



## Improvisation on the Way: Jazz and Kerouac's *On the Road*

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### Abstract

*On the Road*, the most important literature of Jack Kerouac, is regarded as one of the most classical works of the Beat Generation. Descriptions of Jazz occur repeatedly in this novel. This paper aims to discuss the mental status of the Beat Generation and the living conditions of fictional characters in *On the Road*.

**Key words:** *On the Road*; Jazz; Improvisation

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### INTRODUCTION

*On the Road* is the most important literature of Jack Kerouac, which is regarded as one of the most classical works of the Beat Generation. The plots of this novel are very simple, describing a scene that a group of young people have some travels across America in order to pursue freedom and personality. In fact, the novel is a real portrayal of the life of its author, Jack Kerouac, as well as the members of the Beat Generation. In 1950s, those young Americans were fed up with and disappointed with their life after World War II. Moreover, the horrible atmosphere of cold war depressed them and made them extraordinarily nervous. Therefore, they chose to abandon the traditional conventions and lived an uninhibited life. They tried to hunt for spiritual satisfaction, exercising them by drug, sex, and Jazz. They argued against

traditional morals and value on their way to vagrancy, for the sake of relieving themselves from such inhibited life.

In the novel *On the Road*, Kerouac describes that the characters Sal and Dean are infatuated with Jazz and indulge themselves in the strong and unrestricted rhythm of Jazz on their way to vagrancy. It seems that Jazz has become an essential part of their uninhibited lives. With the movements of Beat Generation rising, Jazz also attracts many young people. The black music is becoming popular among Beat Generation. In reality, Kerouac also hangs out with friends in Jazz club. They try to relieve themselves and pursue freedom in such kind of strong power music. As to them, Jazz is not only a sort of music but also an attitude to life. "Beat" also refers to rhythm, which also has some relationship with their vigor of emotion. From the perspective of Jazz, this paper combines some cultural phenomena and features reflected by the black music and discuss the mental state of the Beat Generation after World War II and the living condition of fictional characters in *On the Road*.

### 1. THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF JAZZ

Zhu (2002) explains in his book that Jazz music is a kind of American music which originated among black Americans and developed from ragtime. It has the characteristic of subtle segmentation of rhythm and fantastic contrast produced in orchestration, thus it is particularly applicable to the accompaniment of dance. This explanation of Jazz is not comprehensive enough from a musical perspective; moreover, it seems somewhat out of date today, for the present Jazz music is far beyond that in the 40s or 50s and it has changed a lot. From the aspect of its appearance and development, Jazz is a mass musical form coming into being in USA in 20<sup>th</sup> century and assimilating several cultures, especially African, American and European culture.

The term “Jazz” has a very long history in the United States, which originated in the communities of black people in New Orleans, and mainly came from the black music in West Africa. It is the evolved product of black music brought by black slaves from Africa to America in the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the slave trafficking flourished. Jazz has its own unique style and characteristics. It is a kind of music emphasizing on the improvisation and constantly introducing creativity and new ideas in the course of the performance. The birth of Jazz itself is a fusion of various styles and the result of the gradual convergence of different music cultures during several centuries. The life experience of African-American is the source of inspiration for Jazz. Adorno has pointed out in *Aesthetic Theory* that the structures of artworks (including Entertainment) are always reflections of the structures of their social processes. Music is such an art that expresses people’s emotions and reflects their social life in an organized manner. Researches on the origin and development process of Jazz show that this black music reflects a special musical and cultural phenomenon. And the connotations of it are listed as follows.

### 1.1 A Way to Abreact Social Resentment

From its cultural background, Jazz music comes from Africa. The marketing of Negroes, who were transacted from every corner of Africa to America and most of whom were served as slaves, was thriving in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. What follows with them is their own culture, such as dance, music religion and so on. Though heavily influenced by white colonizer in the process of shipping, the hard core of black music cultural legacy—“freely modified” words, rhythms, and styles—which are the most precious things in their national culture, was finally and doggedly retained from generation to generation. Under the ruthless slavery, these Negro slaves who arrived to America lived a miserable life. They succumbed to the rule of the white people all the time and struggled in the bottom of the society. Even though the Negro slaves once got free after American Civil War in 1865, their lives were still suffering; many of them were cast in the homeless condition. Without any social status, they had no choice but to rely on the music cultivated in their native land to reduce their depression and entertain themselves. These music went along with them when they rushed about to find a job. Through music, they can express their feelings, such as depressed, disappointed and indignant ones. Therefore, in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, American black music was actually helping people express their fierce complaint and resistance to the whole society. This traditional culture made a new progress after emancipation. Finally it even stamped special marks on the white music culture which was in the dominant position. Jazz music was formed by adopting certain music elements in black music. Blues, a music style created by African Americans who lived in difficulties and hardships, which constitutes the

cornerstone of traditional and modern Jazz music, are one of the direct origins of Jazz music. It is a typical melody in black music and it is a music presentation often used to describe sorrowful life and give vent to their depression and discontent. Therefore, considering its creating process, Jazz music is a way for the players to express their resentment in their heart.

As for Jazz, composing and playing are almost carried out simultaneously. The most prominent characteristic of Jazz is improvisation, which makes the meaning of composing of Jazz far less important than that of traditional music. Just like Trummy Young (an American music publisher) said in Jimmy Lunceford’s (a Jazz musician) record, “What matters is not what you should do, but how you do it”. What Jazz musicians value is not playing according to others’ or their own planned intention, but the improvisation in the process of playing, namely, they attach importance to how to transform music in their minds into actual sounds which would reveal their rich inner worlds and how to fully display their playing skills in the process of improvisation. The characteristic of improvisation of Jazz just reflects early black slaves’ wishes to get rid of their enslaved identity and to lead a free life. Even in the process of the evolution of Jazz, it is the natural extension of the player’s ideology, which means that Jazz reveals their various emotional changes, that is, their happiness, anger, sorrow and joy.

### 1.2 The Challenges of Secularity to Tradition

In its developmental process, Jazz has been influenced by a combined effect of classical music, church music, blues, etc., thus it is characteristic of a variety of music but yet different from any of these music. Since the moment of its birth, it was regarded as a separate form of music in the world. Jazz is a relatively secular music relative to classic music and some other elegant traditional music. At the beginning, Jazz was played by the bands who were employed in the parades, funerals, gatherings and other activities but who haven’t received rigorous college-style music education. However, it was this popular art that brought the culture of secular music into a new height. Traditional music has been intensely impacted in front of this authentic art form of popular culture. In the early period, black Jazz musicians, out of the economic consideration, were more likely to use the instruments in military bands. At that time, they could be easily bought at a low price at the flea markets around the country but they were rarely played in the symphony orchestras. In the playing activities, black Jazz musicians have changed the kind of regular beats formerly played with these instruments, which has opened up a new area. For example, some Jazz drummers were not satisfied with the performance of a variety of drums in that times, which led them to invent the Jazz drum exclusively used for Jazz. The secular style of Jazz has been constantly posing challenges to traditional music.

### 1.3 A Revolt to Itself

The grown-up of Jazz is a process of the continual enrichment and development of the music contents and forms. Either way of playing or styles keep on changing so that the old Jazz music styles are abandoned by modernists. In their short developing period, many genres have appeared which make music styles complex and pluralistic. From the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century to World War I, Jazz still belonged to New Orleans, so 1920s is "Jazz Times" because of prevalence of it and at that time a totally white Jazz band's improvisation became very popular. When it comes to 30s and 40s, Jazz had stepped into "Swing Era" when Jazz had become the mainstream music style with dancing. In the middle of 1940s, Swing began to lose creativities and lack artistic features to please white audiences. Therefore, a lot of Jazz musicians broke out of Swing's straitjacket to create "Bebop Jazz" which was based on very complicated chords. Since that time, Jazz was no longer suitable for dancing but turned to artistic music. Meanwhile, other Jazz style was still on the way of development so that "Dixieland" revived and Jazz had been paid unprecedented attention.

In 1950s and 1960s, Jazz had been to a free period for composing. As a new type of Jazz, "Cold Jazz" came out in the area of west coast and it reached its peak in the middle of 1950s. Afterwards, the combination of African wild music and European modern atonality—"Free Jazz" had really promoted the development of Jazz. In 1970s, "Free Jazz" reached its own summit. In 1970s and 1980s, Jazz came to the age of "Fusion Jazz". Musicians brought Rock & Roll, Rhythm, Blues, Funk undertone and Pop music into Jazz and used electronic musical synthesized instruments at the same time. However, Jazz began to look back to the old times in 1980s. Some musicians looked for inspirations before "Bop" so as to create "New Bop". In 1990s, "New Classics" created depressed, abstemious and economic music, which dissociated from traditional Jazz Romanism. No matter the sadness and frustration of Blues in 19<sup>th</sup> century or Free Jazz which opposed to tradition's bondage and pursued freedom, every change is the revolution of music itself.

The form of Jazz and its special musical culture greatly influenced the Beat Generation. Almost all writers of the Beat Generation were spongy over this kind of music. The description of Jazz *appear in On the Road* from the beginning to the end which had built up a bridge for the Beat Generation between music and literature.

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## 2. ON THE ROAD AND JAZZ

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Jazz influenced "Beat Generation" obviously. Jazz has surpassed music itself and is endowed with a new image in this novel. Either the characters or the novel itself reflects the features of Jazz apparently. Probably, we can feel the novel's true meaning from such kind of Black Music.

### 2.1 Jazz Culture Reflected by the Characters in *On the Road*

#### 2.1.1 A Wistful Longing for Freedom

The earliest form of Jazz—western African music—expresses black people's dissatisfaction with reality. From its style of improvisation, it can be estimated that performers hoped to do free performance without restriction of music texts, which then expressed their eagerness for free and unfettered life. As a matter of fact, Kerouac reveals the eagerness of Dean and Sal for free. Dean and Sal were listening to a black performer named Slim Gaillard playing Jazz in a small cub in San Francisco.

Dean was infected by Slim's free improvisation. He considered Slim as a man who knew how to live and how to go on the spree. For him, Slim was God. He was crazy for this kind of music which could make him feel the releasing of his soul and he would not be restrained. On the way of tramping, he always refused to be restrained by anything and free expressions were part of his happy life. Nietzsche ever said that sex was a kind of simplicity and disengagement from the perspective of free heart. For Dean, sex is of first importance and holy thing to do in life. On the way from New York to the West, Dean and Marylou were always on the tiles and their journey was full of passion. From Denver to New York, Dean drove and made love with girls. They went for the pleasure of freedom in their Jazz performance.

#### 2.1.2 The Emancipation of Individuality

Jazz rebels itself constantly and challenges tradition for it continually insists on bringing creativities and new concepts into Jazz, which has innovative spirit against tradition. The innovative spirit is kind of emancipation of individualities reflected by the characters. Dean's deviation from the norm incarnates his longing for the emancipation of individuality due to his tiredness of the regular and boring and numb life. When Dean was listening to the trumpeter, he cared nothing about what others thought about. When the performer started his first piece of music, Dean thought that it seemed that only if the trumpeter continued his performance with full focus on could his soul never gets peace.

For Dean, this is understanding of existence. The meaning of survival was to get rid of social ethic norms and express oneself. Every time when Sam opened Dean's door, Dean either wore much less or wore nothing; he hung up his naked portrait on the most outstanding place of the room; in Denver, he stole cars many times within one night, even police car was stolen by him only because he wanted to drive; he drove from Denver to Chicago in 70 miles an hour. All activities he took part in were looked down upon by the mainstream of culture. But for himself, all the things he had done were to escape from the depression created by traditional morals, the tradition of middle-class in the U.S., etc.. Nothing could compare

to the violation of so-called traditional morals that could release one's individuality. Under the influence of Sam's crazy behaviors, Sam expressed with his heart that he wished to be a black for he could not find something that could amaze himself with the lack of activities, happiness, mystery, music, etc. But in fact the lack of individual development space was literally the lack of thing.

### 2.1.3 The Satisfaction for Spirit

Jazz in 1940s and 1950s, wild chords, rapid beats and strong rhythms were the main performance style. Within such kind of music listeners could get satisfy mentally and burst out emotion. In Bertrand, Dean and Sam watched one of Slim's show. Beautiful music started from Slim's fingers softly, for a while the rhythm turned quicker and quicker which sounded like the roar of ocean. Along with Slim's performance, Dean began to sweat and his collar was totally wet. Dean fell in love with Slim's performance and got his spirit satisfied.

Dean and his fellows always searched for their spiritual goal, however, this goal was hard to realize in a very short time so that they had to find home for spirit temporally in music. Sam ever said that thousands of people worked very hard only for a penny and they made crazy dream—pillage, possession, lose, groan and death, but finally they all had to try to find a refuge in horrible city burial ground for themselves. However, emotions of Jazz performance reached a consensus with their spirit which was also found by Dean from performance of that trumpeter. The trumpeter stared at Dean and thought that this crazy guy could not only understand his music but also hoped to know more. Between them two, they seemed to reach a consensus about meaning of life. In music, they expressed their emotions and searched for satisfaction for the spirit.

### 2.2 Jazz Style in the Novel

This novel is written by Kerouac in more than twenty days, from which, we can see that his novel has been

loosely structured and disorderly organized, and he just spontaneously spoke out what he put inside. He regarded it as "spontaneous writing." That is, writing what he thought of when writing without the consideration of the structure, hierarchy and other factors, the novel sentences not deliberately following the grammatical rules in the writing process. Like filling the gap in general, *On the Road* is the creation of Kerouac to intuition, and this intuition is the reflection of personal experience and ways of thinking, which coincides with the style of Jazz improvisation. With years of experience, musicians do not look at the music score, arbitrarily playing without the restriction of performance rules, and there will not be gaps between the former and the latter phrases. From this point, the novel is under great influence of Jazz. However, these written works unconsciously created with free association are better to express the author's feeling and his thought. Jazz not only lives together with beat writers, but also becomes a part of beat literature. The pursuit of freedom and individuality are also embodied in the style of their works, opposed to the traditional writing, and they make bold innovations.

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## CONCLUSION

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Kerouac once said: "I would rather be regarded as a Jazz poet, playing a long piece of blues on Sunday night." For Beat Generation, Jazz is not only with them all the way in life, what is more important; their life is a song of Jazz.

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