

POETRY AND JAZZ

“Folks who dislike poetry and jazz have one beat minds” Laurie Lee

Salvation March. Michael Garrick Quintet, Poetry and Jazz in Concert..Adrian Mitchell reading ‘Nostalgia, now threepence off’

Marriages of poetry and music are not new. Modern songs have lyrics which may or may not be poetic (a theme for another evening) but classical song frequently consisted of settings of poetry – eg the many settings of Shakespeare sonnets through the centuries, German Lieder etc. Spoken poetry to a musical background, or intertwined with music is not new either. Examples from the past include The Façade Suite which was a collaboration between Edith Sitwell and William Walton.

More recent music and poetry collaborations include the ‘Barrow Poets’ and ‘Doggerel Bank’ in the 60s/70s and there is a direct link to the Poetry and Jazz movement of that time through Heather Kay, one of the Barrow Poets. More of that later.

Specific jazz and poetry links can be thought of in a number of ways

- Lyrics eg [Time Remembered \(words by Mike Garrick, music by Bill Evans, sung by Nette Robinson with Mike Garrick on piano, from ‘Remembered Time’\)](#)
- vocalese – ‘when a jazz vocalist takes a jazz composition or an important jazz solo from the vast jazz repertoire, and they write words to perform to it. Vocalese jazz is truly an underrated art form. It requires real thought and attention.’ Eg Moody’s Mood for Love
- settings of poems
- instrumental pieces inspired by poetry (eg Under Milk Wood)
- jazz and poetry feeding off each other in performance (eg Blues for the Lonely which we’ll hear later)

Though the UK Poetry and Jazz movement (which we will explore shortly) seemed to burn itself out, it left a legacy of an openness to experiment and a lasting interest among those involved. And small scale poetry jazz fusions can still be found – eg Nightdiver, the Christine Bousfield group in Bradford.

The US

Our focus tonight is UK centric but jazz came out of the US so it’s only right to look at the experience there too. Here is American poet Kenneth Rexroth writing in 1958...

“Why is jazz poetry? Jazz vocalists, especially white vocalists and especially in the idiom of the most advanced jazz, are not very common. Most Negro singers stay pretty close to the blues, and there is more to modern jazz than blues. Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, there are not many singers whom all schools of jazz find congenial. Curiously enough, the poet reciting, if he knows what he is doing, seems to “swing” to the satisfaction of many musicians in a way that too few singers do. I think it is wrong to put down all popular ballad lyrics as trivial; some of them are considerable poetry in their own right, but certainly most are

intellectually far beneath the musical world of modern jazz, and far less honest. The best jazz is above all characterized by its absolute emotional honesty. This leaves us with the words of the best blues and Negro folksong, often very great poetry indeed, but still a limited aspect of experience, and by no means everything, translated into words, that modern jazz has to say. In other words, poetry gives jazz a richer verbal content, reinforces and expands its musical meaning and, at the same time, provides material of the greatest flexibility.”

Rexroth was worried that something which could become a serious marriage could be seen as a fad and fade away. But the flirtation had been going on a long time – in the 20s Hart Crane sought to write poetry to the rhythms of jazz while Carl Sandburg wrote about listening to Jazz and Langston Hughes used the blues form extensively.

The Weary Blues

by Langston Hughes

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 . . .
 He did a lazy sway . . .
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.

The Beats focussed heavily on poetry and jazz combinations and the combination became so identified with the Beats that it has been written off as a fad - but poetry about jazz entered the mainstream and Google searches throw up a number of poetry and jazz combinations – eg the Lou Malandra Trio.

And then there's Gil Scott Heron who links the whole movement to rap and other spoken word/music combinations. More of him later.

The UK

The work of Michael Garrick helps to illustrate a number of the areas identified. Because he is one of the country's leading jazz educators I have been fortunate enough to spend some time with him. He is an inspirational player, composer and band leader and also a lyricist and theorist so a good authority. He was one of the leading lights of the UK Jazz and Poetry movement in the 60s as this extract from his autobiography ('Dusk Fire – Jazz in English Hands' Springdale Publications 2010) shows.

"Jazz and Voices was presented to a capacity audience (Festival Hall, Waterloo Room) on 6th June 1961 with the Quartet, the Johnny Scott Quintet... and speakers from the University of London led by Heather Black (nee Kay, of the Barrow Poets). I was greeted at the back by Jeremy Robson. By coincidence, he had organised a similar concert a week earlier with poets rather than speakers. He asked if I could provide the music for a tour being organised by playwright Arnold Wesker whereby, under the aegis of the TUC Resolution 42, performing arts would be taken to factory environs. So began a collaboration that endured for the next decade as *Poetry and Jazz in concert*.

The tour began at the Belgrave Theatre, Coventry with a line up of Dannie Abse, Laurie Lee, Spike Milligan, Adrian Mitchell, Jeremy Robson and the Quartet, with Shake Keane on trumpet and flugelhorn, bassist Johnny Taylor, and Colin Barnes on drums....A little later Jeremy was able to extend the budget so we could also have Joe Harriott – at £10 a gig the money was good. Many musicians were derisory about poetry and jazz but Shake and Joe had a natural feeling for what was going on and a willingness to be involved in something which audiences found novel and fresh"

[Blues for the lonely – Jeremy Robson and the Michael Garrick Quintet from Poetry and Jazz in Concert](#)

Over the next few years, under Robson's direction, *Poetry and Jazz in Concert* travelled the country with 250+ concerts in a range of venues, regional tv and Radio 3 broadcasts. LPs were issued. Other poets became involved. Some read with Jazz, others read solo with jazz before and after their readings. The final roll call included, besides those already mentioned, Thomas Blackburn, Edwin Brock, Pete Brown, Alan Brownjohn, Charles Causely, Michael Hamburger, John Heath-Stubbs, Douglas Hill, Anselm Hollo, Ted Hughes, Bernard Kops, Christopher Logue, Dom Moraes, Lydia Pasternak, Peter Porter, Vernon Scannell, John Smith, Stevie Smith and Nathaniel Tarn. John Smith and Jeremy Robson wrote specifically for the project.

As the 60s drew to a close, Jeremy Robson launched Robson Books and his energies were pulled in that direction. Without his lead, the project came to an end and Garrick switched his attention to Jazz Praise and collaborations with choirs and the jazz organ. One of the results of this was *'Mr Smiths Apocalypse'* a jazz cantata from which *I will speak* is an extract.

['I will speak' from Mr Smiths Apocalypse by Garrick/Smith](#)

Gil Scott Heron

In focussing on mainstream jazz (and Garrick is mainstream even if he is very English and quirky) there is a danger of overlooking more radical elements, so to put that right we will finish by looking at Gil Scott Heron. To quote Wikipedia..

Gil Scott-Heron (born April 1, 1949) is an [American poet, musician,](#) and [author](#) known primarily for his late 1970s and early 1980s work as a [spoken word](#) performer and his collaborative [soul](#) works with musician [Brian Jackson](#). His collaborative efforts with Jackson featured a musical fusion of jazz, blues and soul music, as well as lyrical content concerning social and political issues of the time, delivered in both [rapping](#) and [melismatic](#) vocal styles by Scott-Heron. The music of these albums, most notably *Pieces of a Man* and *Winter in America* in the early 1970s, influenced and helped engender later African-American music genres such as [hip hop](#) and [neo soul](#). Scott-Heron's recording work is often associated with [black militant](#) activism and has received much critical acclaim for one of his most well-known compositions "[The Revolution Will Not Be Televised](#)". On his influence, [Allmusic](#) wrote "Scott-Heron's unique proto-rap style influenced a generation of hip-hop artists".^[1]

[The revolution will not be televised from Ghetto Style, Gil Scott Heron](#)

To demonstrate how poetry and jazz can work from the bottom up, I recorded a backing track (blues), added a blues based poem (Power Blues), then added a tenor and then an alto sax improvisation around the reading. An interesting exercise, multi functioning giving some challenges, but it shows that it's something interesting to explore as a group

[Power Blues by Tony Earnshaw](#)

.... And to finish off, we mentioned music inspired by poetry but haven't played any so here is an extract from the original 1965 recording of Stan Tracy's Under Milk Wood suite - [Starless and Bible Black](#)

Discography

Poetry and Jazz in Concert Dannie Abse, Laurie Lee, Adrian Mitchell Jeremy Robson with the Michael Garrick Quintet (remastered *Vocalian 2006*)

Remembered Time – Nette Robinson sings with Michael Garrick (*Jazz Academy Records 2010*)

Epiphany/Mr Smiths Apocalypse – Garrick's Fairground (*remastered. Vocalion 2007*)

Ghetto Style Gil Scott Heron (*BMG Records*)

Under Milk Wood – the Stan Tracey Quartet (Stan tracey , piano; Bobbt=y Wellins, tenor sax; Jeff Clyne, double bass; Jackie Dougan, drums)
(*Resteamed2010*)