



Archibald J. Motley, *Blues*, 1929

**Honey  
Mixed  
with  
Liquid  
Fire**

The 1920s gave birth to the Jazz Age. Once the music of poor Black Americans, jazz now became wildly popular with everyone, rich and poor, white and black. Part of its popularity was related to Prohibition which came into force in the U.S. in 1920 and was not repealed until 1933. Jazz was played in the speakeasies. Like drinking, jazz was an act of transgression. It flaunted the old rules of classical music and facilitated the new freedom-loving morality of the Roaring Twenties. In the songs of the Jazz Age can be found some of the best poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Jazz competed with classical music as free verse vied with formalism. Jazz declined in popularity after World War II as its various offspring, such as Rock 'n Roll and Rap, took over its rebelliousness and irreverence. All of these musical styles originated in the talents and the experiences of Black Americans.

The painting, by one of the great artists of the Harlem Renaissance, shows a night club in Harlem. Drinks on the tables, music in the air.



**Langston Hughes  
(1902-1967)**

Born in Missouri, Hughes grew up in the Kansas. He left Columbia University because he felt more at home in Harlem than on the campus. He worked his way around the world and then returned to study at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He published his first poems in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP. Hughes was one of the major forces in the explosion of creativity known as the New Negro Movement or Harlem Renaissance.

Langston Hughes was one of the most prolific poets of the Harlem Renaissance. He had lived a peripatetic life. He worked as a crewman on a merchant ship, and served as a busboy and assistant cook in a hotel. While a busboy he slipped his poem *The Weary Blues* under the plate of the poet Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931), who was dining at the hotel. Lindsay was impressed and introduced Hughes to a publisher.

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.



Langston Hughes

Aaron Douglas  
*Congo*, 1928



One of Langston Hughes' earliest poems was *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. The poem is striking in its simple solemn rhythmicity.

In 1828 and 1831, Abraham Lincoln and some friends were hired to take a cargo of merchandise on a flatboat down the Mississippi River from Illinois to New Orleans. The young Lincoln was horrified by what he saw at the slave market there. Some point to this episode as the beginning of his lifetime crusade against slavery.

### **Claude McKay (1889-1948)**

Born in Jamaica, McKay came to Harlem in 1912. He worked at odd jobs and wrote poetry protesting the state of Black Americans. His poetry presents radical views but follows classic forms. In 1928, his novel, *Home to Harlem*, about a soldier who deserts the army and goes back to find a life in Harlem, became a bestseller. McKay lived for much of the 20s and 30s in Europe and espoused Communism. He returned to the US in the late 30s, becoming a citizen in 1940 and a Catholic in 1944.



Claude McKay's sonnet brings to us the horror of the practice of lynching. The lynching of black men for crimes of which they were almost certainly innocent attracted crowds of onlookers. Postcards were made to tell one's friends and relatives that one was there. I cannot bring myself to show these.

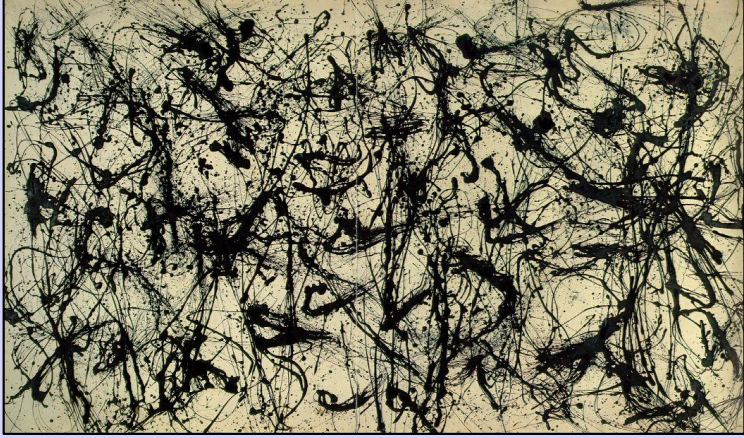


The song *Strange Fruit* was written by Abel Meeropol, an English teacher in the Bronx in 1937. He published it under the pseudonym Lewis Allan. Meeropol was transiently a member of the Communist Party. He and his wife later adopted the orphaned children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been convicted of espionage in 1951, and executed in 1953. The most famous recording of the song was by Billie Holiday. This video is from the 1950s:  
<https://vimeo.com/5568311>

	<p>Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon, I heard a Negro play. Down on Lenox Avenue the other night By the pale dull pallor of a one bulb light He did a lazy sway ... He did a lazy sway ... To the tune o' those Weary Blues.</p> <p>Langston Hughes, music arranged by Leonard Feather and played by an all-star jazz sextet, 1958</p>
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The Blues is one of the great contributions of Black music. The music originated in the American South about the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It derived from African music and work songs. It uses a repeating chord progression (e.g. 12-bar blues), with the chords containing “blue” or “bent” notes.

Langston Hughes performed this poem, published in his first book of poetry also entitled *The Weary Blues* (1926), together with a jazz group in 1958.



I got those sad old weary blues.  
I don't know where to turn.

Jackson Pollock  
*Number 32*, 1950

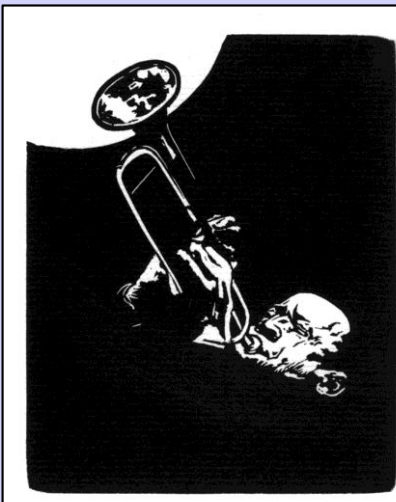
This is another Blues poem from Langston Hughes. The illustration is by Jackson Pollock, an American Abstract Expressionist.

the music  
from the trumpet at his lips  
is honey  
mixed with liquid fire  
the rhythm  
from the trumpet at his lips  
is ecstasy  
distilled from old desire—

Langston Hughes

Clifford Brown


Stefan Berg, 2007  
Buddy Bolden from  
*Let that Bad Air Out*



Our final Hughes poem describes the music of a trumpet player. It is a brilliant description of the experience of jazz.

The illustration is from a book about Buddy Bolden, a New Orleans trumpeter, who many believe was one of the great originators of jazz. The novel *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) by Michael Ondaatje describes his rise to fame and descent into madness.

The music is a trumpet solo of Clifford Brown – part of a 1954 recording by Dinah Washington of *I've Got You under My Skin* (Cole Porter). Clifford Brown died in a car accident in 1956 at the age of 26 years.



Sidney Bechet  
*Summertime*, 1939

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,  
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,  
Building for some a legendary Quarter  
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,  
Everyone making love and going shares –

Philip Larkin

White poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have long been enamored of Jazz. The music combined both freedom and rhythm, attributes they sought in their own poetry.

Sidney Bechet (1897-1959) was born in New Orleans as a “Creole of color.” He played saxophone and clarinet with some of the rising jazz bands, and was one of the earliest jazz musicians to record as a soloist. Like many of his colleagues he relocated to France in 1950. Bechet plays soprano saxophone in the *Summertime* track from a 1939 recording.

Larkin’s poem uses rhyme but, like jazz, it follows a rhythm abab that is not synchronized to the three-line verses. Like jazz everything comes together in the end.

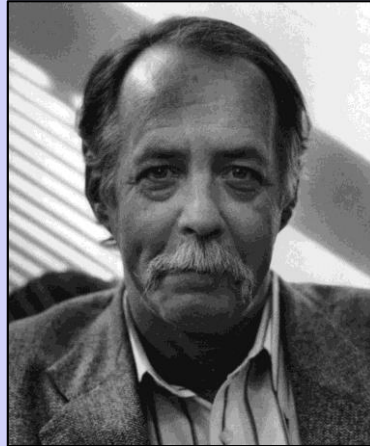
Larkin revels in the music, knowing full well that it portrays the dream rather than the reality of New Orleans. Storyville is the area (quarter) in the *Faubourg Tremé* of New Orleans that was set aside by Alderman Story as a regulated red-light district to control prostitution and drugs in the city located on the great final crescent-like turn of the Mississippi before it reaches the sea. Many believe that jazz had its main origins in the bars and brothels of Storyville. Prostitution was made illegal in 1917 and most of the buildings demolished in the 1930s so that block housing could be built. Discussion of the poem is at:

<http://www.allinfo.org.uk/levelup/sidney.htm>



**William Matthews  
(1942-1997)**

Don't play too much, don't play  
too loud, don't play the melody.  
You have to anticipate her  
and to subdue yourself.  
She used to give me her smoky  
eye when I got boisterous,  
so I learned to play on tip-  
toe and to play the better half  
of what I might.



1998 photograph by Ted Rosenberg

Matthews considers the complex interactions between the accompanist and the singer – Don't play too much, don't play too loud. As he states the relationship is partly sexual, and considers the relationship between Billie Holiday and the tenor saxophonist Lester Young in Count Basie's band (from 1937-1941). He called her "Lady Day" and she nicknamed him "Pres" (after FDR).



Bessie Smith sings out "Daddy"  
and Louis Armstrong plays back "Daddy"  
as clear through his horn as if he'd  
spoken it.

When I wasn't nothing but a child  
When I wasn't nothing but a child  
All you men tried to drive me wild



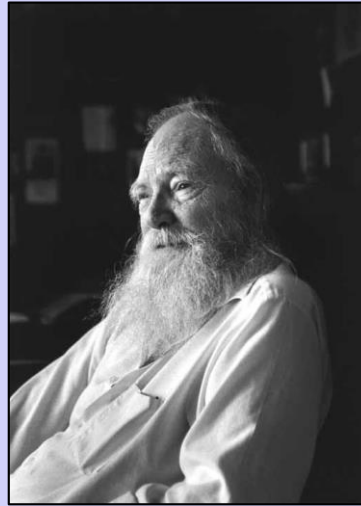
Sometimes the interactions between accompanist and singer become the work of genius. The Bessie Smith recording of *Reckless Blues* is from 1929.

**Hayden Carruth  
(1921-2008)**

Born in New England, and educated in North Carolina, Carruth published more than 30 books of poetry. His poems considered rural life, social justice and jazz.



But don't say a word,  
don't tell a soul, they wouldn't  
understand, they couldn't, never  
in a million years, how fine,  
how magnificent we were  
in that old club tonight.



Hayden Carruth's poem is about the experience of jazz musicians. He describes them meeting after a gig at a White Tower diner in Chicago in the early hours of the morning. Scrambled eggs and whiskey – weren't we fine tonight?

A website about the White Tower restaurants still standing is at

<http://www.roadarch.com/eateries/wt2.html>



*Blue in Green* from *Kind of Blue*, 1959

The next two poems consider or allude to what may be the most famous tracks in modern jazz – *Blue in Green* from the 1959 Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue*. The musicians involved are Miles Davis on trumpet, John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Bill Evans on piano, Paul Chambers bass and Jimmy Cobb drums. Miles begins the piece and then John Coltrane does a solo. This solo begins the music sample.



**Terrance Hayes**  
(1971- )

Born in South Carolina, he studied literature and painting at Coker College and played on the basketball team. He did graduate work at the University of Pittsburgh. He has taught for a while at Carnegie Mellon and is now a Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. He was awarded a McArthur Fellowship (“genius grant”) in 2014.

Terrance Hayes is one of the best young black American poets. His first book of poetry, from which *Boxcar* is taken, was entitled *Muscular Music* (1999).



Black as snow & ice as cool/ Miles stood horn-handed while  
John so&solloed/ I mean mad but mute like you be when you  
got five minutes/ to be somewhere ten minutes away & a train  
outta nowhere stops you/ boxcarboxcarboxcar & tracknoise

The poem refers to the interactions between Miles Davis and John Coltrane. (*Blue in Green* is one example but they played together for several years both on record and in person.) Miles was the leader and Coltrane one of the great soloist. The poem refers to their lives – Miles was indeed the son of a dentist; Coltrane was born in North Carolina; Naima was Coltrane’s first wife, from whom he separated in 1963 but with whom he maintained a deep spiritual relationship. Coltrane became more and more spiritual as he grew older, bringing feelings from Christian, Islam and Hindu religions to his music. This was most evident in his 1964 album *A Love Supreme* recorded after he was no longer with Miles Davis and had his own quartet. John



Coltrane was addicted to heroin and alcohol, and he ultimately died of hepatitis and liver cancer in 1967 at the age of 40 years.

The poem uses the rhythm of the boxcars passing to give a background. He then likens his thoughts (He is late for a date and will be even later because of the train) to the thoughts of Davis waiting for Coltrane to finish his solo.

### Grace Schulman (1935- )

Blue in green: baywater seen through grasses  
that quiver over it, stirring the air,  
slanted against the water's one-em dashes.  
Each blade is a brushstroke on thin rice paper,  
unrehearsed, undrafted, no revision,  
right on the first take. In "Blue in Green,"  
on tenor sax, John Coltrane fills the blues  
with mournful chords on scales older than Jubal's,  
ending in air.



Grace Schulman's poem deals directly with the *Blue in Green* track. The poem is a marvel of ekphrasis, describing in words both the sounds and their emotional meaning – if only I could get it right on the first take.

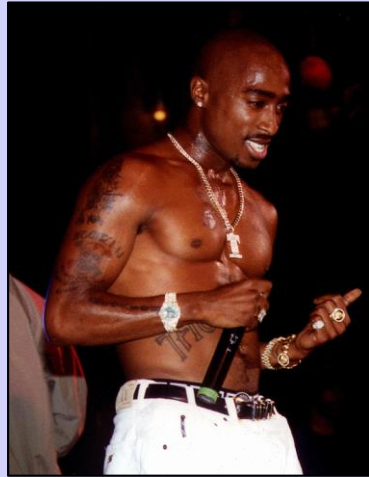


Lorenzo Maitani, Orvieto Cathedral (14<sup>th</sup> Century)  
Naomi teaches reading; Jubal and his bells.

Schulman's poem refers to Jubal's chords. The source is Genesis 4:21 which refers to those who were born of the line of Cain in the land of Nod:

And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.

Naomi was the mother of Ruth. She took care of Ruth's son, Obed, who was the grandfather of David. The relief on the Orvieto cathedral is thus tracing the lineage of David's love of words and music.



### Rap Poetry

Certainly the most popular form of poetry today, rap is a creation of urban African-American males. Like all oral poetry in English the rhythms are mainly determined by placing accents, usually four in a line:

/                      /  
Some say the blacker the berry  
/                      /  
the sweeter the juice

In rap poetry these accents form more complex rhythms with drums and other musical sounds.

One of the descendants of jazz is rapping – words spoken to a driving background rhythm. Spoken words were always a part of the Blues, but in the 1970s the new rap music became very popular. The fitting of the words to the musical rhythm is termed “flow.” This can be relatively simple (such as Tupac) or extremely complex. Rhyme is pervasive and often quite sophisticated. Alliteration is used to accentuate the beats.

### Tupac Shakur (1971-1996)

Born to a parents who were associated with the revolutionary Black Panthers, Tupac was named after the last Inca Emperor Tupac Amaru II who rebelled against Spanish rule. He grew up to a life of both sensitivity and crime. He had multiple arrests became part of the thug and gang culture. His rap music was loud, rhythmically complex and often obscene. His success as a rapper brought envy and violence. He was fatally shot leaving a Mike Tyson boxing match.



Tupac Shakur was one of the greatest and most influential rappers. His success fueled great envy among other black musicians and his drive-by shooting was perhaps related to these rivalries. The shooting remains unsolved.



### Nina Simone (1933-2003)

Simone studied to be a concert pianist at the Juilliard School but her application to the Curtis Institute of Music was rejected. She began to play piano in a jazz nightclub, and started singing because she was paid more if she sang as well. In the 1960s she became an avid supporter of the Civil Rights Movement. One of her most famous songs from this time was *Pirate Jenny*. This came originally from *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. In her version, Simone changed the setting to a flophouse in South Carolina.

We conclude this section with one of Jazz's great vocal stylists. Simone was classically trained and turned to jazz when she could no longer pursue her career in classical music.

### Pirate Jenny's Song

There's a ship  
The Black Freighter  
Turns around in the harbor  
Shootin' guns from her bow



Pirate Jenny's Song comes originally from the *Beggars Opera* by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. Their songs do not neatly fit with the story of the opera. Rather they portray the feelings of the singer. This song is about a pirate who is working as a servant in an inn. She suffers in silence,

biding her time until her ship finally arrives to shell the town and capture all the inhabitants. It is up to Jenny to decide whether they live or die. In the opera, the song is sometimes sung by Polly Peechum who is upset by her parent's refusing to allow her to marry Mack the Knife, and sometimes by the Prostitute Jenny who has harbored Mack from the police but who is upset by his refusal to give up Polly for her. In both cases the song gives voice to the desire of the downtrodden for revenge.

Simone's song became popular in the Civil Rights era as a warning that long years of oppression may ultimately end in violence.

### **Honey Mixed With Liquid Fire**



Norman Lewis, *Untitled*, 1947

The painting illustrated in this final slide is by Norman Lewis (1909-1979), an African-American artist born in Harlem. He was painting in the style of the Abstract Expressionists at the same time as they were but his work was overlooked. The famous 1950 photograph of the Irascibles in Life magazine is all white

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Irascibles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Irascibles)