried over into


\(^{70}\) *Ibid* (8).

\(^{71}\) Clark Coolidge, *Now it's Jazz: Writings on Kerouac & the Sounds* (18).

\(^{72}\) *Ibid* (35-36).
writing. In addition to his phrasing, Kerouac’s pulling things from his mind in the middle of a work echoes the bop convention of quoting other tunes in the middle of an improvisation. His extremes of “tempo” are also reminiscent of Parker.

Both Kerouac’s admiration of Parker and his embodiment of Parker’s style in his writing can be seen in his novel *The Subterraneans*:

> …so here [Parker] was on the stand, examining them with his eyes as he blew his now-settled-down-into-regulated-design “crazy” notes…[he looked at me] directly in my eye looking to search if really I was that great writer I thought myself to be as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions or remembered me from other night clubs and other coasts, other Chicagos—not a challenging looking but the king and founder of the bop generation at least the sound of it in digging his audience digging his eyes, the secret eyes him-watching, as he just pursed his lips and let great lungs and immortal fingers work, his eyes separate and interested and humane, the kindest jazz musician there could be while being and therefore naturally the greatest…

Please note the lack of punctuation, other than dashes—this is typical of the length of one of Kerouac’s sentences. He took the sound jazz musicians blew and just kept on blowing words out onto the page, his sparse punctuation marking the occasional breath. As can be seen in this example, bebop musicians like Parker connote a divine quality, as is further explored by Kerouac’s Buddhafication of Parker in *Mexico City Blues*, which I discuss later in this paper.

Kerouac was not only interested in writing like, and about, jazz; like his contemporaries, was also interested in performing poetry with a jazz band. As a result of the influence of the San Franciscan poets on the Beats, they helped revive interest in public performances of poetry: the Beats “brought the written word back into live breath and musical time.”

Kerouac recorded *Blues and Haikus* (Hanover LP #5006) in 1958, released in 1959, with saxophonists Al Cohn and Zoot Sims and *Poetry for the Beat*.

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73 Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey, *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (41-44).
74 Mel Van Elteren, *The Culture of the Subterraneans: A Sociological View of the Beats*, as found in David Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond* (86).
Generation (Hanover LP #5000) in 1959 with pianist and television personality Steve Allen. Composer David Amram had quite a lot to say about working with Jack Kerouac. According to Amram, Kerouac had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of music in that anything he heard could be instantly recalled. Kerouac often improvised his verse with Amram’s piano music. For Amram,

    collaborating with Kerouac was as natural as breathing. That is because the breath and breadth of Jack’s rhythms were so natural that even the most stodgy musician or listener or reader could feel those rhythms and cadences, those breathless flowing phrases, the subtle use of dynamics that are fundamental to the oral (i.e., spoken) and aural (i.e., to be listened to) tradition of all musics and poetic forms of expression...Jack himself spoke, wrote, improvised and sang in long flowing phrases, like the music of Franz Schubert, George Gershwin, Hector Berlioz, Haydn, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Billie Holliday, like the poetry of Walt Whitman, Dylan Thomas, Baudelaire, Langston Hughes, and other lyric artists whose work we both loved and admired.\footnote{David Amram, \textit{This Song's for You, Jack: Collaborating with Kerouac}, as found in David Amram et. al., \textit{Beat Culture: The 1950's and Beyond} (131).}

The fact that his prose and poetry were considered musical by a musician, to me, shows beyond any doubt the intensity of the influence that music had on Kerouac’s sound as a writer. Kerouac seemed to feel the same way about the times he spent improvising with Amram, as he once said to his friend, “Now I’m \textit{serious}, man. When Davey and I start \textit{cooking}. I feel like I’m flying. Like Charlie Parker. A bird in flight. He didn’t \textit{talk} about it. He \textit{did} it.”\footnote{Ibid (134).}

According to poet David Meltzer, Kerouac was the most successful of the Beat poets who read their poems to jazz. Kerouac “understood that jazz was more than the background to his poems; instead, he made the ‘spirit’ of the music interactive with the poetry.”\footnote{David Meltzer, \textit{Poetry and Jazz}, as found in Ann Charters’ \textit{Beat Down to Your Soul : What was the Beat Generation?} (396).}  Kerouac both read and improvised with jazz ensembles. Reading words and
sheet music are a different creative work than improvising, as they are interpreting rather than creating. Improvising is “inventing on the spot alternate ways of expressing words and music, creating new moments in time that are ineffable and beyond captivity.”

Poet Kenneth Rexroth, however, disputed the idea that poetry improvisation can come only out of in-the-moment invention. As Parker well knew and Kerouac perhaps learned, there are many depths within a seemingly instantaneous improvisation. According to him,

the most spontaneous improvisation works with an immense repertory of stereotyped patterns, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, which every musician knows, and into which he pours the new life of the immediate performance as he goes along…So the idea that you can just get up in front of a band and everybody blow poetry and sounds out of dreams is just plain silly.

Rexroth believed that “poetry and jazz gain new and different dimensions in association. Poetry has always gained by association with music…ancient China, Japan, India, Greece, the troubadours and minnesingers and scalds. Not just as lyrics for songs, but also as recitation.”

The Beat scene grew partially out of the jazz scene, and perhaps this is the reason they celebrated improvisation and spontaneity and glorified jazz musicians. Jazz musicians were part of what Kerouac called the “fellaheen”: hobos, drifters, migrant farm workers, low-paid manual workers, street people, loggers, prostitutes, and others. According to social science professor Van Elteren, Kerouac used this term “to articulate a sense of cross-cultural global solidarity with oppressed and deprived peoples who could be romanticized as being without nationality, as primitive, instinctual, cunning and in

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79 Ibid (399).
80 Kenneth Rexroth, Jazz and Poetry, as found in Fred W. and Timothy S. McDarrah’s Kerouac and Friends: A Beat Generation Album (45).
81 Ibid (41).
82 Mel Van Elteren, The Culture of the Subterraneans: A Sociological View of the Beats, as found in David Amram et. al., Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond (65-66).
tune with the ‘cosmos.’” His folk heroes were “angel-headed hipsters” like Parker and Neal Cassady, a Colorado friend and fellow rebel whose long, wild letters also helped him to find his voice as a writer. Jazz was natural, promoting pre-civilized and anti-technological values, a music of the unconscious. However, as Parker knew much about the jazz tradition before him as well as much about modern and historical classical music, Beat writing also shows the impact of a literary tradition. Like Parker, they took that tradition and brought something new to it.

The question that must be asked is, did Kerouac succeed in adapting jazz to writing? Kerouac called his spontaneous writing “jazz writing,” and he used jazz as the model for absolute spontaneity, a state that he believed was ideally without consciousness. According to Mel Van Elteren, Kerouac thought that the best writing—or the best solo—was one without the intervention of the creator’s thought process. Kerouac was perhaps not informed enough musically to realize all of what went into a virtuosic bop solo. Soloists like Parker might have given the impression of being entirely in the moment, but they had years of technical training, listening, and harmonization behind them. Kerouac may have ignored all of the behind-the-scenes work that goes into the making of a legendary musician: all of the rehearsing and revision that goes into any good solo. Like writers, musicians draw from a broad history of texts and traditions, and the knowledgeable listener (or reader) can hear echoes of this in their works. Jazz improvisations include both spontaneous phrases and rehearsed stock phrases. Kerouac seemed to think that something spontaneous was created as a beautiful whole, but this

83 Ibid (67).
84 Ibid (68).
85 Ibid (77).
was not always the case, both in the case of the musicians he admired and in his own writing, which sometimes falls flat by the standards it attempts to emulate.

Critic Jan Panish takes this speculation on Kerouac’s lack of musical understanding even further and states that “There is nothing inherently musical or jazz-like in Kerouac’s writing.”86 He also criticizes Kerouac for reducing Parker to the personification of kindness, as can be seen both in *The Subterraneans* and in *Mexico City Blues*. Perhaps, in the ears of some, Kerouac’s writing sounds more like a drug- or alcohol-induced rant than like blowing a jazz phrase. Others have also criticized Kerouac for his idealistic view of African-Americans and his association of them with his romantic version of the Fellaheen. There is some merit to both of these criticisms; however, the former especially is not shared by the majority of scholars. According to Van Elteren,

in his actual writing Kerouac was remarkably more true to the musical practice of jazz. He modeled his prose around the musical concept of storytelling, and the musical time of effective jazz playing. By attending to sound and rhythm, he succeeded in injecting musical texture into his prose, which is quite different than merely a spontaneous outburst of unreflected experience as Kerouac himself saw it…the many ‘sketches’ of persons and situations which he jotted down in his notebooks, contained stock phrases which he incorporated into his novels. They can be seen as preparations and rehearsals for the ‘spontaneous’ writing that Kerouac cultivated.87

Although not directly espousing it, Kerouac’s actual writing methods seem to be much more similar to the methods of a jazz musician than they first appear.

To Kerouac, jazz players embodied “IT,” a quality which can be described as a sort of ultimate high, an “orgasmic extreme of consciousness which a player reaches at

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86 Richard Quinn, *Jack Kerouac, Charlie Parker, and the Poetics of Beat Improvisation*, as found in Jennie Skerl’s *Reconstructing the Beats* (155).

87 Mel Van Elteren, *The Culture of the Subterraneans: A Sociological View of the Beats*, as found in David Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond* (77-78).
Jazz helped him explain his writing process, because for him writing was the closest he could personally come to embodying “IT.” In terms of Kerouac’s books, the jazz motif helps to unify his work as a whole, and it is possible “to define the relationship of novel to novel as variations on a single theme, or jazz riffs.” As Parker’s music can be characterized more by the rhythm rather than the harmony, Kerouac’s writing is perhaps more important in its sound than in its meaning.

Parker’s sound (for example, his rhythm and tone) especially appears to have been a large influence on Kerouac’s sound (as in his voice and phrasing). It seems that “most critics accept the fact that bebop, particularly Charlie Parker, influenced Kerouac, that something in Parker’s persona and performative technique inspired Kerouac to invent his Beat persona and ostensibly ‘spontaneous prose.’” I would take this a step further and argue that in particular it was the sound of Parker’s rhythms and phrasing that specifically influenced Kerouac’s spontaneous prose and that reading Jack Kerouac without any knowledge of Parker’s unique style of music takes away from the experience. Indeed, according to Richard Quinn, Kerouac’s texts seem incomplete without Parker’s sound. Studying both of their styles in the context of each other extends the meaningfulness of both. Quinn states that “in Parker’s music, Kerouac discovered literary methods and enigmatic forces that empowered him (and his readers) to engage in processes of active meaning-making while experiencing depths of significant feeling postwar life seemed incapable of providing.” Spontaneity is important to both artists,

88 Regina Weinreich, *The Divine Comedy of the Bebop Buddha: Kerouac, Jazz, and “IT”*, as found in David Amram et. al., *Beat Culture: The 1950’s and Beyond* (149).
89 *Ibid* (150).
91 *Ibid* (152).
yet theirs is a spontaneity mixed with deep intellectualism and thought as well as an attitude of rebellion against the mainstream. Without Kerouac’s knowledge of jazz, his writing would have been more like the stream of consciousness typified in authors such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce instead of having the distinct rhythm and sound of bebop.

Kerouac’s jazz-inspired writing extends to his poetry as well. His 1954 San Francisco Blues was the first serial-length poem involving jazz influences. It was written in 79 choruses based loosely on the blues chorus. As Kerouac explains about his creative process in this work,

In my system, the form of blues choruses is limited by the small page of the breast pocket notebook in which they are written, like the form of a set number of bars in a jazz blues chorus, and so sometimes the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another, or not, just like the phrase-meaning can carry harmonically from one chorus to the other, or not, in jazz, so that, in these blues as in jazz, the form is determined by time, and by the musician’s spontaneous phrasing & harmonizing with the beat of the time as it waves & waves on by in measured choruses. It’s all gotta be non stop ad libbing within each chorus, or the gig is shot.93

Kerouac in his poetry and prose experiments with line placement, bop language and phraseology, and the ability of words to imitate the sound of music. He also tries to capture the spontaneity of improvisation. Many of his poems employ the scat vocabulary used by bop singers, and often he phonetically uses a sound reminiscent of an instrument.

Mexico City Blues is perhaps the work that best compares with the sound of Parker’s solos and as a whole is most related to jazz.94 The dominant motives of his 242 choruses are alliteration in sound and the articulation of language, as well as the occurrence of countermelodies in the text. Kerouac’s approach to these choruses uses

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93 From Kerouac’s San Francisco Blues, as found in T. J. Anderson, Notes to make the Sound Come Right: Four Innovators of Jazz Poetry (47).
94 John Swenson, Beat Jazz: The Real Thing, as found in Holly George-Warren’s The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture (29).
repetition as well as stylistic releases and silences to replicate Parker’s musical precision. Dominant themes include Buddhism, jazz, and railing against academia and suburbia. He uses his poems to create riffs from a structure, that structure being the blues chorus. The form of the book of poetry itself is a series of blues choruses. On the back cover is a quote from Kerouac: “I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses; my ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus of from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next.”

Many of his choruses, such as the eighty-second, consist of him playing with the sounds created by different words and by “riffing” off of a certain sound:

Fracons, acons, & beggs,
Lay, it. all that
  be bobby
  be buddy
I didn't took
I could think
  So
  bepo
  beboppy
  Luney & Juney
    —if—
    that's the way
    they get
    kinda hysterical

Looney & Booney
  Juner and Mooner
Moon, Spoon, and June96

While perhaps not the most meaningful lines ever written in the English language, these phrases take a common sound and improvise on them, as if to see what of interest comes

95 Richard Quinn, *Jack Kerouac, Charlie Parker, and the Poetics of Beat Improvisation*, as found in Jennie Skerl’s *Reconstructing the Beats* (162).
96 Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues* (82).
up next. Kerouac scats on nonsensical, made-up words like a musician trying out
different tones. He also employs repetition of words that occur like a musical motif. An
example of this is his one hundred and thirty-eighth chorus, where he riffs off of the word
“night”:

It’s really a Brooklyn Night
the Aztec Night
the Mix Toltec Night
the Saragossa Night
the Tarasco Night

Jaqui Keracky
Grow Opium
In Ole Culiacan

(BLANK, the singer
sings nothing)\textsuperscript{97}

His note at the bottom is a self-referential comment reflecting his ideal that these be
viewed as a jazz poet blowing at a session. Perhaps he has run out of things to improvise
upon for the moment—or, like Parker, he is employing an unusual silence in order to
grab the attention of his listeners/readers. Parker himself is the subject on which Kerouac
muses for three of the penultimate poems in the book, one of which is the two hundred
and thirty-ninth chorus:

Charley Parker Looked like Buddha
Charley Parker, who recently died
Laughing at a juggler on the TV
after weeks of strain and sickness,
was called the Perfect Musician.
And his expression on his face
Was as calm, beautiful, and profound
As the image of the Buddha

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid (138).
Represented in the East, the lidded eyes,
The expression that says “All is Well”
— This was what Charley Parker
Said when he played, All is Well.
You had the feeling of early-in-the-morning
Like a hermit’s joy, or like
the perfect cry
Of some wild gang at a jam session
“Wail, Wop” — Charley burst
His lungs to reach the speed
Of what the speedsters wanted
And what they wanted
Was his Eternal Slowdown.
A great musician and a great
creator of forms
That ultimately find expression
In mores and what have you.\(^98\)

This poem is fairly unique among Kerouac’s work in that the line length is consistent throughout the entirety of the piece. While not in any traditional poetic meter, it has a rhythm and flow that is slower and more broken up by punctuation than much of his work. This is similar to the shorter phrases broken up by rests in some of Parker’s solos and perhaps is symbolic of the “Eternal Slowdown” in contrast to Parker’s normal double tempo speed. His personification as Buddha reiterates Kerouac’s vision of Parker as both a spiritual and an aesthetic inspiration, someone who created the forms in music that he used in his writing, who created a way for him to find expression.

To writers, jazz presented new freedom and the permission to create and recreate as well as a pattern for rebellion through sound. Many writers found this same rebellious freedom in the sound of Jack Kerouac’s spontaneous writing. His method of writing influenced a long list of contemporaries, all of whom can trace the sound of their work back to Kerouac, whether by their long lines, their lack of punctuation or use of alliteration, or their tendency to blow. Strangely, poets such as Amiri Baraka reflect

\(^98\) Ibid (241).
Kerouac’s rhythms in their writings more than they do those of Parker.99 Kerouac’s unique sound became a way of identifying his voice in a similar way that Parker’s innovative use of rhythm characterized and typified his music. Although each was heavily influenced by others in various traditions, as well as by the time period in which they lived, they emerged with styles unique enough to revolutionize both the music and the literary world. In Parker’s case, through his large influence in Kerouac’s sound and style of writing, he had a long-lasting impact on a variety of artistic spheres. There is merit to be found in each artist’s work: although they both fit into the larger context of their artistic traditions, their artistic output stands quite easily on its own, and they are each highly regarded by both scholars and the general public today. Although the rebellious undertones in their works alienated the mainstream society of the 1950s, at present those same works from that generation are celebrated. Kerouac heard something in Parker’s sound that appealed to him intellectually and emotionally, a sound that was alien to postwar America, and he attempted to record that sound in words and transmit it to an entire generation in his jazz-inspired spontaneous improvisations.

99 Francis Davis, *Bebop and Nothingness: Jazz and Pop at the End of the Century* (262).
Bibliography


