The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-V, October 2026
www.the-criterion.com

Jazz, Rhythm and Orality in Beat Poetry

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n5.2

Abstract:

Jazz influence on "Beat Generation" has been a major point of discussion among many academic scholars. The studies that have been done on Beat Generation till now throw light on how Beat Generation admires Jazz, mentions them in their poem and even performs with jazz accompanists. The way Beat Generation admires Jazz music is quite an interesting element about Beat Generation. This paper aims to extend these observations to identify exact techniques that were adopted by Beat Generation and to do so, the present paper evaluates specific formal techniques that are inherited from Jazz music. All those formal Jazz principles were turned into foundational structure of Beat Poetry. Through in-depth analysis of six Beat poems: Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," "A Supermarket in California," and "America", Gary Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout", Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Constantly Risking Absurdity", Gregory Corso's "Marriage", and Bob Kaufman's "Walking Parker Home", this paper aims to navigate through formal jazz principles adopted in Beat Poetry, such as bepop's syncopation, call-and-response structures. The paper argues that Beat Poets were diligent formalists who rigorously studied Jazz and adopted it systematically through techniques such as anaphoric repetition, breath-based lineation, practised improvisation. In doing so, Beat Poets established Orality, Performance and Voice as fundamental structural feature of poetry instead of additional ornamental dimension of poetry.

Keywords: Beat Generation, Jazz, Poetic technique, Rhythm and Orality, Performance Poetry.

Article History: Submitted-05/08/2026, Revised-04/10/2026, Accepted-11/10/2026, Published-31/10/2026.
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Introduction:

Jazz, Rhythm, and Orality in Beat Poetry: Form, Performance, and Literary Modernism:

Two major phenomena about Beat Generation and Jazz have been studied by various scholars so far. First, the Beats' admiration for Jazz and second, the manner in which Jazz has been mentioned in Beat literature. Most scholarly observations focus on the relationship between Beat and Jazz as cultural (which show how Beat Poets emphasized on Jazz clubs), ideological (that Beat Poets made black musicians as outsiders) or thematic (which show how Jazz is mentioned in Beat Poetry). This paper attempts to reach to the answers of questions like what exactly Beat Poets adopted or learnt from Jazz? and how did those adoptions find its way to Beat Poetry? Tad Richards in his essay "Jazz and American Poetry" says that "the influence jazz had on Beat poetry cannot be overstated", but he mainly focuses on the idea of Jazz as metaphor and inspiration for Beats and not on musicology. Moreover, Mike Janssen in his essay "Jazz" claims that "Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis rapidly became what Allen Ginsberg dubbed 'Secret Heroes' to this group of aesthetes," but all these observations tell us very little about the manner in which Beat Poetry got its form. This paper makes the argument that Beat Generation engaged with Jazz not only as inspiration or admiration but it also internalized the specific techniques as the fundamental principles of Beat Poetry. In his article "The Word is Beat: Jazz, Poetry and Beat Generation", Jacob Baekgaard notes that the Beats' aim was "bringing words closer to music, with the howl of the human soul resembling the deep blowing of a saxophone," but even this observation misses to see the connection between Beat Generation and Jazz as structural and not otherwise, such as thematic or cultural. Tad Richards comes close to this idea when he says that "Kerouac described his writing style as 'spontaneous bop prosody,' but bop was no more spontaneous than it was unheeding of the metronome," in his essay "Jazz and American Poetry". This helps us understand the fact that the spontaneity or the formlessness that is visible in Beat Poetry is more like the result of deliberate internalization

of Jazz technique. And apparently no research work has focused on this idea so far. Thus, the present paper aims to fill this research gap by first identifying and studying the Jazz techniques adopted by Beats such as syncopation (a stress pattern that is against the iambic meter of west), call-and-response (an anaphoric repetition which aims at rhythmic Beat) and improvisation (encapsulating the revision behind the apparent spontaneity). Second, this paper shall examine where and how these techniques found its way in Beat Poetry through analysis of the poems selected for this study. And third, the paper shall challenge the notion of Anti-intellectualism and spontaneity associated with Beats. The present study, thus, focuses on unleashing the poetic form of Beat Poetry rather than their ideology.

"Jazz Breath: How Jazz influenced Beat Poetry", an article by Anpilson describes that "Beat poetics required a practiced air of spontaneity... Much of their poetry appears to be created upon first draft, but the poems underwent revisions that crafted the poems into something more." He says further, Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road" was "the mature product of ten years' graft by several pairs of hands," though it was celebrated for his spontaneous writing.

The distinction between apparent spontaneity and the reality is significant because it reveals that the Beats solved a fundamental problem modernism had created. Early modernists like Eliot valued formal innovation but kept it separate from oral performance-the poem's meaning was complete on the page, and how you said it aloud was supplementary. New Criticism institutionalized this separation, insisting that the text was autonomous and self-contained. The Beats challenged this assumption by learning from jazz. They discovered that in jazz, form and performance cannot be separated-a musician's syncopation only makes sense when performed, heard in real time. The Beats therefore did something revolutionary: they integrated this Jazz principle into poetry itself. They designed their poetic forms so that lineation, breath breaks, and repetition became instructions for performance. When Ginsberg repeats "who" in "Howl," this anaphora is not merely a textual device; it is a formal encoding of how the poem must

sound when spoken aloud. This explains the paradox of Beat "spontaneity": the poems appear spontaneous but actually result from careful revision and deliberate technique-exactly like jazz improvisation. By learning from jazz, the Beats thus overcame modernism's separation of form from voice, text from performance. This integration had lasting consequences, as later African American poets like Jayne Cortez directly built on it: "Like Ginsberg, Cortez also utilises the breath as the unit of her poetry adapting these breath-units to measures deriving from African American music" (Kleidona**)**. This demonstrates that Beat formal innovation was not a passing experiment but a genuine expansion of modernism itself-one that established orality and performance as constitutive rather than supplementary to literary form.

Syncopation and Call and Response:

The bepop's innovations emphasise on the second and fourth beats as against the first and second beats in the traditional western music. This leads to creation of syncopation. This technique became a foundational feature of Beat Poetry. Consider part 1 of the poem "Howl" by Ginsberg,

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz," (Ginsberg, part 1, lines 1–4)

In this part, the word "who" is written more than 30 times which clearly indicates the idea of using anaphoric repetitive word to provide a structural rhythmic beat to the poem. According to Janssen, Ginsberg himself says this in his 1959 essay "Notes Written on Finally Recording Howl" that, "I depended on the word 'who' to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to

and take off again onto another streak of invention." ("Notes" 134). Ginsberg accurately adopts the Call-and-Response technique from Jazz. In Jazz, one musician plays certain segment as Call and another musician responds to that particular segment and this chain reaction continues. Here in Ginsberg's poem this technique is visible through the use of "who", each of them performs the role of Call and the description followed by it is the response to that who.

In addition, this pattern enables poet for improvisation. For example, after every Call that is "who" poet can provide responses that vary widely in terms of the tone, syntax, length etc. In this poem it is visible, one "who" carries the description of spiritual wondering and on the other hand, another "who" describes criminality. The one Beat is constant throughout the whole poem, and the rest of the poem is all improvisation.

This structure is followed by Ginsberg in his poem "America" as well,

"America, I've given you all and now I'm nothing. / America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956." The repeated addressal to America plays the role of Call, and for every Call there is response. "America" is a constant beat in this poem just like "who" in "Howl".

Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California" also follows the Call-and-Response technique in a unique way,

"What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the side streets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.
In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! -and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?" ("A Supermarket in California" 4–5)

Here, in this poem, the Call is “What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman” and in Response, the speaker itself describes as a response to the Call initiated by speaker only.

Ferlinghetti’s “Pity the Nation” provides a clear Call and Response structure,

“Pity the nation whose people are sheep
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars
Pity the nation that raises not its voice
Pity the nation that knows

no other language but its own
Pity the nation whose breath is money
Pity the nation oh pity the people
who allow their rights to erode” (Ferlinghetti, “Pity the Nation”, lines 1-17)

Orality and Breath:

Charles Olson’s principle of “projective verse” held that “every line break should reflect a natural respiratory pause,” such that “Lineation thus becomes a function of respiration.” (Olson, 368-97). The Beat Poets internalized this as the primary feature of Beat Poetry. Take into account a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Constantly Risking Absurdity”;

“Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience” (Ferlinghetti, “Constantly Risking Absurdity”, lines 1-5)

The above-mentioned lines show that they do not follow grammatical logic but it adapts respiration logic. Here, the pauses that is taken in the poem represents breath intake while reading it aloud.

"Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout", a poem by Gary Synder follows the same respiration logic but not in the same way as Lawrence.

“Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.” (Snyder, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout”, lines 1-5)

Lines are kept relatively short intentionally so that it can be read aloud within a single breath. Anpilson, in his article, “Jazz Breath: How Jazz Influenced Beat Poetics” writes that "Ted Joans, a poet and friend of the Beat authors, once said, 'I could see that [Ginsberg] was picking up the language and rhythm of jazz, that he was not following the European tradition'. (Anpilson).

This observation is important because it indicates that in Beat Poetry, breath has become fundamental principle of poetic composition as against the word that is in conventional poetry. This clearly shows a formal and structural connection between Jazz and Beat Poetry as it indicates the way in which Jazz depends on breath as a physiological factor became central feature of Beat Poetry.

Further, Ferlinghetti wrote in the introduction to *A Coney Island of the Mind*:

"These poems are intended to be read aloud or chanted. The visual form on the page is merely a guide for the voice. The real poem exists in the performance, in the speaking aloud." (Ferlinghetti, A Coney Island of the Mind)

This is self-indicative that performance is a crucial part of Beat Poetry. What is written on page is a form of guidance following which performers may improvise their poem while reading aloud. And Beat poets used to do this while poetry readings. They used to take pause at different spaces than suggested by the written poems. As performance is the main goal breath becomes even more significant than anything and window for self-improvisation is way to entertain different performers as breath requirements may differ person to person.

Moreover, Kerouac also compared the use of space by him with the Jazz musician's breaks to breathe. He said, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" is explicit: "No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddles by false colons and timid usually needless commas - but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between out blown phrases)."

This idea of Beat poetry challenges the New Criticism's principle. As per New Criticism's Autonomy of the text principle, the meaning of a poem is not dependent on the performance. It primarily relies on the page. However, for Beat poets, the meaning of the poem is understood only when it is performed. The visual writing on the page is a guide or script which is also said to be modified by the performer if he thinks it is required.

Practiced Spontaneity:

The famous bebop solo "Koko" by Chalie Parker sounds utterly spontaneous but Parker followed years of practise of scales, chord progressions only after such intense work he could achieve improvisation that comes naturally. Thus, the seemingly organic work of art is not merely spontaneous because it was improvised on the spot but is a result of thousands of attempts on learning how to create such art. This applies to the Beat Generation equally.

It is believed by many that Beat writers wrote with spontaneity. There was no revision in the writings of Beat, indicating the state of pure inspiration from within. However, this paper

highlights that this perceived spontaneity itself is a formal technique that has been adopted by Beats from Jazz. Jazz musicians have inculcated this technique through years of practice. Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" is celebrated as spontaneous writing, as if the words coming out of stream of consciousness but this apparent spontaneity came after 10 years of practice to achieve the appearance of spontaneity.

Let us consider Ginsberg's "Howl" once again, in his poem the use of word "who" is not merely a coincidence but it is well crafted, revised and manufactured use. Also, the fact that Beat Poetry is focused on being read aloud indicates Beat poems to be well thought and crafted rather than spontaneous because the lines are calculated as per the breathing requirements while reading aloud. All these features look spontaneous but what is hidden behind them is years of practice, countless efforts to study Jazz and internalising it into the Beat Poetry.

Beat poets cannot be claimed as anti-intellectuals. Instead, Beats actually understood that form and spontaneity go hand in hand. Through Jazz, they learned that spontaneity itself is acquired after deliberate learnings and efforts. Osborne says that, "the Beats were often erudite, bookish, sedentary" even as they "kept wobbling between shame and pride in their own scholarliness," (Osborne,190-191). This observation throws light on the fact that Beats were actually scholarly intellectual people who achieved this flawless writing momentum after learning Jazz rigorously.

The poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "I Am Waiting" reflects this idea,

I am waiting for my case to come up

and I am waiting

for a rebirth of wonder

and I am waiting for someone

to really discover America

and wail

(Ferlinghetti, "I Am Waiting," lines 1–6)

These short lines are not coincidence or spontaneous but it is intended effort. They are learned from the Japanese poetic form Haiku and Jazz's breath technique. The appeared spontaneity is actually the result of diligent scholarly learning of Jazz, internalization of its techniques and craft.

Conclusion:

After evaluating Beat Poetry systematically, it is evident that Beat poets were scholarly poets. They have read other poets and navigated their own way of writing poetry through the techniques of Jazz. The techniques offered by Jazz to them became integral part of Beat Poetry, it was not merely inspiration to Beats. By establishing Jazz techniques into their poetry Beat poets shows how orality, performance can be the medium of conveying message. They proved that orality or performance are not something which are additional features of poetry writing but both orality and performance itself can be the medium through which poetic meaning is derived. The beats' way of integrating Jazz into their poetry challenges the idea of spontaneity associated with them. Their adoption of Jazz clearly shows how was the perceived spontaneity of Beat poetry achieved which gives us understanding that spontaneity and technique share symbiotic relation rather than being on opposite sides.

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