

# **The Importance of Music in the Counterculture Literature of the Beat Generation**

**Kawther Ibrahim Abbas  
Baghdad Business School  
Kawther.abbas@iraqed.org**

**اهمية الموسيقى في ادب جيل البيت المضاد  
كوثر ابراهيم عباس**

يلقى هذا البحث الضوء على العلاقة التكافلية بين الموسيقى والادب في سياق جيل البيت، وهي حركة ثقافية مضادة تكونت من كتاب وشعراء امريكيين في الخمسينيات والستينيات. ويبين بان جيل البيت، المنزعجين من الإمعية و الاتباعية والمتوقين الى الاصاله، وجدوا الالهام في موسيقى الجاز لاحداث ثورة في أشكالهم الادبية. ييدا البحث باستعراض الصلة التاريخية بين الموسيقى والكلمة، مسلطا الضوء على العلاقة التعاونية بين هذين الشكلين الفنيين. ثم يتعمق في نقد جيل البيت للمجتمع الأمريكي، الذي يتسم بالاستهلاك والمادية وقمع الفردية. يظهر البحث كيف أن الموسيقى، وخاصة موسيقى الجاز، كانت مصدر الهام حيويًا وقوة توجيهية لجيل البيت. ومن خلال تبني روح موسيقى الجاز، ابتكر جيل البيت حركة ادبية جديدة تحدد التوافق الاجتماعي، ودعت الى الاصاله، وخدمت كصوت قوي للمقاومة في الثقافة الأمريكية. الكلمات المفتاحية: جيل البيت، الثقافة المضادة، الجاز، جاك كيرواك، آلن جينسبيرج، الارتجال، العفوية، تيار الوعي، المقاومة

## Abstract

This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between music and literature in the context of the Beat Generation, a countercultural movement of American writers and poets in the 1950s and 1960s. It shows that the Beats, disillusioned with societal conformity and yearning for authenticity, found inspiration in jazz revolutionize their literary forms. The paper begins by establishing the historical connection between music and word, highlighting the collaborative relationship between the two art forms. It then delves into the Beat Generation's critique of American society, characterized by consumerism, materialism, and a stifling of individuality. The paper shows how that music, particularly jazz, served as a vital source of inspiration and a guiding force for the Beat Generation. By embracing the spirit of jazz, the Beats created a new literary movement that challenged conformity, called for authenticity, and served as a powerful voice of resistance in American culture. Keywords: Beat Generation, counterculture, jazz, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, improvisation, spontaneity, stream-of-consciousness, resistance

## Music and Word: The Two Wings of Resistance

In the realm of music history, a debate persists regarding the primacy of music and word. While the precise order of their emergence remains undetermined, scholars universally acknowledge the collaborative relationship between these two art forms. However, this historical partnership is not without its disruptions. Plato, a pivotal figure in the foundation of Western civilization, exemplifies this concern. He cautioned against music's influence, famously stating: "when the mode of the music changes the walls of the city shake" (qtd. in Simonelli, 140). Furthermore, Plato's dismissal of poets from his ideal society in Utopia (Copleston, 253) further underscores this apprehension. The two arts were reunited in the Romantic era against the rigidity of the previous age. Romantic principles attempted to destroy the boundaries between music and poetry in both theory and practice (Scher, 195). The Romantic poet, Coleridge, for example, appreciated the music/ word combination thus: "...at the opera in Syracuse, Coleridge noticed how the words and the music of a quintet appeared as fellow-combatants in a kind of love quarrel. The words were not 'interpreters' of the music, but both were 'one, and not one', united, separated and re-united 'till at length they die away in one Tone'. (Barry, 156) In his "The Soother of Absence", Coleridge observed the inadequacy of language: "words halt over and over again" and wished that he knew "the Language of Music", especially that the very poem was planned but never finished (Barry, 156) Not only language of music but music of language is also important; the kind of music one can have in one's soul and reproduce on paper in the shape of rhythm and sound. Coleridge called this inner music "the gift of imagination" which can give one "a new sense", and without which one can never be a poet (Hopkins, 54) Similarly, modern writers have found in music a source of imagination and a great muse, inspiring and enabling them to break away from traditional and academic forms of literature. Beginning with the French symbolists and continuing throughout the first half of the twentieth century, many of the most important literary modernists used music as an inspiration for their experiments with literature (Lodato, 4). It was a workshop that produced new modes and models of language. Eric Prieto, in his book, *Listening in: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative*, declares that the modernists' attraction to music and what it offers occurred as a reaction against the "mimetic function of literature", that characterized the literature of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century: [The reaction was] motivated by a growing mistrust of the conventions of nineteenth-century realism and by a desire to seek out techniques appropriate to one of the central quests of literary modernism: the ever more accurate representation of psychological states and processes. Music [acted] as a guide for reconfiguring the narrative text in such a way that it [could] better represent those

elements of thought that had theretofore been considered to be ineffable, unrepresentable, or otherwise inaccessible to language. (x)

## The Beat Generation and Music

The elements of thoughts that are inaccessible to language obviously refer to the unconscious mind. This relation between music and language on one hand and music and the imagination and the unconscious mind on the other was particularly important for writers after World War Two, especially the writers known as the Beat Generation, a group of American writers and poets of the 1950s and 1960s, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who rejected conformity and traditional social and literary values. Using such techniques as stream of consciousness writing, jazz-influenced free verse, and focusing on the workings of the mind, the Beat writers created works that were nonconventional in both form and subject (Richard, 23) By using music in their prose and poetry, they sought to create a system of their own in order not to be enslaved by others (Blake, xi), at a time when Americans mistrusted imagination. Such ‘‘fear’’ and mistrust of imagination and other manifestations of the unconscious mind can best be seen in a totalitarian society. One of the definitions *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives to ‘‘totalitarian’’ is: ‘‘of or relating to a political regime based on subordination of the individual to the state and strict control of all aspects of the life and productive capacity of the nation especially by coercive measures’’. This is what the Beat Generation saw in the USA as they were outside the American Dream matrix, that had lured so many others. People had been given what they wanted: suburbia, automobile, and TV sets, and thus stopped questioning the status quo. They didn’t have actual freedom, only the ‘‘freedom to consume’’ as the authorities or ‘‘superpowers’’- to use Ginsberg expression<sup>4</sup> - realized, that there were easier ways to stop revolutions and make sure people do not rebel: as long as their lives are all right and they have the things they want to make their lives easy, they do not question any policy They also realized they didn’t need aggressive power, if they controlled the way people think. Much of this thought control was done through language, which had become a device to serve the authorities- and to promote their ‘‘reality film’’- what they wanted people to believe. Describing how language is manipulated in a consumerist world, in his essay ‘‘The Music of Poetry’’, Reginald Gibbons comments: In everyday life, we are all affected by some of the potent but often unnoticed meaning-making techniques of rhetoric.... We can’t help responding, most often unconsciously, to them. They are used against us—in commercial and political speech, and in all too much of the American genius for turning news into a sorry kind of entertainment for the sake of the pleasures, sad to say, of opinion, grievance, fear, gullibility, and harangues aimed at our impulse to submit... in our formation there’s such a huge amount of forced language training that conditions our language abilities (which means a conditioning of our ability to think) by means of advertising, popular media, political discourse, and other saturations of our shared language-world... We get very little exposure to language that has been intuited and worked to utmost meaningfulness for the sake of thought and feeling; instead, it’s for the sake of persuasion and of the fashions in ready-made ideas and emotions. (writing-arts-blog.northwestern.edu) Similarly, William S. Burroughs argues that one thinks s/he uses the language while in fact the language uses her/him, as it is designed to serve the ‘‘enemy’’ – by which he means the western authorities; he adds that language has become the ‘‘word virus,’’ ‘‘the dead heart of the control machine’’ (xxiii). The war Burroughs implies is a kind of class war needed to free art from ‘‘the myth’’ and give it back to the masses: The most revolutionary experiment in poetry under the capitalist regime [has been the one that tends] to destroy all the myths about art that for centuries have permitted the ideologic as well as economic exploitation of painting, sculpture, literature, etc. ... [such an] experiment can and should serve the cause of the liberation of the proletariat. It is only when the proletariat has become aware of the myths on which capitalist culture depends, when they have become aware of what these myths and this culture [meant] for them and have destroyed them, that they will be able to pass on to their own proper development. The positive lesson of this negating experiment, that is to say its transfusion among the proletariat, constitutes the only valid revolutionary poetic propaganda. (Weber, 306) From this, it becomes obvious that there is a direct relation between politics and poetics, that reform in one could lead to the reform of the other. For the Beats<sup>5</sup>, a new language meant a new consciousness, what they thought was most needed in their time, the soul being dead as it became obvious in the words of Sampus, Jack Kerouac’s childhood friend. In a letter to Kerouac, Sampus outlined the contemporary relevance of Oswald Spengler’s philosophy by summarizing the spiritually destructive ego of the western man, and by pointing out the destructive effect of capitalism, he warned Kerouac of the consequences of following the ideals of this imposed model: in all of us, Jack, there is a great spirituality, that flowers in our youth and should bear fruit in our maturity. That it does not is

[because] there is a dissonance between ideals and life, between Civilization and the "landscape" whence it was rooted.... there are no more worlds to conquer in the Western Civilization. It remains for the intellectuals of the Western World to rearrange, to comment, to imitate but not to create, to actualize the fullest possibilities of the All- soul. The form set too thickly – its earth roots are withered, the soul is dead. (quoted in Lardas, 73) This said, as a kind of giving an antidote Burroughs affirms that "writers are very powerful...[as] they can write, and 'unwrite' the script for the reality film" (Burroughs, xxiv). The relation of reform in language and reform in society becomes most obvious in the words of Le Guin, saying: "we can't restructure our society without restructuring the English language" (quoted in White, 170). The Beats, as well as other post war artists, attempted to "restructure the English language". The question was how to do so. The beats found the answer by resorting to music, namely, jazz. In his book, Go, Beat author John Clellon Holmes writes: In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them, and their lives knew a gospel for the first time. It was more than a music; it became an attitude toward life, a way of walking, a language and a costume; and these introverted kids... now felt somewhere at last. (478) The same sentiment of jazz – which is rebellion – was transferred to the Beats along with the aesthetic of spontaneity embodied in the improvisation of jazz with its magic power of opening up channels to the unconscious. For Beat writers and poets, the vitality they sensed in jazz represented the powerful creative energy inside people, the release of which could transform society. An editorialist wrote in Climax magazine that jazz "affirmed the ideal of creative vitality" (Hobbs, 76). Jazz represented, Eithne Wilkins wrote in Jazz Forum, "the form that art must take if it is to work out the nightmare and what lies behind,[and] so gradually liberate the patient, who is both the person – in society and society itself" (quoted in Hobbs, 76) The "open" or "heteroglossic" forms advocated by Beat artists inspired by jazz, challenged the social power of the USA's dominant Anglo-American tradition (Belgrad, 16). Jazz principles of spontaneity centered around "honesty," "awareness," and "authenticity" over the mastery of traditional forms and techniques stressed by the established voices in American high culture like the "New Criticism" and the literature it promoted; moreover, it challenged the cultural domination of privileged Anglo-American "insiders", by giving voice to artists and writers from ethnic and social backgrounds that were not admitted in the official channels of cultural authority (Belgrad, 16). Kerouac's new style and ideology manifested itself in emulating the rhythmical experiments of such jazz musicians as saxophonist Charlie Parker (Lawlor, 154). Ginsberg also explored the use of jazz rhythms and imagery in much of his writing, especially his poem Howl (Whaley, 12) The jazz-inspired spontaneity, thus, promoted a new movement in literature that embraced intuition and stream-of-consciousness as a route to authenticity in contrast to the rationalism of western civilization, which had succeeded in developing technologies and principles of organization that threatened human life and freedom to a great extent. This spontaneity, therefore, struggled against the culture of corporate liberalism, which was a manifestation of these principles (Belgrad, 15). The lives of jazz musicians themselves acted as a great inspiration too as "the jazz musician is not merely the custodian of an authentic folk culture or even the conscious avant-garde artist; he is the leader of rebellion against post war conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless" (Pavlovski, 46). In following jazz musicians' steps, the Beats themselves became subterranean heroes who'd finally turned from the 'freedom' machine of the West and were taking drugs, digging bop, having flashes of insight, experiencing the 'derangement of the senses,' talking strange, being poor and glad, prophesying a new style for American culture, a new style...completely free from European influences (unlike the Lost Generation), a new incantation. (Rabaka, 136) Beside all this, the Beats' admiration for jazz can be specifically seen in the term beat itself: firstly, it implies rhythm, especially "the free-flowing rhythm of experimental Jazz" (Swartz, 11). Second, the term "beat" itself was inspired by Jazz musicians in the 1940s, who used the word to express their poverty and weariness in a hostile white world (Portwood-Stacer). Kerouac comments: The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the late forties, of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way--a vision gleaned from the way we had heard the word 'beat' spoken on streetcorners on Times Square and in the Village, in other cities in the downtown city night of postwar America--beat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction--We'd even heard old 1910 Daddy Hipsters of the streets speak the word that way, with a melancholy sneer--It never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies<sup>3</sup> staring out the dead wall window of our civilization. (quoted in Gair, 37) As it is obvious from the quote it was through the inspiration of jazz and jazz musicians that Kerouac, the father and prophet of the beat

generation, could "prophesy" a new style for American culture: I went one afternoon to the church of my childhood and had a vision of what I must have really meant with "Beat"... the vision of the word Beat as being to mean beatific.... People began to call themselves beatniks, beats, jazzniks, bopniks, bugniks and finally I was called the "avatar" of all this. (quoted in Blair, 487)

### Notes

- 1- From Ginsberg's poem "Do The Meditation Rock": "It's never too late to tell the superpower to stop and meditate" (quoted in Barry, 123).
- 2- The Beat Generation writers and poets are sometimes referred to as "Beats" in this thesis for the sake of concision.
- 3- A character in Herman Melville's short story- *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of a Wall-Street*- who one day ceases to do things repeating his famous line " I prefer not to" (Melville, 14). One of the symbolic implications of the work is that it is a silent cry of resistance against the dehumanization that occurs in a capitalist society.

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