OISE, University of Toronto

Hosted by: Ben Gallagher & Ashleigh Allen

**Poetry** **and music**

**Workshop description**:

Our 90-minute creative writing workshop explores **Poetry and Music** as we read and listen to the relationship between what we often discuss and understand as two art forms that have actually been connected since antiquity.

The purpose of this workshop is to expose participants to different ways of reading and writing poetry as a community, and to think about the possibilities for poetry in our lives and classrooms. Today we specifically want to focus on how to use music as fodder for poems (although the reverse is just as possible, if there are music teachers who want to reimagine a music composition lesson/ unit).

We are grateful to be a part of a community that values engagement with writing and reading.

**Workshop outline:**

*(5 minutes)*

**Welcome participants & introductions / check-ins**

* Names, pronouns, a word to describe how each person is feeling today

*(5 minutes)*

**Share the purpose of this workshop**:

* To consider what happens when we’re influenced by jazz? Classical music? Hip hop? How does music enter into poetry? (How can music enter into our poetry?)
* To explore the consequence of what mindful listening does to our writing. Like music, poetry pays attention to sound… poets draw on the forms and rhythms of different musical traditions: jazz, rap, and hip-hop to folk songs and beyond.
* To explore poetry and musicand how these arts working in collaboration, specifically how music and musicians have inspired poets and their poetry (although the reverse is true, too)
* NB: Both poetry and music can be considered political. How do race, class, gender play a part?
* \* *Play music while we write to anchor the writing/ thinking into music and poetry\**

*(5 minutes)*

**Read Rankine and Sanchez poems**

PART 1: Poems responding in depth to one song/ singer.

**Claudia Rankine, “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely [Mahalia Jackson is a Genius.]”**

*Mahalia Jackson was an American gospel singer. Possessing a contralto voice, she was referred to as "The Queen of Gospel". She became one of the most influential gospel singers in the world and was heralded internationally as a singer and civil rights activist.*

<https://poets.org/poem/dont-let-me-be-lonely-mahalia-jackson-genius>

**Prompts**:

* Make a similar assertion of a musical artist: *Name of singer* is *adjective*
* Reference a specific performance or album or song - perhaps a performance you’ve seen live or have watched a recording of - Describe the performance and how you related to the artist(s) if at all
* Cite the song (maybe different variations on the chorus throughout your poem, revisiting and commenting on the same line in a new way, with a different interpretation, each time).
* Invent a counterpoint of someone who might disagree with your opinion, *or* someone who would agree with your above assertions
* Indicate you are going to change the subject and do so (or not!)
* Comment on voice, movement, how *you* see/ feel the music
* Compare the artist to someone who works in another art form (writer, painter, filmmaker, etc.)
* Cite an artist or philosopher (or both)
* Speak to these quotations you’ve chosen, what do they mean to you/ to this poem/ to this artist and performance that you’ve chosen?

**Sonia Sanchez, “A Poem for Ella Fitzgerald”**

*Ella Jane Fitzgerald was an American jazz singer sometimes referred to as the First Lady of Song, Queen of Jazz, and Lady Ella. She was noted for her purity of tone, impeccable diction, phrasing, intonation, and a "horn-like" improvisational ability, particularly in her scat singing.*

<https://poets.org/poem/poem-ella-fitzgerald>

**Prompts**:

* Use musical sounds in your poem (oooooo, bop bop doowa, or something else)
* Choose a colour to repeat throughout your poem (“yellow” shows up throughout Sanchez’s poem)
* Make a list of different musical instruments and then use them throughout your poem (e.g. violin, piano, guitar, horn in Sanchez’s poem)
* Reference an animal (Sanchez references a bird - the nightingale)
* Use the word “Amen” (This is often a summative word at the end of a prayer but Sanchez uses it in the middle of the poem.)
* The poem transitions towards jazz’s “scat” singing at the very end, and the lines shift away from the left margin. Consider shifting your line placement on the page anywhere in your poem. Perhaps you begin this way, or perhaps you use it throughout your poem.

*(20 minutes)*

**Write poems**

*(8 minutes)*

**Read Hayes, Parker, and Strand poems**

PART 2: Responding to music - the literal music-ness and commenting on how life is like music/ song & Consider how music opens possibilities for you to think about your life/ daily living.

**Terrance Hayes, “What it Look Like”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58404/what-it-look-like>

**Prompts**:

* Choose an artist and song that you enjoy and know quite well (perhaps an artist and song that’s been with you awhile) that you can meditate on throughout the poem
* Address the poem - begin with “Dear” or a similar greeting and agree or disagree with a line from a song
* Include a motto (your own or one you know)
* Hayes writes: “A bandanna is a useful handkerchief/ but a handkerchief is a useless-ass bandanna” Write your own version of this where A is B but B is not A
* Include a word of slang, option to translate it, give examples of how/ when it could be used
* Include your thoughts on lying
* Include a character from one of Shakespeare’s plays or reference a play of his more generally
* Comment on what this singer knows about themselves/ what is known and what/ who you understand them to be

**Morgan Parker, “Take A Walk on the Wild Side”** from *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*

**Prompts**:

* What does “a walk on the wild side” look like to you in practice/ what are you doing? What are you wearing (clothes, makeup), how are you walking, etc.?
* Address someone as “babe” - what do you say in this address? (Reed says: “hey babe, take a walk on the wild side” and Parker says “I’m older than the hot girls/ Think about that, babe”
* Complete the line: “Without you…”
* End your poem mid-phrase

**Mark Strand, “The Everyday Enchantment of Music”**

<https://poets.org/poem/everyday-enchantment-music>

**Prompts**:

* This poem describes a setting as through music - here he is in Venice - Describe a memorable scene from your life - a night on a vacation, a wedding, and describe how it looks but also how it sounds. Strand doesn’t offer us much more than the weather (thunder) for sounds, but be descriptive here
* Strand uses “polishing” to describe a change of state, one thing becoming another (rough sound, smooth sound, music, memory, absence). Make a list of objects and then “polish” (or, rather, “change”) them from one thing into another in your poem

*(20 minutes)*

**Write poems**

*(5-10 minutes)*

**Invite participants to share what they wrote or a section of what they wrote**

*(5-10 minutes)*

**Ideas for exit conversation**

* Participants invited to discuss:
  + What they noticed as they read and wrote/ what was the experience of writing together like?
  + Benefits / uses of writing poems using music? Would you consider using these poems or prompts in your class? In what ways and for what subjects (For instance, Mahalia Jackson was a Civil Rights activist, might her music and Rankine’s poem be used in a history or social science class? How? Why?)
  + We can consider general reflections on the poems and formats as well as how we feel reading, writing, and sharing these poems…

**OTHER RESOURCES:**

**Links to poetry and music**

<https://poets.org/poems-about-music>

<https://poets.org/collection/poetry-lesson-plans-about-music>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/148663/poetry-and-music>

***Boston Globe* book review on Terrance Hayes book of poems *How To Be Drawn***

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2015/05/02/poetry-review-how-drawn-terrance-hayes-the-last-two-seconds-mary-bang/UiVhD4erZdbi69WYrYNwGK/story.html>

**Ada Limón “A New National Anthem”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147506/a-new-national-anthem>

**Gerald Stern, “Bolero”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/42333/bolero>

**LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, “originator”**

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56494/the-originator>

**Philip Glass - *Hydrogen Jukebox* (entire album)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tRXcjSTFWM>

<https://www.arts.gov/about/40th-anniversary-highlights/spontaneous-composition-allen-ginsberg-and-philip-glass-partner-create-hydrogen-jukebox>