

Monk, Bird, 'Trane, and Miles: Jazz in the English Language Arts Program

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My mother tells me she dreamed
of John Coltrane, a young Trane
playing his music with such joy
and contained energy and rage
she could not hold back her tears. . . .
(Levine, 1992, p. 63)

'Trane. Jazz. Satchmo. Duke. Lady Day. Bird. Ella. Miles. Taking the A Train. Taking 5. Taking Giant Steps. Taking a ride with Wynton Marsalis on Harriet Tubman's railroad. Taking John Coltrane's saxophone to a fire-bombed church in Alabama and mourning over the dead bodies of children. Taking improvisation to new insights and expressions. Taking poetry: taking Ntozake Shange and Langston Hughes. Taking the music sorrowful and joyful: winter ice on the face and peppered summer on the lips. Taking Jazz. Jazz.

This essay is about jazz and its natural connection to literature and literacy education. It is about an art form that is uniquely American, but can be heard in small clubs far above the arctic circle, in remote regions of Africa, and in cities throughout the world. My primary purpose is to explore why jazz and books about jazz deserve a respected place in the English Language Arts curriculum. Accordingly, I have divided this essay into four main parts. First, I discuss why I believe jazz is important for English Language Arts education. Second, I briefly describe some contemporary literature for young adults that I and others have found to be engaging. Third, I present some general strategies for incorporating the music and literature into the English Language Arts program. And, fourth, I explore in more detail one specific strategy and provide some examples of students' responses.

Why Jazz?

First, although some jazz historians might debate specifics, almost all agree that jazz is *the* uniquely American art form which originated in the southern part of the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is rooted in African-American experiences and their related musical expressions, for example, blues, spirituals, work songs, brass band marches, ragtime tunes, minstrel show music, and West African and West Indian rhythmic patterns and drum music. Moreover, certain European melodic patterns can also be

found in the roots of jazz (Mitchell, 1992).

Although grounded in America and African-American experiences, jazz has spread during the last century beyond nationality, race, and class. This truly American music has been embraced by people around the globe. Thus, for Americans, it is an important part of our cultural heritage, as important, I maintain, as any other literary or artistic "canon." For students and people from other countries, jazz offers an important lens through which they might explore aspects of America, a more important lens, I believe, than, say, bluegrass music, rap, or rock and roll. George Economou (cited in Hutchinson & Suhor, 1996, p. 85) says: "To grow up in America is to grow up with the sound of jazz nurturing our souls along with our speech and our oceans, winds, waters, and birds. Jazz is our land's musical nature."

Second, jazz is fun and can move the spirit. Langston Hughes says that jazz is the sound of surprise, is a "playing *with* music, for fun" (Hughes, 1982, p. 40); it helps keep us intellectually and emotionally alive. Our reactions to it are often as unpredictable as the music itself. Furthermore, the poet William Matthews maintains that jazz, like poetry,

is "about what it feels like to be whole" (Komunyakaa & Matthews, 1992, p. 654).

Thus, third, and especially for English educators, jazz is a natural rhythmic complement to poetry. "Jazz seeps into words," according to Langston Hughes (cited in Hutchinson & Suhor, 1996, p. 85). Poetry readings accompanied by or to jazz have a rich tradition in the United States, from the Beat readings in the 1950s to the poetry slams held around the country today. Moreover, some educators too have recognized the possibilities of making this jazz and poetry connection with their students (Hutchinson & Suhor, 1996).

Fourth, jazz reflects America's pluralistic vitality and can provide us with a valuable metaphor for democracy. Improvisation is the essence of jazz. A quartet, for example, might open a number by clearly stating a theme, but then each member improvises or plays off that theme; finally, all of the musicians together return to the original statement at the end of the piece. Thus, jazz as metaphor can show us how we can be ourselves, play our own variations on a piece of music, while at the same time remain connected to the larger band, the greater community.

Finally, jazz also offers a metaphor for reading and teach-

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ing. The improvisational process in jazz involves rethinking and reinventing previously held ideas. And that's what critical reading at its best is about: rethinking, reconsidering, re-visioning, and being open to unexpected flashes of insight from the text, oneself, and others. Similarly, English educators know that:

Expert teaching is much closer to *improvising* over "changes" than rendering an accurate reading of a score (a "lesson plan"). A teacher, like an excellent jazz improviser, is well prepared to deal with moment-to-moment problems and opportunities encountered on the fly. (Elliott, 1992, p. 12)

Some Books about Jazz

In this section I briefly describe a handful of books about jazz that I have found to be vital with students and teachers. (There is a growing body of picture and chapter books appropriate for children, adolescents, and adults, and I encourage interested readers to explore them.) I have grouped the books into the following categories (although most of them cross categories): Jazz, Poetry, and Art; Biographies of Some Famous Jazz Musicians; History of Jazz; and Jazz and Issues of Race and Social Change.

Jazz, Poetry, and Art

i see the rhythm (1998), with text by Toyomi Igus and paintings by Michele Wood, chronicles poetically the history, mood, and movement of African-American music. This Coretta Scott King Award winning picture book includes major sections on jazz, for example: Swing, Jazz Women, Cool Jazz, and others. The brief definitions, time lines, expressive paintings, and poetry ("I see the rhythm of be bop,/ the music of those jazz hipsters/who refuse to play the dance rhythms of swing. . .," p. 19) make this an especially fine book for middle school and high school students and teachers.

Ntozake Shange's lyrical poem, *i live in music* (1994), is complemented with twenty-one paintings by the noted American artist Romare Bearden. Together the poet and painter pay tribute to the language of music and the magical, often mystical, rhythms that bring people together. This is a beautiful book that belongs in the library of anyone who cares about poetry, visual art, and jazz:

. . . sound
falls round me like rain on other folks
saxophones wet my face
cold as winter in st. louis
hot like peppers i rub on my lips
thinkin they waz lilies. . . .

Biographies of Some Famous Jazz Musicians

There are many different biographies of jazz musicians, including those for young children; an example is Andrea Davis Pinkney's Coretta Scott King Award winning *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (1998). There are also numerous collective and individual biographies for adults, such as Lewis Porter's *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (1998). Here I want to highlight a single book that is full of stunning artwork and is informative and accessible to secondary students and teachers alike, especially those with little or no background in jazz: *Jazz: My Music, My People* (1994) by Morgan Monceaux introduces the reader to many

of the seminal figures in jazz from its earliest years, for example, the trumpeter Buddy Bolden, to the modern era, for example, with the jazz singers Lena Horne and Johnnetta. Monceaux typically provides a one page biography of each artist and complements it with one or two expressive paintings that literally and symbolically capture the musician's life and style.

Monceaux divides the biographies into three eras: "The Early Years: Shaping Jazz"; "The Swing Years: Dance Music"; and "Bebop and Modern Jazz: What Comes Next?" The musicians included range from Louis Armstrong to Billie Holiday to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. The Coltrane entry, for example, states that "Coltrane is often looked on as a prophet in jazz, and sometimes it's hard to separate myth from fact." However, Monceaux highlights Coltrane's continuing influence: "An obsessive, driving figure, he has inspired rock musicians as well as those working with the jazz tradition" (p.57).

With its chronological arrangement and glossary of musical terms associated with jazz, this collection of brief biographies and striking paintings is a fine introduction to the artists who have helped to create the music we know as jazz. It surely will inspire the reader to go out and listen to some of the music.

History of Jazz

There are several excellent histories of jazz for teachers and more able student readers who become especially interested in the topic. Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz* (1997) is a standard and more scholarly work, while Ward and Burns' accompanying volume, *Jazz: A History of America's Music* (2000), to the 10-part television series is a popular work with over 500 photographs. However, there are various shorter histories that will introduce both teachers and students of different reading abilities to the development of jazz.

The poet and jazz aficionado Langston Hughes wrote *The First Book of Jazz* (1982) which is a brief introduction that focuses on the historical development of jazz up to around 1950 and defines such key elements of jazz as "improvisation," "syncopation," "riff," and so forth. This short illustrated book is accessible to less-than-skilled readers.

Giuseppe Vigna's *Jazz and Its History* (1999) chronicles the development of jazz from its origins to the present day. It highlights various artists, styles, and the connections between jazz and larger social and historical movements, for example, jazz during WWII and the rise of "Free Jazz" during the Civil Rights struggles in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. It is a beautifully-illustrated book with both drawings and photographs, and the short two-page entries, for example, "Jam Sessions," "Bebop," and "A Modern Art Form," make it an engaging reading experience for all students and teachers.

Jazz: An American Saga (1997) by the noted jazz critic and novelist James Lincoln Collier is a short (104 pages) book which examines the origins of jazz, its variety, and the achievements of individual artists. Collier's discussion of what improvisation is all about in his chapter titled "Making It Up as You Go Along" is one of the clearest I've encountered:

It is the same when you are standing around at the bus stop talking with some friends. You have not come there with a

prepared speech. Instead, you “improvise” your conversations as you go along, responding to what others are saying, adding things that pop into your head, and so forth. But once again, you are prepared: you understand English, know the foibles of the teacher the gossip is about, are familiar with the hot musical groups the talk turns to. (pp. 88-89)

If I had to recommend one history for the secondary classroom it would be Gene Seymour’s *Jazz: The Great American Art* (1995). This book highlights major artists and jazz in its many manifestations, discussing how the music reflects the experiences of African-Americans. With its black-and-white photographs, glossary of terms, recommended lists of books, videos, and recordings, and vivid, evocative writing style (“It was as if, during these final years, there was a battle between [Billie] Holiday’s interpretive imagination and mortality’s icy grip. Mortality scored a victory in the end. But not before Holiday got in a few sharp blows of her own,” p. 64), Seymour’s book is both enlightening and accessible to a reader with little or no background in jazz.

Jazz and Issues of Race and Social Change

Jazz offers students and teachers a unique lens through which to examine the struggles of African-Americans in the United States. I personally have found this aspect of jazz to be most powerful, whether exploring the music and topic with young adults or university students, both in the United States and abroad. Here are some musical examples that capture this connection between jazz and the experiences of African-Americans. (Note: all of the particular jazz pieces I mention below can be found on [often many] different recordings by the particular artists; thus, the reader should browse an artist’s recordings or inquire at a music store with knowledgeable employees to locate a CD or audio tape with the specific recording on it.)

Louis Armstrong asks in his recording of “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” a question that many African-Americans continue to ask in various ways. John Coltrane in his “Song of the Underground Railroad” and Wynton Marsalis in his “Harriet Tubman” celebrate the heroic struggles against slavery. Charles Mingus in “Fables of Faubus” ridicules the governor of Arkansas who used the National Guard to block Black students from entering a Little Rock high school in the late-1950s. John Coltrane mourns the bombing death of little girls in a Birmingham church in his almost-unbearably sad “Alabama.” And Max Roach in his “We Insist! Freedom Now Suite” captures the Black Power consciousness of the 1960s.

Perhaps the most powerful and disturbing work is Billie Holiday’s recording of “Strange Fruit,” a tale of lynching in the American south. Holiday’s lament of these terrible lyrics is unnerving: “Southern trees bear strange fruit,/. . . Pastoral scene of the gallant south,/The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth. . . .” David Margolick’s *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (2001) tells the history and impact of this song written by a White Jewish schoolteacher.

Some General Strategies

Jazz and books about jazz can easily be incorporated into the English Language Arts program and indeed across the whole curriculum. From my experience, team teaching and collaborative efforts between English and music teachers

produce the most exciting projects. Some obvious strategies which I and others have used include the following:

- Listen to jazz. Simply bring into the classroom various jazz recordings that reflect different eras and styles. You and your students will find those that you like. Use the discographies in Collier (1997), Seymour (1995), Vigna (1999), and Ward & Burns (2000) as beginning sources to explore.
- View selected segments of Ken Burns’ 10-part, 20 hour PBS series on jazz: *Jazz: A History of America’s Music*. It is available for purchase, or teachers may copy it from broadcast and use it legally for up to one year in the classroom.
- Explore with your students the web site for Burns’ *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* at <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>. It will connect you to other jazz sites, teacher resources and lesson plans (some first-rate), biographies of jazz artists, discographies, and a variety of other jazz-related things. This is a must site to check out.
- View Wynton Marsalis’ four VHS tapes in which he introduces children and adults to different aspects of jazz, for example, rhythm, improvisation, and so forth. Then read and listen to the accompanying book (Marsalis, 1995) and audio CD that are based on the television series.
- Read the books that I have described above and others. My suggestions are only a beginning. Use the books to investigate the biographies of particular musicians and as entrees into studies of particular historical periods and events.
- Create visual responses to the music listened to, books read, and poetry performed in class. Various artistic styles are displayed in the books I’ve discussed above. *i see the rhythm* (1998), *Jazz: My Music, My People* (1994), and *i live in music* (1994) offer students many intriguing options.
- Read and perform poetry backed by jazz music. You will be able to find appropriate jazz pieces to complement any poetry; however, you might want to highlight poems about jazz or those that have been influenced by jazz. Three fine edited collections are: Lange & Mackey’s *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (1993); Feinstein & Komunyakaa’s *Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991); and Feinstein & Komunyakaa’s *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology (The Jazz Poetry Anthology, Vol. 2)* (1996).

Writing Poetry to Jazz

Certainly the most enjoyable and linguistically-playful activity in which I’ve engaged students is poetry writing to jazz music, and this has been viable with both first and second language learners. I’ll briefly describe below some specific writing activities I used with students and teachers while I was on a Fulbright Scholarship to Norway during the 1999–2000 school year. All of the students with whom I worked, both at the secondary and college levels, had learned or were learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Form Poetry

Students who have little experience writing poetry usually find different kinds of form poems to be fun and easy to

write. Three that I found especially viable in Norway were: cinquain poems, alphabet poems, and color poems. I'll briefly describe each.

A *cinquain* is a 5-line poem that typically follows the following format.

- First line: one word that names the subject of the poem
- Second line: two words describing the first line
- Third line: three "ing" or action words
- Fourth line: four years that express a feeling about the subject
- Fifth line: a synonym for the first line

Here is a typical jazz cinquain written by *Ungdomsskole*, or lower secondary (grades 8 – 10), students in Norway:

Jazz
Cool, hot
Soloing riffing wailing
We want to dance
"Bird"

Alphabet or *acrostic* poems similarly are easy to write:

Jazz
Alto
Zesty
Zip

These can be extended in a variety of ways, for example, as some students did:

Jazz, jumping, jamming, (in a) joint
and
Zah, zah, zah-do, zah-be
as in scat singing.

Color poems encourage students to capture the color essence they see and feel when listening to different pieces of jazz. I used as catalysts such things as: "Hotter than a burning stick" (for the color red); and "Sweet like summer honey" (for yellow). This led to a blue poem such as:

Blue as an early-evening sky
Blue when I feel bad
Blue when I feel glad
Blue like my best friend's eyes

More Open Poetry

Form poetry by its nature is relatively easy to write; however, as present readers know, it is also limited in its development, imagery, and language play. The best poetry written by students in Norway was created after I encouraged them to write after listening to various pieces of jazz with their eyes closed and minds open to the imagery that the music called forth. Here are three different poems written in response to ballads by Duke Ellington and John Coltrane.

"A Bar Night" was written by a 15-year-old in the Norwegian settlement of Longyearbyen, the administrative center of the high arctic archipelago of Svalbard. This young man had never been to a bar or a jazz club, but the music called forth both a longing and a lovely poem:

Jazz makes me feel
a way I never felt before.
I feel like a man dancing
with a woman in a red dress
on a late Saturday night.
The people in the bar
are drunk and asleep
at their tables or the bar.
We are dancing all alone.

Jazz makes me wanna dance all night.

Here's another from a young female in the 9th grade in a small town south of Oslo:

Jazz
The war is over,
Music fills my ears,
The war is over,
No more tears.
I'm sitting in a bar
Having a cup of tea,
The war is over,
And the music is the sea.
I want to be the ocean
Because my love is there.
She drowned a long time ago,
She cannot be here.
It is the war's fault
The music fills my ears.
I want to be the ocean
Because my love is there.

And last, here's one by a college student preparing to become an English teacher. She titled it "Lonely Morning":

Monday morning
The kids have left for school
Loneliness, where do I start?
The radio is on
This smooth tune
Clears my mind, calms my body.
It's time for tea
On a Monday morning.

Conclusion

Jazz is the uniquely American art form that has transcended its origins and become a truly universal language from Chicago to Oslo to Tokyo to Moscow and to all corners of the globe. It offers English Language Arts educators at all levels a wonderful opportunity to explore the relationships among reading, writing, music, poetry, history, art, and popular culture. But more, listening to jazz offers students and teachers a way of looking at literacy. Gene Seymour (1995) concludes his history of jazz by saying that the listener to jazz can be as much of a player as the musician. Substitute "reader" for "listener," "author" for "performer,"

and "text" for "music" and you'll have a fine description of how we should encourage our students—and ourselves—to read:

As a listener, you are as much a "player" as the singers or musicians. You bring your own feelings to a performer's work the way a performer puts everything he or she has into a song. This is true of all music, but what makes jazz especially exciting is that your own reactions can be as unpredictable as the music. It isn't necessary to understand the technical aspects of what a musician is doing. Often, you find your own meaning to a piece of music. (Seymour, 155)

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