“I, Too, Sing America”: Jazz and Blues Techniques and Effects in Some of Langston Hughes’s Selected Poems

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It is commonly accepted that oral poetry has been greatly influenced by jazz and blues, a phenomenon that developed mainly in the USA. In light of this, we may infer that such poems should logically be considered as mere scores to be deciphered and performed, or records that should be heard rather than read, and that have many of the dynamics of “the music” about them.1 In point of fact, a significant number of jazz techniques are to be found within the framework of poetry and combine with it to produce a highly personalized mode of free expression, which is the essence and spirit of jazz creation. As it appears, Langston Hughes’s outstanding collection of poems exemplifies the greatest of those qualities of jazz and blues, and his talent truly makes these poems come alive in the same way that jazz and blues music comes alive for the audience as well as for the musicians.

To those who are familiar with such music, it is quite clear that Selected Poems of Langston Hughes, a book which reveals the author’s personal choice, unquestionably includes blues poetry, as evidenced by the many characteristics of blues music that pervade most of the selected pieces. To start with, it is significant to note that Hughes’s poems are not at all static. They are pervaded with lively and active repetitions, and we notice a series of variations within each poem which closely resemble the variations present in a blues song. Many of Hughes’s poems exhibit a slow tempo and rhythm which is a common trait to most styles of blues. What is more, there exists some degree of internal variation in breath rhythm that contributes to the blues effect. In addition, those poems definitely seek the interaction of call-and-response, making the reader feel an active participant in the “concert” provided by the poet as musician, as performer.

Other characteristics of blues to be found in the poetry of Langston Hughes include the merging of the poet’s voice and history, references to social background and community life, along with parody, biting irony and a sizeable dose of colloquialism, with a view to “telling it like it is,” as the saying goes among African American bluesmen and jazzmen. Besides the blues elements, we can detect the recurring presence of various jazz techniques and effects in Langston Hughes’s poetry. The “Jazzpoem,” as it
is commonly referred to, gets its name from the union of jazz and poetry. And it can be pointed out that the effects of jazz playing are very much similar to those produced by the performing and creative language of poetry. To put it differently, we can say that when read aloud, jazzpoetry, with its spontaneous and improvisational quality, very much partakes in the essence of jazz music. Obviously, the purpose of jazzpoets, like Amiri Baraka, or Roland Snellings, or Askia Muhammad Toure, or the so-called Last Poets, is essentially to “bugle” words, as it were, to moan or growl words, making them very close to the notes of music aimed at imitating the voice. Through a careful reading of his selected poetry, it is apparent that Langston Hughes certainly fulfills the role of a successful jazzpoet. As a matter of fact, he was the very first African-American writer to make a conscious use of both jazz and blues music in his art. He was the one who deliberately set the example at a time when it was quite risky to do so.

Unquestionably, Hughes’s poems have a great sense of musicality, of lilt, of “swing” about them. Besides, we can notice in them too a good deal of allusiveness, of suggestiveness, of free association, together with frequent thematic variation. Langston Hughes, in his collection of poems, lavishly uses such characteristics of jazz as repetitions, choruses, riffs, scats, and nonsensical onomatopoeia, to achieve musical success as well as audience participation. It is also significant to note that Hughes’s poems are often marked by dissonance, discordance, and line irregularity, which all contribute to the representation of the jazz spirit in verse forms. Just like blues poetry, jazzpoetry makes use of the “call-and-response” pattern, which creates an atmosphere of intensive interaction. More often than not, Hughes’s poems exhibit the lyrical elements, the flatness, – or “blue-note effect” – that give jazzpoems their name. Likewise, this African-American poet laureate manages to create dazzling word effects that sound like the musical fireworks of a John Coltrane, a Charlie Parker or a Dizzy Gillespie. He also uses the pun as both a literary device and the necessary humor and comic relief destined to create distance, thus enabling the poet and his audience to “laugh it out,” instead of crying or rebelling against the system. As a jazz poet, Langston Hughes lavishly resorts to sound effects like echoes, groans, moans, and shouts, that indicate the direct influence of jazz on his art. In this respect, it should be remembered that Langston Hughes initiated the process of performing poetry with jazz accompaniment, a technique willingly adopted by moderns like Amiri Baraka, Michael Harper or The Last Poets, to mention only a few.

One of the most outstanding pieces included in Selected Poems of Langston Hughes is entitled “Feet O’ Jesus.” The feeling behind this poem is so raw and intense that it really puts the reader or listener directly in that spot.