



*Dire et Chanter Les Passions*  
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LES PASSIONS



Varia

Directeurs de la revue :

Marc JEANNIN et David POULIQUEN

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## Présentation de la *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions*

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La *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions* (revue DCLP) est une revue à comité de lecture qui publie des articles rattachés à la thématique principale de l'expression des passions. Elle propose des sujets de réflexion interdisciplinaires de qualité, notamment autour de la voix et des émotions qu'elle suscite, selon des angles d'approche divers et originaux. La revue DCLP publie dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales, en format numérique et/ou papier, des articles émanant de chercheurs, d'experts, de spécialistes, d'artistes et de personnalités rayonnant dans une sphère nationale et/ou internationale. La revue DCLP publie des numéros thématiques et également des hors-séries, et une rubrique varia. Cela souligne l'engagement résolu de la revue DCLP en faveur du décloisonnement des savoirs et la diffusion des connaissances.



VARIA

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*Marc Jeannin*





# JAZZ MUSIC IN KEROUAC'S *ON THE ROAD*

Marc Jeannin

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“I got sick and tired of the conventional English sentence which seemed to me so ironbound in its rules, so inadmissible with reference to the actual format of my mind as I learned to probe it in the modern spirit of Freud and Jung, that I couldn't express myself through that form anymore...” Those were Jack Kerouac's words, as reported by Paul Maher in his book *Kerouac: His Life and Work*, relating to the creation of his masterpiece *On the Road*. By creating the 'Beat Generation' in the early 1950s, it was obvious that Jack Kerouac wanted to stand apart from the so-called conventional literature. Besides, during that period, a new artistic trend, based on a complete freedom of expression and breaking off from any preceding style of music, was emerging from a minority of black musicians under the name of 'jazz'. This type of music was, and still is, characterized by its use of improvisation, syncopated phrasing, and typical binary or tertiary rhythm. Jack Kerouac, inspired by jazz, surely saw in that original music an opportunity of reshaping, through his own style, traditional literature. Though a connection between jazz music, which is the apogee of freedom of expression, and literature, which is bound to respect some literary conventions, seemed to be paradoxical, Jack Kerouac took up the challenge of mixing jazz music and prose in order to create a new form of literature. He succeeded in writing *On the Road* which he completed in May 1951. This article first provides a critical approach towards the literary form of this novel, which is greatly influenced by jazz music, and then analyses the specificity of linguistic rhythms and cadences that structure the time and events of the book, while comparing it to the musical organisation that is typical of jazz music. Thereafter, the linguistic treatment of several themes in *On the Road*, such as sex, road and writing, which are linked to the musical mood of the novel, demonstrates the pervading jazzy atmosphere that testifies to Kerouac's most original work.

Defining the literary form of *On the Road* by comparing it to the other trends characterising American literature would be a difficult thing to do, as it is unique. It seems more appropriate to concentrate on a fundamental source of inspiration that guided Kerouac's mind on writing this book, that is on music and more precisely on jazz music. Kerouac's writing is an attempt to rediscover form through music while illustrating the cultural and social context of America at a particular time. *On the Road* visibly appears to be linked to jazz, for it was created on the spur of the moment, in order to try to give way to the creation of a new literary style, one which arose from a nonconformist feeling and which represented a way of rejecting societal norms. This novel, aiming at instantaneous writing, has no form: it is an unbridled and episodic odyssey relating encounters, conversations and experiences, with impulsiveness and lyricism. Allen Ginsberg, one of the Beat writers, called it “a spontaneous bop melody”. In fact, the linguistic construction of *On the Road* illustrates very well Kerouac's will to free himself from the traditional style of literature which seemed too restrictive to him. Kerouac's “spontaneous bop prosody” shapes *On the Road* – which was written as he made his long road trips and attended jazz music performances along the way – as a non stop statement of an experience that kept on moving and was not restrained. The novel, which is largely autobiographical, is a first-person account of the hero's compulsive wanderings through America. The hero, Sal Paradise (representing Jack Kerouac), and his friend Dean Moriarty (representing Neal Cassady), meet and talk to a loose community of dropouts, underdogs, hoboes and sinners whose uprootedness resembles a flight, an escape, sometimes a pilgrimage. What they escape and revolt against is

American culture, conformity and the middle-class ethic. This protest is accompanied by a search for mental and physical liberation for a wealth of experience. But, there is also a romantic and mystical yearning to reach self-fulfilment, to learn the joy of 'pure being', a madness for life. This fantastic quest is reflected through an original literary form. As a matter of fact, the energy of the language of *On the Road*, far from being constrained by any limitations imposed upon it by the fixed framework of traditional sentence form, takes its strength from jazz music, and, by freeing itself, fashions Kerouac's 'spontaneous prose'.

The expression 'spontaneous prose', which is very much in connection with jazz, is perhaps Kerouac's most controversial innovation in language because it links his book design with a particular literary method, one that is based on the freedom of style. Usually misunderstood, however, is the term 'spontaneous', which in no way signifies, for Kerouac, an abandonment of control. Spontaneous prose echoes Wordsworth's assertion that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling", a form of free experimentation, but more accurately a way to encapsulate with no restriction whatsoever the energy of natural speech. Although Kerouac viewed his spontaneous bop prosody as a revolutionary linguistic tool to reshape American literature, much in the same way Joyce's precursory style had modernized English prose, spontaneous prose is based on a musical model, especially the jazz that Kerouac loved so much – the music of Charlie 'Bird' Parker, Miles Davis, Dizzie Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk. Critics have often mentioned jazz music as a contributor to Jack Kerouac's writing, but few have contended that it was his chief influence. However, the qualities of his work that shine the brightest – his phrasing, his unconventional use of language, and the emotional and soulful qualities of his work – are all strongly connected with jazz. So too is the improvisational way in which Kerouac goes about putting his thoughts on paper. The overwhelming evidence is enough to support the affirmation that not only is Kerouac's writing heavily influenced by jazz, but also that in many ways, it can be considered as a daring attempt to create what can be seen as the literary form of jazz music.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see how Kerouac's improvisational and spontaneous way of writing runs parallel to the underlying philosophy behind jazz music. As Kerouac himself explains in *The Paris Review Interviews*: "by not revising what you've already written you simply give the reader the actual workings of your mind during the writing itself: you confess your thoughts about events in your own unchangeable way...well look, did you ever hear a guy telling a long, wild tale to a bunch of men in a bar and all are listening and smiling? Did you ever hear that guy stop to revise himself, go back to a previous sentence to improve it, to defray its rhythmic thought impact...[It's] like a part of the river flows over a rock once and for all and never returns and can never flow any other way in time." Thus, the spontaneous prose style designed by Kerouac, comparable in his eyes to the improvisation of the jazz musicians he greatly admired, enables him to capture life the way it was lived – forward in time, with details accumulating along the way. And capturing life by directly transposing it into an outpouring of words is really what Kerouac's writings are all about.

The literary structures of *On the Road* echo the ones we find in jazz themes and riffs<sup>1</sup> – they are built so as to express spontaneity. According to Murray "when they are effective, riffs always seem as spontaneous as if they were improvised in the heat of performance. So much so that riffs are sometimes regarded as being synonymous with improvisation. But such is not always the case by any means. Not only are riffs as much a part of some arrangements and orchestrations as the lead melody, but many consist of nothing more than stock phrases, quotations from some familiar melody, or even *clichés* that just happen to be popular at the

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<sup>1</sup> In a critical study of jazz music, Murray (1976) defines a jazz riff as a "brief musical phrase that is repeated, sometimes with very subtle variations, over the length of a stanza as a chord pattern follows its normal progression."

moment. Improvisation includes spontaneous appropriation (or inspired allusion, which sometimes is also a form of signifying) no less than on-the-spot invention." These forms of improvisation, as discussed in the present article, are profusely found in the language of Kerouac's *On the Road* at various levels within the structural organisation mapping linguistic elements. Kerouac, as the horn player blows his saxophone, jazzes prose through his experiences as an American traveller under the pseudonym of Sal Paradise.

Though Kerouac admits he is neither a musician nor an expert on the subject of music, he manages to grasp the essence of music creation and then modulates it into his literary work. As he explains in *The Paris Review Interviews*: "As for my regular English verse, I knocked it off fast like the prose, ... just as a musician has to get out, a jazz musician, his statement within a certain number of bars, within one chorus, which spills over into the next, but he has to stop where the chorus page stops". In *On the Road*, there are no full stops to divide sentences into sections. In fact, phrases are usually and arbitrarily peppered with false colons and, from time to time, superficial commas. However, the use of dashes separating rhetorical breathing can be compared to the jazz musician's drawing breath between blown phrases. As a matter of fact, Kerouac goes on to liken the craft of the writer to that of the horn player: "Jazz and bop, in the sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement has been made. That is how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind. I formulated the theory of breath as measure, in prose and verse, never mind what Olson, Charles Olson says, I formulated that theory in 1953 at the request of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Then there's the raciness and freedom and humour of jazz." Accordingly, the length of sentences is generally about a third of a page, and punctuation is used sparingly. Kerouac likes his work to flow in a lyrical, musical sense, and uses different literary tools to achieve this. To this end Kerouac's use of capital letters gives more prominence to specific passages, just as a musician might play an important part of a song louder to highlight it or to come to a climax. Rather than employing traditional narrative methods of storytelling to convey the atmosphere, Kerouac models his prose around the musical concept of storytelling. For this purpose he largely gets rid of conjunctions, which establishes logical prosaic sequences. His phrases are structured according to an overall rhythm and flow of ideas, as a jazzman uses phrases in the judicial context of a solo chorus. By arguing that his phrasing follows jazz model, Kerouac deliberately gives a musical dimension to his literary style. He reveals, in his theory of 'breath as measure', his acute care for the sentence, which he otherwise denounces, and, perhaps most important, acknowledges the control of cadence. The intrinsic elements of Kerouac's writing are therefore structurally similar to a musical motif. In fact, linguistic structures in *On the Road* could be directly compared to jazzy rhythms and cadences. It appears in this book that each repetition of events represents them in the 'now', in the present, in the truth of the moment – much as a jazzman blows the notes out of a horn, even though, of course, this ideal 'now' is itself constituted by both temporality and timelessness. It is also noticeable that the texture of *On the Road* is controlled by a musical metaphor that, seeming on flow, contains rhythms and cadences, interior sound systems, in the manner of prose poetry.

Many of the specific textual components of *On the Road* are explained by their reference to jazz. First, Kerouac himself makes the musical analogy explicit. Secondly, the musical analogy can be seen through punctuation, or rather the unconventional form of punctuation. The words and phrases that occur between dashes seem to be linguistic entities but they are not aligned according to the conventional subject-verb arrangement of English sentences. Furthermore, the notion of time works differently in the linguistic configurations emanating from Kerouac's writing. Instead of framing statements and ideas within the past-present-future arrangement found in traditional literature, Kerouac designs, thanks to the musical analogy, a notion of time that appears to be timeless. Kerouac gives an account of the procedure as follows: "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”. As a matter of fact, Kerouac attempts to convey the emotional intensity of a jazz solo through the creation of phonetic sounds which reproduce by imitation specific musical sonorities: “hearing a wild tenorman bawling horn across the way, going ‘EE-YAH! EE-YAH! EE-YAH! (...) a rising and falling riff that went from ‘EE-yah!’ to a crazier ‘EE-de-lee-yah!’ (...) everything came out of the horn, no more phrases, just cries, cries, ‘Baugh’ and down to ‘Beep!’ and up to ‘EEEE!’ and down to clinkers and over to sideways-echoing horn-sounds.” (Kerouac 1947, 185-186). By doing so, Kerouac gives voice and words to music, illustrates sounds of jazz by giving an insight of the sonorous atmosphere pervading the scene he depicts. In an attempt to rhythmically mimic jazz through phonetic constructions, Kerouac’s recreated sound patterns provide an illustration of complete spontaneity. By injecting the specific syncopated rhythm of jazz phrases into the overall flow of his prose, he evokes, amongst other things, the use of the shifting sense of time.

Multitudinous sections of the text of *On the Road* do illustrate that the compositional process follows the structural framework of jazz music. The repetition of musical structures creates a deeper pattern than the novel’s linear surface narration might suggest. It is useful to bear in mind that jazz music almost always works as the repetition of a series of chord changes. Thus, this music is based on the notion of repeated forms or cycles. Musical themes become redeveloped and thus redefined through each rendition of the series. Moreover, timing is of course not only important for the phrasing of jazz notes but also integral to the very articulation of certain phrases, ideas and structures. Like different types of jazz songs, Kerouac’s *On the Road* varies greatly in tempo and tone. Whether contemplative and peaceful, like a muted trumpet, or blaring and rocking like a mad saxophone solo, Kerouac’s work is bound by the common thread of its deep emotional appeal. Nevertheless, the truthfulness of the experiences he recounts in his work is only part of the reason Kerouac achieves such a musical effect.

The reader is moved through a series of heightened moments – the ups and downs – that Kerouac himself terms moments of ‘IT’ which purposely remain vague. Those moments are in close connection with the specific pervading atmosphere of jazz music. The time symbolized by ‘IT’, being an isolated moment, is, according to Ann Charters “both integral to the notion of the hero and to the quest for ‘IT’.” As a matter of fact, it turns out that ‘IT’ functions as a chord progression of Kerouac’s central red line (Route 6) across America which is made earthly and substantial like a body or “the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent” (Kerouac 1947, 76-77). The analogy of ‘IT’ with the jazzman’s actions is made explicit in the text when Kerouac describes the alto player: “He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it* – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops” (Kerouac 1947, 194). This description proclaims the terms of Kerouac’s aesthetic stance as much as his more explicit statements in *The Paris Review Interviews*. He indicates the purposes of establishing such an aesthetic quality as an effective mediation of time and space. At the moment of ‘IT’, time stops. But as the description goes on, Kerouac details a movement in space: “He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his belly bottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back to do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT” (Kerouac 1947, 194). In other words, it is not the continuity of causal relationships of experience that matters, but the heightened moment. And it clearly appears that the importance of jazz in *On the Road* is nothing short of intense moments of life. As for Dean Moriarty, listening to jazz is a religious experience where ‘IT’, an indescribable mystic message, is communicated to him through the performer. Upon hearing the pianist George Shearing, Dean astoundingly points to the empty piano seat and simply declares, “God’s empty chair” (Kerouac 1947, 122). Many musical themes in *On the Road* are based on subtle variations of the linguistic material. The novel illustrates a departure into bebop, where the sounds become “BIFF, BOFF, BLIP,

BLEEP, BOP, BEEP, CLINCK, ZOWIE!” Sounds break up and are replaced by other ones. In his book entitled *Essais sur le symbolique*, Rosolato suggests that there exists a close relationship between narrative and musical structures as far as instruments are concerned. According to him the musical instrument – the horn, for instance – by its rigid body participates in the formation of the sound that traverses it. One could even imagine a narrative form, which might try to maintain itself as near as possible to the musical entity that is to be represented. Yet, it can be added that it is not obvious to establish a precise critical methodology dealing with the musical analogy for the discussion of Kerouac's work. How, it might be asked, do the problems of a free jazz that is really not free – but in fact, structured – apply to the apparent freedom or formlessness of Kerouac's prose? Indeed, however structured jazz music can be, improvisation prevails over everything else; comparatively, Kerouac's spontaneous or free prose is an improvisation of the flow of words within American language, but this improvisation prevails over everything else. In that sense, *On the Road* is definitely a book of intuitions.

Kerouac uses many other musical techniques in his writing as well. Experimentation and disregard for conventional form are both well-known as common aspects of jazz, yet were not widely accepted in literature in Kerouac's time. Regarding this, Warren Tallman once noted that “in the jazz world of the Bop generation where Charlie Parker is king and founder, Jack Kerouac in a different medium is heir apparent...[His] adherence to the jazz principle of improvisation is right for our time, I think. The jazz vernacular is just that, a vernacular, and Kerouac has demonstrated that it can be transposed into fiction without serious loss of the spontaneous imaginative freedom which has made it among the most vital of the modern arts.” In keeping with the jazz tradition, it seems Kerouac has no qualms about using language his own way, regardless of what critics or experts might think. Sentences like “Mu-u-u-usic pla-a-a-a-a-ay!” and “So baby come on just clo-o-o-ose your pretty little ey-y-y-y-yes” (Kerouac 1947, 187) are but one example of Kerouac's experimentation with language. As well, it should come as no surprise that Kerouac seems to develop his experimental descriptions especially when relating the experience of listening to jazz. Kerouac's efforts to transpose jazz into words by mimicking the sounds of the various instruments are obvious, but subtle. In an effort to convey the surprise of “a new simple variation of a [saxophone] chorus” the narrator, Sal Paradise, explains how the saxophonist, Carlo Marx, would go from “ta-tup-tader-rara...ta-tup-tader-rara,” to “ta-tup-EE-da-de-dera-RUP! ta-tup-EE-da-de-dera-RUP!” (Kerouac 1947, 189-190). Again, this description is characteristic of Kerouac's experimentation towards instantly and spontaneously transcribing music events with the phonetic material produced by the combination of orthographic letters.

The musical analogy and the redefinition of the quest form suggest a spatial, nonlinear relationship of language and form. As suggested by Ann Charters “to achieve the improvisational creativity of the great jazz players, Kerouac experimented for several years before arriving at what Allen Ginsberg, referring to Kerouac's poetic sensibility, termed a ‘modality of consciousness’, signifying the aesthetic recreation of jazz improvisation in the creative prose of *On the Road*. To ‘step across chronological time’, so as to temporarily escape the linear road that could only end in death, Kerouac reassessed linearity not only at the level of individual sentences and paragraphs, but in allowing the plot of his novel to zigzag in a spatial, nonlinear relationship of language and form.” The zigzagging motion of *On the Road* is pre-empted by prose paragraphs of about a page in length, each an arrangement of impressions of accumulated images, phrases and syntactical patterns. The musical metaphor allows Kerouac to represent antithetical images such as ‘building / collapsing’ with the concomitant emotive response of ‘ecstasy / sadness’. In these extremes, Kerouac depicts the spiritual decline of America. The musical themes of the book combine or juxtapose images of harmony with images of chaos. Music is Kerouac's vehicle of perfection. The constant use of onomatopoeias is an attempt at directly transcribing music, the connection made between bop, the road and writing: “it never ends” (Kerouac 1947, 227). Sexual metaphors also connect the two following themes bop and the road to writing; for instance the following extracts

give an illustration of this: “Everybody in Frisco blew” (Kerouac 1947, 168), “don’t move a bone and just balls the jack” (Kerouac 1947, 189), while the black musician says that “Lord, I ain’t never been there and they tell me it’s a real jumpin town but I ain’t got no cause complainin where I am. I’m married, you know” (Kerouac 1947, 188). Jazz – which refers to a sexual intercourse in slang – mingles sexual and musical references, for Dean Moriarty’s orgasmic approach to music is paralleled, or rather created, in Sal Paradise’s approach to original writing: “ah-haa! Whoo! said Dean. He was rubbing his chest, his belly; the sweat splashed from his face ... Dean was in a trance. The tenorman’s eyes were fixed straight on him ... Yes! Yes! He blowed that one! Dean wiped himself with his handkerchief” (Kerouac 1947, 186-187). In doing so, Kerouac depicts a world where everything reflects everything, the pervading atmosphere is the one in which all is intermingled.

*On the Road* is never so wild as in its sequences on music: “Whoo, Frisco nights, the end of the continent and the end of doubt, all dull doubt and tomfoolery, good-bye” (Kerouac 1947, 190). Here, transgression in the writing of the book becomes obvious. Sal Paradise frees himself from the anxiety of influence thanks to the new, non-literary tradition of bop. There are obvious connections between language and jazz for other reasons. Remi Boncoeur, because of his bilingual status, is said to speak “jazz American” (Kerouac 1947, 59). Sal Paradise also connects jazz, writing and sex in his Doctor Sax dream (Kerouac 1947, 162), which seems a pun on Sal, sex, music and dream-vision looking for the right art form. Breaking off from the traditional literary convention, Kerouac quotes Melville by saying about San Francisco “there she blows!” (Kerouac 1947, 161), only to transform then the notion of “blowing” from the whale-image to the saxophone player. Pierre-Yves Pétillon, a French literary critic, writes that “in fact, the whole book is a piece of jazz music. Kerouac wants to jazz American language”, showing that the subtle lexical variations and modulations in connection with music: “Foghorn” becomes “Forlon”, the interjection “man” becomes “moan” or “mourn”, the word “sad” becomes “mad” or “sag” or even “rags”. Furthermore, the variation of the syllable “aw” is repeated through the book and sounds as a deep low note: the exclamation “Aw!” echoes “awe” which designates miscellaneous feelings such as amazement, fear and respect.

Thus, *On the Road* is, to a great extent, more than a book in connection with jazz music. In essence it is a ‘jazzy book’ because, by creating a new literary form, Kerouac’s style of writing refers in all thematic references to black music and bop. The life Kerouac delineates is one that is, like jazz, quintessentially American. His novel is full of literary experimentations, improvisations and intuitions. Jack Kerouac, like Miles Davis or Charlie Parker or a number of other jazz greats, pushed his medium to a limit previously unseen in the literature of his time. By linking music and writing together the way he did, Kerouac produced an original literary form capturing the jazzy atmosphere around him. It clearly appears that *On the Road* is no less a travel through jazz music than a travel through wild America. Besides, jazz music not only shapes the form of the book, but also provides the atmosphere that symbolizes the spirit of the Beat Generation. Mainly for those reasons, *On the Road* became the manifesto of the beat movement. In addition to this, jazz music plays a referential role in the evolution of the plot: the systematic recurrence of musical themes engraves the reader’s mind. A never-ending movement is induced by the eternity that suggests the cyclic structures of jazz music and Sal Paradise is, like the horn player wandering on jazzy rhythms, always on an improvised trip. Jazz, being somewhat unpredictable, symbolizes the travel of *On the Road* and the spontaneity and unexpectedness of life. When all things are considered, the book can be compared to a huge jazzy score that is frantically transcribed with original phonetic elements and linguistic structures, as the music is composed and played in the heat of the performance while travelling. By writing *On the Road*, Kerouac rendered a genuine

<sup>2</sup> “*Tout le livre est en réalité un morceau de jazz. Kerouac veut ‘jazz’er’ la langue américaine*”, Pétillon (1992), “The whole book is really a piece of jazz. Kerouac wants to ‘jazz up’ the American language” [my translation].

musical atmosphere, expressing spontaneity as purely as possible, as if the words were reproducing jazz music through another kind of creativity, thus giving birth to a new, hybrid art literary form henceforward referring to the 'jazz novel'.

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