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Contemporary American Poetry and All That Jazz

Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, eds. *The Jazz Poetry Anthology.* Indiana University Press, 1991. 284 pages.

It may be true, as Walter Pater told us, that "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," but to understand more fully the poetry of any given author, or age, it would be helpful to go beyond his generalization and ask, what *kind* of music does the poetry aspire to? For Walt Whitman, it was his beloved opera; for Emily Dickinson, the hymns of the church she refused to attend. For contemporary American poets, the kind of music that has provided the most formal and sonic inspiration is jazz. (I should hasten to explain that I include the blues in my definition of jazz, as do the editors of *The Jazz Poetry Anthology,* which contains both poems that employ the blues form and poems that deal with such blues artists as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Leadbelly, Alberta Hunter, and Janis Joplin. The blues is not just one of the roots of jazz; it is the very stem of the plant.) This is not to say that other forms of music haven't influenced our poets, even those who write frequently about jazz. One need look no farther than Emilie Buchwald and Ruth Roston's excellent anthology *Mixed Voices: Contemporary Poems about Music* (Milkweed Editions, 1991), which contains poems inspired by several different kinds of music, to learn otherwise. As Gerald Barrax has said, in words that apply to many of

his fellow poets, "It is difficult, almost impossible, for me to isolate the influence of jazz on my work from the influence that *all* music has had on me, my work, my whole life." Nevertheless, it seems clear that jazz has had the most widespread influence on our poets, for poems dealing with jazz significantly outnumber those dealing with other forms of music. If we want to understand the poetry of our time fully, then, we must try to understand why it so often turns to jazz for inspiration.

One reason, perhaps, is that jazz expresses some essential characteristic of contemporary life better than other forms of music. In *Sitting In: Selected Writings on Jazz, Blues, and Related Topics* (University of Iowa, 1986), Hayden Carruth suggests as much, saying that the blues and jazz derived from it "are musically, concretely, functionally the best expression of existentialist feeling in the twentieth century. . . ." In his view, this kind of music is "a sensual experience of seeking and failing, that is, of inadequacy," and therefore captures the essence of "our present monstrous life." (James Baldwin puts it even more extremely in his "Sonny's Blues": "the man who creates the music is . . . dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air.") For Amiri Baraka, however, jazz is not an expression of twentieth-century alienation and angst but a joyful affirmation of ancient religious communion. In an essay in David N. Baker's *New Perspectives on Jazz* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), Baraka argues that jazz is a re-creation of African religious rites in which the soloist is a "priest," the "call-and-response form" is "a dialogue between the shepherd and his flock," and the "frenzy" of the music is "the method of communication with and possession by the spirit " — i.e., a kind of "speaking in tongues" in which God's presence in the musicians takes the form of "screams, shouts, moans, stomps, tearing the air wildly, staring pop-eyed into space, [and] quivering like a cosmic gong."

If Carruth's and Baraka's contradictory views of jazz

both seem at least partially accurate — and they do to me — it is not only because the word "jazz" accommodates so many approaches to music but also because both poets acknowledge what seems to me the crucial element of jazz: a sense of "seeking" for something not immediately available in our culture, or ourselves. Jazz is nothing if not a courageously exploratory music, both technically and emotionally. Sometimes the explorations result only in reinforcing the musician's sense of existential loneliness and uncertainty — as in much of the work of Miles Davis — and other times they lead, often after torturous struggles, to ecstatic communion with "a love supreme" — as in some of John Coltrane's compositions. Whatever the result of the explorations, jazz musicians commit themselves to the search. They do this most obviously through the technique least dispensable to jazz, improvisation, which by definition requires them to explore musical and emotional possibilities — and to do so each time they play a composition. Unlike classical music, which separates, to a large extent, the composition and performance of the music and therefore stresses product over process, jazz demands that the musician simultaneously compose and perform and thereby puts the focus on process. To the jazz musician, it is the process that is permanent and the product that is provisional — the next time the song is performed, it will be different. If it's not — if the musicians play their "improvisations" the same way twice — the music they produce will cease to explore and, therefore, cease to be jazz.

It's not surprising that contemporary poets, who by and large believe in and practice the ideal of "organic form," have found in jazz improvisation a model for the poetic process. As Jack Mueller says in his "statement of poetics" in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology:*

> Poetry, like jazz, obeys emerging form. The sound and shape is followed, joined, and carried

> forward. The music teaches the musician, the poem teaches the poet. In both cases, it is an active process of doing two things at once: thinking and singing, playing and solving, taking in and making up.

In short, many contemporary poets think of form as Gunther Schuller said jazz musicians do: "as a verb rather than a noun." Clearly, the exploratory impulse of jazz corresponds to a similar impulse in contemporary poetry. Whether one preceded the other or, as I suspect, they arose simultaneously out of the same cultural concerns and influences, jazz offers the purest example of organic form in contemporary art and, as such, has inspired even those poets who already shared its basic premises about form. The result, as Carruth has said, is that "Today the open-ended, random, improvised, indeterminate poem, whatever its length, concluding usually with inconclusion, is our norm."

Since organic form arises from within the artists rather than from without, it's also not surprising that both jazz and contemporary poetry tend to be intensely personal. By stressing improvisation and solos, jazz makes personality an essential element of the music. (Louis Armstrong even went so far as to *equate* jazz with the self, saying "Jazz is only what you are.") Contemporary poetry, even when it is not overtly "confessional," is similarly preoccupied with the self. As a result, jazz, as an example of the Romantic impulse toward self-expression, speaks to our poets in a way that even the most Romantic examples of classical music, for the time being at least, do not.

Poets have also been drawn to jazz because its techniques have suggested new ways to write poems. Whereas poems in the classical mode typically stress unity of rhythm, rhyme pattern, diction, and tone, poems inspired by jazz frequently use the literary equivalent of cross, or polyphonic, rhythms, eschew patterns

in favor of "surprise," and shift dramatically from one tone or one level of diction to another. The result, often, is an energetic, impatient, propulsive — and exploratory — kind of poetry. As Alice Fulton says in her statement of poetics in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology,* "I try to write a line with a pushy, impulsive edge, an energetic phrasing that propels the reader along. . . . The experiments of jazz music, including time changes, exchanges of dissonance with melody, and unconventional dynamics, have encouraged me to risk parallel inventions in my work." Feinstein and Komunyakaa call the result of such parallel inventions "jazz poetry."

The term "jazz poetry" may conjure up in many readers' minds the image of a black-garbed, goateed beatnik solemnly reciting his pseudo-poem to the accompaniment of a similarly garbed and goateed "cat" on a bongo drum. And indeed, as Feinstein and Komunyakaa acknowledge in the preface to their anthology, the poetry and jazz readings of the Fifties have done much to prejudice readers against jazz-related poems. A major purpose of their anthology, then, is to challenge that prejudice by presenting a wide range of poetic responses to jazz. In this, they have succeeded — and then some. The anthology contains 189 poems by 133 poets from both the U.S. and abroad, and virtually every major "school" of contemporary poetry is represented. There are, predictably, quite a few Beats and their Frisco Renaissance associates, among them Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ted Joans, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Rexroth, and Jack Spicer; and since jazz is a largely African-American music, there is also a considerable number of black poets, including Amiri Baraka, Sterling A. Brown, Michael Harper, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Etheridge Knight, Ishmael Reed, Sonia Sanchez, and Al Young. But the book also includes Black Mountaineers (Paul Blackburn, Robert Creeley), New York Poets (Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara), L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets (Clark Coolidge), and such Formalists and Neo-Formalists as Dana Gioia,

Marilyn Hacker, Philip Larkin, and Vassar Miller. More importantly, the anthology includes many exceptional poets — young, old, and in between — who never enrolled in anybody's "school" but their own: Marvin Bell, Hayden Carruth, Fred Chappell, John Engels, Garrett Hongo, Lynda Hull, Philip Levine, Larry Levis, William Matthews, Robert Pinsky, Wallace Stevens, David Wojahn, Robert Wrigley, and others.

As these lists of authors should suggest, the poetic approaches in the anthology range from the traditionally formal to the experimentally improvisational. Alice Fulton's "You Can't Rhumboogie in a Ball and Chain," in which she manages to rhumboogie despite the ball and chain of the sestina form, is an example of the former. A portrait of Janis Joplin, it begins:

> You called the blues' loose black belly lover
> and in Port Arthur they called you pig-face.
> The way you chugged booze straight, without a
> glass,
> your brass-assed language, slingbacks with jeweled
> heel,
> proclaimed you no kin to their muzzled blood.
> No chiclet-toothed Baptist boyfriend for you.
>
> Strung-out, street hustling showed men wouldn't
> buy you.
> Once you clung to the legs of a lover,
> let him drag you till your knees turned to blood,
> mouth hardened to a thin scar on your face,
> cracked under songs, screams, never left to heal.
> Little Girl Blue, soul pressed against the glass.
>
> That voice rasping like you'd guzzled fiber-glass,
> stronger than the four armed men behind you.
> But a pale horse lured you, docile, to heel:
> warm snow flanks pillowed you like a lover.
> Men feared the black holes in your body and face,

knew what they put in would return as blood.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have Richard Kostelanetz's "STRINGFOUR," an example of jazz poetry at its most experimental. The poem, which was improvised to jazz, consists of words strung together without spacing, punctuation, or division into lines, as the following excerpt reveals:

Stringfourselvestrymandolingerbillowbrowboatmealtimetablemishapelessencephalogrampagentangleefulcrumpushoverballerinadvertenthralligatoreadorablessingletonsilverwarehouselesssayist . . .

The poems in the anthology also range widely in subject matter, taking us on a tour through jazz history, from the early blues of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. Inevitably, major figures such as Duke Ellington (the subject of six poems), Charlie Parker (nine), Thelonious Monk (ten), and John Coltrane (twelve) dominate the anthology, but even unknown musicians, be they acquaintances of the poet (as in Jon C. Tribble's "Anaximander Lewis") or people who play on street corners for donations (as in Sascha Feinstein's "Buying Wine"), get their due. And, often, the poems step beyond jazz and jazz musicians to consider such issues as race relations, politics, religion, and love. There have been other collections of jazz-related poems before — most notably, perhaps, Rosey E. Pool's *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes* (Hand and Flower Press, 1962) and Jim Stephens and Warren Woessner's *Bright Moments: A Collection of Jazz Poetry* (Abraxas, 1980) — but Feinstein and Komunyakaa's anthology is, so far, the only one broad and inclusive enough to be considered essential.

As we might expect, many of the poems here pay tribute to jazz musicians. One of the first tributes is Fred Chappell's homage to Louis Armstrong, "The Highest Wind That Ever Blew." With its shifting, propulsive rhythms, the surprising leaps from one level of diction to another, and, above all, its hard bop energy, it's a good example not only of the anthology's tendency toward poems of homage but also of the "parallel inventions" Alice Fulton speaks of:

> *What's whiskey without the jazz?*
> Nothin but gutache, nothin to look back on.
> Whiskey alone don't fill you that honeysuckle
> Sunlight in your vein, it ain't the gin
> That makes you shine. It's the man in the cyclone
> of flame
> Who keeps on saying *Yes* with a note that would
> light
> Up the Ice Ages. He's the silver sunrise
> In the pit of the body, dawnwind jiving the trees.

But the poets here do more than pay homage to jazz masters: more often than not, they define the terms of musicians' inspiration on them and their work. Robert Hayden's moving tribute to Bessie Smith, "Homage to the Empress of the Blue," is a particularly good example of this. It concludes:

> Because grey laths began somewhere to show from
> underneath
> torn hurdygurdy lithographs of dollfaced in heaven;
> and because there were those who feared alarming
> fists of snow
> on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of
> statistics,

She came out on the stage in ostrich feathers,
beaded satin,
and shone that smile on us and sang.

Often the poems of homage take the form of elegies. One of the finest, Frank O'Hara's justly famous "The Day Lady Died," ends with an image that suggests how he, like the other elegists in the book, "died" in a way when he learned of the death of a great jazz artist. Seeing Billie Holiday's photo on a copy of the *New York Post,* O'Hara remembers

leaning on the John door in the FIVE SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped
breathing

Many of the other elegies in the anthology "take our breath away" in a similar way. Among the most impressive are Elton Glaser's "Elegy for Professor Longhair," Yusef Komunyakaa's "Elegy for Thelonious," and William Matthews' "Coleman Hawkins (d. 1969), RIP." Matthews has written many exceptional poems about jazz, and his elegy for Hawkins reveals the graceful fusion of intelligence and emotion characteristic of his work. The poem opens:

As if that sax
were made of bone wrenched from his wrist
he urged through it dank music
of his breath. When he blew ballads
you knew one use of force:
withholding it.

As Matthews' poem suggests, many of the poems in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* describe performances, and describe them well. These poems range from those that focus on the *significance* of performance, as in "Coleman Hawkins," to those that try to capture the rhythms and feel of the jazz, to those that try to *become* jazz. Generally speaking, the poems that focus on the meaning of a performance to the performer or a listener (for example, Clarence Major's "Un Poco Loco," which describes a performance by Bud Powell from Powell's perspective, and Matthews' "Bud Powell, Paris, 1959," which approaches the same subject from the point of view of someone in the audience) are the most successful because they allow the poem to do what language can and music can't: *think*. The more the poem tries to re-create the performance, the less it has to say — and the more it invites an inevitably unfavorable comparison with the music it describes. William Carlos Williams' "Ol' Bunk's Band" (which Carruth has called "the worst poem Dr. Williams ever wrote") is a good example of this weakness, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> . . . Stand up, stand up! the
> slap of a bass-string.
> Pick, ping! The horn, the
> hollow horn
> long drawn out, a hound-deep
> tone —
> Choking, choking! while the
> treble reed
> races — alone, ripples, screams
> slow to fast —
> to second to first! . . .

Williams' poem may do an adequate job of conveying the excitement of Bunk Johnson's music, but since

words cannot do more than *suggest* the rhythmic and sonic complexity of music, the poem succeeds mostly in making us want to abandon it and go listen to Bunk's band instead. (John Montgomery seems to recognize the impossibility of capturing music in words; he interrupts his "Snowmelt from Yesteryears" twice to print several bars of music.) What's more, because the poem seems to have little purpose beyond the re-creation of music, it — and poems like it — inevitably seems to be something of an "exercise," the literary equivalent of playing scales.

But Williams' poem only hints at the extent to which some of the poets in the anthology have gone to recreate music. In "Playing the Invisible Saxophone *en el Combo de las Estrellas,*" Harryette Mullen describes the impulse that drives many of these poems:

> One of these days I'm gonna write a real
> performance poem.
> A poem that can grab the microphone and sing
> till voice becomes music . . .

A number of poems contain occasional, and therefore relatively unobstrusive, passages in which "voice becomes music." In "Cabaret," for example, Sterling A. Brown interrupts his narrative at a strategic point with the line "Bee — dap — ee — DOOP, dee — ba — dee — BOOP," and in "Cecil Taylor," Joe Johnson weaves variations of "conga li bombo gri gri / bombo canga li bombo" through his poem just as Taylor would weave variations of a musical phrase through an improvisation. But in longer doses, such "scat-writing" only serves to call attention to poetry's relative lack of expressiveness compared to music, as this rather inert passage from Amiri Baraka's "AM/TRAK" suggests:

duh duh-duh duh-duh duh
duh duh
duh duh-duh duh-duh-duh
duh duh
duh duh-duh duh-duh duh
duh duh
duh Duuuuuuuuuhhhhhh

In attempting to re-create music, scat-writing fails as poetry and becomes, at its worst, as in Sonia Sanchez's "a/coltrane/poem," little more than creative typewriting.

As I see it, poems that "translate" music into words are inevitably more successful than those that attempt to transform words into music by deconstructing them into mere sounds. Kenneth Rexroth's "Written to Music," for example, translates some of Ornette Coleman's free jazz into the random images it provokes in him. The result is a kind of associative, semi-surreal, "program music"-in-reverse, as this excerpt indicates:

then the waning
moon in young leaves
do you think of the old wounds
it is like Mykenai
with those terrible
dead kings with gold foil
over their faces
no animal or vegetable
anywhere
another landscape
with some people in a boat
sewn with needles or with thread
birds with dry human voices

William Tremblay's "Song for Jeannie" was also written

to music — Monk's "'Round Midnight" — but unlike Rexroth's poem, it meditates on a memory the music triggers. The song's mood of "tenderness/& regret" leads him to remember, tenderly and with regret, a woman from his past:

> & remember how you hugged me & said you loved
> me
> when you knew I thought you insane,
>
> & that's the shiv in my spine . . .

Whether the poems written to music take the associative tack of Rexroth or the meditative one of Tremblay, because they translate music into words they succeed better as poems than those that try to transform words into music. Moreover, their indirect approach paradoxically brings them closer to capturing the feeling of jazz than the poems that attempt direct imitation.

As Trembley's poem suggests, many of the poems in the anthology treat jazz not so much as a subject but as a means by which to explore a relationship. The focus in these poems is not on the technical matters of describing or imitating jazz; rather, it's on *people,* and what jazz can tell us about ourselves. Among the fine poems in this category are George Barlow's "In My Father's House," Claire Collett's "Midsummer," and Jan Selving's "Dancing to Ellington," all of which use jazz to parse their speakers' relationships with their fathers; Lynda Hull's "Hollywood Jazz," Robert Pinsky's "History of My Heart," Ira Sadoff's "At the Half-Note Cafe," and Aleda Shirley's "Ellington Indigos," which use jazz to examine their speakers' relationships with lovers, real and imagined; and Rod Jellema's "Stop-time" and Jon C. Tribble's "Anaximander Lewis," in which jazz is the proving (or, as the case may be, *failing*) ground for the relationship between a white and a black. David Wojahn's poignant "Satin Doll" is one of the best ex-

amples of this type of jazz poetry. As Wojahn says in his statement of poetics at the end of the anthology, "The poem is not *about* Ellington, nor is it about the song; the poem is instead meant to seem to travel back in time, to offer a kind of consolation to a figure very much like my aunt, who suffered more than her fair share of human tragedy at one point in her life." The song "Satin Doll" is what allows the speaker to express, and exorcise, his compassion for his aunt:

> But now it's raining on the first spring night
> of 1947, six years to my birth,
> and I don't want to leave her here. I want
> the kitchen radio to murmur
>
> some slithering big band and "Satin Doll"
> from the Casablanca ballroom, high in Chicago's
> clouds.
> I want her to see the women floating
> In their taffeta, chilly red corsages from
>
> their pencil-mustached men, ivory tuxedos, lotion,
> and bay rum. She can almost touch them now.
> Duke Ellington
> rises from the sprawling Steinway as the three
> trombones begin their solo, horns glittering
>
> under the spinning globe of mirrors. And now
> she's dancing, isn't she? Until the cupboards shake,
> until the window, already trembling with rain,
> hums its vibrato, and she's holding herself in her
> arms
>
> so tightly she can feel the veins
> in her shoulders throb to their separate music,
> until this is a song she can dance with too,
> and I can let her go.

Given the wide range of voices and aesthetics Feinstein and Komunyakaa have gathered together, it's inevitable that readers will dislike some of the poems. For my taste, the anthology contains too many poems written out of the Beat aesthetic. All too often, these poems suffer from a "hipper-than-thou" attitude and the pseudo-profundity that attitude inspires ("Life is a saxophone played by death," Bob Kaufman tells us). And, of course, there are the usual strained metaphors, the abstractions yoked to concrete images like U-Haul trailers, the hyperbolic claims of spiritual enlightenment, and the word "angel," without which, it seems, no self-respecting Beat can write a poem. Here's a typical passage from Kaufman's "Bagel Shop Jazz":

> . . . Love tinted, beat angels,
> Doomed to see their coffee dreams
> Crushed on the floors of time,
> As they fling their arrow legs
> To the heavens,
> Losing their doubts in the beat.

Despite all their talk of iconoclasm and originality, the Beats have produced an astonishingly homogenous poetry. With few exceptions, they seem to be trying desperately to *conform,* to reveal, through their use of argot and the literary equivalent of secret handshakes, their inclusion in the club. As a result, their poems are among the most mannered in the anthology, and their manner has long since begun to seem "dated." Even the most recent Beat poems seem far more dated than such artful and unmannered poems as Langston Hughes' "Weary Blues," which appeared the year Allen Ginsberg was born. The Beats deserve credit for many things — not the least of which is calling our attention to jazz — but theirs are, generally speaking, the weakest contributions to *The Jazz Poetry Anthology.*

I also found myself tiring of those poems, by Beat and non-Beat alike, that relied excessively on such mannerisms as abbreviations ("yr," "wd," "cld," "w."), slashes ("the many/solos of the mind/spirit," "I can use/the hour you give me"), non-dialectal misspellings ("u," "pickt," "magick"), eclectic use of upper- and lower-case letters ("Trane stood and dug Crazy monk's shit," "i live tyranny down"), and downright corny word play ("ASS/RISTOCRATS," "eargasm"). These techniques may once have been fresh and innovative, but now they're nothing more than clichés. Like an improvisation written out in advance, they only echo a past originality.

But despite these weaknesses, *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* deserves our praise and gratitude, for Feinstein and Komunyakaa have gathered into one volume many poems as extraordinary as the music and musicians that inspired them. The great pianist Bill Evans once said that jazz can't be described in words because "it's feeling" and "words are the children of reason and, therefore, can't explain it." True: no poem (much less this review) can explain, or even represent in aural terms, the music we call jazz. But *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* contains many poems in which the children of reason come exhilaratingly close to translating the glossolalia of jazz into words. In them we feel what Feinstein and Komunyakaa call "the swing, the sex, the dance, the violence, the laughter, the brutal rhythms and the tender sway of jazz," and when we return to the music that inspired them, as we should, we do so with new ears. And for that, as for much else, this fine book deserves not only applause but a standing ovation.