

“I Improvised behind Him...Ahead of Time”: Charles Mingus, Kenneth Patchen and Jazz/Poetry Fusion Art

HOLLY FARRINGTON

In the last two weeks of March 1959, the jazz bassist Charlie Mingus and the beat poet Kenneth Patchen performed on stage together at the Living Theatre in New York City. Mingus and his band improvised to jazz themes at the back, while Patchen read simultaneously from his poetry at the front. This article examines in detail both Patchen's and Mingus's work with jazz/poetry fusion art and positions these collaborations within the context of the wider movement. It explores the artistic relationship between Mingus and Patchen and examines and contextualizes these performances within the jazz aesthetic.

In the last two weeks of March 1959, the jazz bassist Charlie Mingus and the beat poet Kenneth Patchen performed on stage together at the Living Theatre in New York City. Mingus and his band improvised to jazz themes at the back, while Patchen read simultaneously from his poetry at the front. The Patchen/Mingus performances marked the climax of the jazz/poetry fusion which had been becoming increasingly popular both at live gigs and on record releases. Mingus's autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, published in 1971 to great controversy, significantly references the performance, commenting that Patchen was a “real artist.” It is of this type of merged text–music performance that Patchen's biographer Larry R. Smith wrote, describing “the basic musical compositions [which] provide a context or environment out of which the musician's or the poet's statement acts in counterpoint or reinforcement.”¹

Whilst no recordings of the collaboration are currently known to exist, its very happening leads to unanswered questions regarding issues of

Dr. Holly Farrington is a freelance writer and independent scholar with interests in jazz, autobiographical writing, popular culture and American literary studies. She currently works as an Associate Lecturer for the Open University in London.

¹ Larry R. Smith, *Kenneth Patchen* (New York: Twayne, 1978), 134.

interdisciplinarity and artistic fusion, particularly with reference to the media of jazz and poetry. This article examines in detail both Patchen's and Mingus's work with jazz/poetry fusion art and positions these collaborations within the context of the wider movement.

Patchen had been heavily involved with the jazz/poetry movement since its conception, one facet of his own move towards interdisciplinarity, of which jazz/poetry was just a part. Kenneth Patchen's work with interdisciplinary artistic fusion will now be examined from two perspectives: his actual collaborations with jazz artists and his work with picture poems.

Patchen's various jazz and poetry performances were part of the so-called "beat generation's" drive during the late 1950s and early 1960s to bring jazz music into the poetry arena, to make it both accessible and "hip" at the same time.² Some of these fusions were successful, others less so. One particular low point in terms of artistic merit is the heavily pretentious and affected Cool Personnel's "Grimm's Hip Fairy Tales," in which Grimm fairy tales are provided with a new "hip" vocabulary over a jazz musical background. Unfortunately, here the clash of late twentieth-century popular music and early nineteenth-century children's literature proves too great.³

A further example of the clash between cultures is highlighted in the poet Maxwell Bodenheim's posthumously published autobiography *My Life and Loves in Greenwich Village* (1961), in which he bewails the danger of immediately associating poetry which contains an element of primitivism with jazz. The intentions of the author, he suggests, must always be kept in mind. He focuses particularly on Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo*, often performed by a poet named Eli Siegel in Greenwich Village cafés and bars in a particularly jazzy style. Lindsay, claims Bodenheim, wrote the poem in the style of "a mild, guitar-playing bard," but during his interpretations of this work, Siegel "rolled his eyes, twitched his face, foamed at the mouth, [and] banged on the table."⁴

Interestingly, there was a corresponding movement in the United Kingdom, culminating in performances at the Royal Festival Hall and the

² Patchen did resist being labelled a "beat," and was fairly vocal about this to friends. Through his non-appearance at events such as the October 1955 "Six Gallery Readings," he illustrated his lack of affiliation with the subculture. In a 1959 radio interview at the University of Washington he claimed that the San Francisco beat scene was "not my dish, and it's not the dish of any artist I know of, or any writer I admire." Larry Smith, *Kenneth Patchen: Rebel Poet in America* (Ohio: Bottom Dog Press, 2000), 243.

³ Currently available on the Rhino Label, as a track on the CD release *The Best of the Beat Generation* (1998).

⁴ Bodenheim, Maxwell, *My Life and Loves in Greenwich Village* (New York: Belmont Books, 1961), 112.

publication in 1969 of the anthology *Poems from Poetry and Jazz in Concert*. This suffered from little adverse criticism, primarily because the artists made hardly any attempt to integrate the two art forms. Poets such as Spike Milligan, Ted Hughes and Stevie Smith read their work, interspersed with “specially written interludes of jazz played as ‘bridges’ between readers.”⁵ A lack of any actual fusion meant that the jazz and poetry elements of the performance were seen as entirely separate. Indeed, it is perfectly clear from the poet Jeremy Robson’s introduction to the anthology that the events were seen primarily as poetry readings, as he commends the fact that “partly as a result of *Poetry and Jazz in Concert* ... poetry readings, in whatever form, have become a regular and accepted part of the London ... scene.”⁶

Returning across the Atlantic, the beat poets Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti both involved themselves in jazz/poetry fusion recordings and gigs. Indeed, Rexroth provides an invaluable insight not only into the aesthetics of such performances but also into the practicalities, in a 1969 interview:

The essence of the thing was in the direct speech of one person to another. Since none of us were singers, we read. Also there were other reasons for that. It gave a jazz musician much greater freedom. And poets were a hell of a lot easier to get along with!⁷

The practicalities of such live performances could also lead to problems. Poets may well be “easier to get along with,” but sung verse is louder, and singers have more experience of projecting their voice. Ferlinghetti reveals that “most of the poetry and jazz in the fifties ... was awful. The poet ended up sounding like he was hawking fish from a street corner.”⁸ On occasion, audiences simply could not hear the words. Patchen himself suffered from this at times, as John Ciardi, writing in 1961, reveals:

Whatever the merits of the theory [that jazz and poetry could be combined in a single performance]... the performance itself managed to be two things going on at the same time with no convincing sense that one was related to the other. Worst of all the music kept drowning out the words.⁹

⁵ Jeremy Robson, ed., *Poems from Poetry and Jazz in Concert* (London: Panther, 1969), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Kenneth Rexroth, “Ferlinghetti, Patchen and Myself” (1969), in David Meltzer, ed., *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 227–252, 240.

⁸ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Interview” (1969), in Meltzer, 92–95, 94.

⁹ John Ciardi, “Kenneth Patchen Does Jazz and Poetry” (1961), in Richard G. Morgan, ed. and with an introduction by, *Kenneth Patchen: A Collection of Essays* (New York: AMS Press, 1977), 120–124.

work clearly appealed to composers as a basis for their musical compositions of all styles – musicians who have utilized Patchen texts as the basis for lyrics in vocal compositions include artists as diverse as David Bedford, Richard Willis and Simon Sargon.

Patchen’s collaboration with the Alan Neil Quartet, recorded in Vancouver in February 1959 and currently available as *Kenneth Patchen Reads with Jazz in Canada* (Locust Music, 2004), reveals a further side to his own unique artistic fusion of poetry and jazz: that of improvisation. There was something unique about Kenneth Patchen’s approach to jazz and poetry. In a similar mode to those criticisms we have already examined above, Alan Neil is unsympathetic towards the movement in the original sleeve notes, lamenting the split between the “jazz guys” and the “beat” poets, in particular that the former saw the latter as “false, weird: it’s not a real scene, it only pretends to be.” The attempt to appropriate jazz’s world of “pot and heroin and casual sex” leads, according to Neil, to versions of the jazz world in “beat” literature where these things appear merely as “easy words in a fast-buck book.”

Given Neil’s attitude, it is both fortunate and a testament to both artists that he credits Patchen as “the one exception” to this rule. The poems read to jazz on the recording are transformed versions of the texts published in his 1957 *Selected Poems*. Rather than sticking rigidly to the published poem, Patchen chooses instead to form and shape the words around the music, so that a more fluid, aural idea develops, unconstrained by the written word.

The fact that each poem is developed in a different way suggests that Patchen is merely improvising alongside the band, rather than using a pre-ordained form and structure. Some poems simply have extra words inserted, some have words missed out, and some include longer improvisations which expand on the fundamental theme of the poem. This suggestion of improvisation is strengthened by the liner notes, which confirm that individual members of the band were wearing earphones in order to hear Patchen’s voice and begin and end the pieces appropriately. According to Neil’s sleeve notes, they only had one break in the recording, which again suggests that the aim for this particular collaboration was not a perfectly timed conversation between voice and instruments, but rather a more elastic, improvisational dialogue. Presumably, without a definitive text, the band would have looked to Patchen for a hand signal to indicate that he was reaching the end of his extemporization.

There are numerous examples of Patchen’s play with his own words on this one recording, but one particular poem which stands out is “Not Many

Kingdoms Left,” originally published in Patchen’s 1954 collection *The Famous Boating Party*. The text of the poem, as published, reads as follows:

I write the lips of the moon upon her shoulders. In a temple of silvery farawayness
I guard her to rest.

For her bed I write a stillness over all the swans of the world. With the morning
breath of the snow leopard I cover her against any hurt.

Using the pen of rivers and mountaintops I store her pillow with singing.

Upon her hair I write the looking of the heavens at early morning.

– Away from this kingdom, from this last undefiled place, I write civilizations,
governments, and all other spirit-forsaken and soldiery institutions, O cold beautiful
blossoms, the lips of the moon moving upon her shoulders ... Stand off! *Stand off!*

As a textual, printed poem, “Not Many Kingdoms Left” clearly deals with the difficulties Patchen encounters as a writer, focussing too much on romantic eulogies (presumably to Miriam, his wife), and not enough on “civilizations, governments, and all other spirit-forsaken and soldiery institutions.” The poem may well be a response to criticism of his work, the final repetition of “Stand off! *Stand off!*” revealing both his inability to focus on more mundane issues and his own internal frustration (emphasized in the use of italics) at this inability.

David Meltzer’s 1962 essay on Patchen informs us that so many “of the men of letters have said that Patchen is too loud, too sentimental, not specific enough nor accurate enough in the forms that he chooses.”¹³ The second criticism in particular must have angered Patchen. “Not Many Kingdoms Left” is certainly an irate poem; his domestic space, and particularly his marriage-bed, is the “last undefiled place” in his existence, and yet he must move “away from this kingdom” into the realm of “institutions.” Patchen’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* also deals with a character who bemoans his unappreciated ability: “What is not understood,” he protests, “is that talent has nothing whatever to do with creation. Mediocre artists produce a veritable cloudburst of talent; in fact, it is their sign, their stock in trade.”¹⁴

The recording of this particular poem plays with our concept of what Patchen’s views really were on the relationship between his romantic leanings and his more obligatory poetical output, between what “men of letters” saw as “talent” and his own methods of “creation.” Patchen begins this section of the recording with a short introduction to the band members,

¹³ David Meltzer, *We All Have Something to Say to Each Other* (San Francisco: The Auerhahn Press, 1962), 10.

¹⁴ Kenneth Patchen, *The Journal of Albion Moonlight* (New York: Padell, 1941), 142.

and entitles the four poems read here as “Four Poems as Songs,” hinting, of course, that change and improvisation may well take place. “Not Many Kingdoms Left” is the final poem in the quartet, following “The Everlasting Contenders,” “Do I Not Deal with Angels” and “The Sea is Awash with Roses.” The second of these poems is among Patchen’s best-known short verse, a beautiful and moving tribute to his wife Miriam.

The “her” of this poem is undoubtedly also Miriam, and her presence maintains a certain power over his ability to alter words. As Patchen reads, the first section is identical to the printed version, suggesting again the inviolability of his marriage. However, as he reaches the second session, which, as I have suggested above, responds to criticism of his work, there is a marked change from the printed verse:

– Away from this kingdom, from this last undefiled place, I would keep our governments, our civilisation and all other spirit-forsaken and corrupt institutions. O cold beautiful blossoms of the moon moving across her shoulders, there, where any other lips would be a proclamation.

Now Patchen does not only “write” the “institutions” of which he despairs, but “keep[s]” them away from Miriam. They are not only “spirit-forsaken,” but “corrupt,” a stronger and more powerful word than “soldierly.” The final anger of “Stand off ... Stand off!” is gone, yet there is no less certainty or purity in the final line. Those “cold beautiful blossoms” of the moon move across her sleeping body, and, were he to kiss her himself, he would assert, or proclaim, his ownership. But that time of “proclamation” has not yet come. There is less need for confrontation in this recorded version; it is more assured, and the words Patchen chooses reveal his certainty that the two worlds, one of beauty and purity, and one of institution and corruption, can and will be kept apart. Given his reluctance to write poetry which associated his work directly with the “beat” movement, it is no surprise that Patchen was attracted to Charles Mingus, another artist who consistently refused to bow to accepted practice. Mingus’s 1971 autobiography *Beneath the Underdog* is a fluid, musical text, not only in its subject matter but also in its form and structure. While this is not the place for an exposition of Mingus’s written work, a brief insight into the style of his writing will highlight connections between the two artists. It is also important to note that while the final publication date of *Beneath the Underdog* was 1971, Mingus had begun working on the manuscript a number of years previously, probably in the late 1950s or early 1960s.¹⁵ Mingus was

¹⁵ Charles Mingus, Interview with Bill Whitworth, *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 Nov. 1964.

therefore undoubtedly influenced by those artists he came across at that time.

Jazz musicians themselves are notoriously reticent in their autobiographical material to praise other artists. *Beneath the Underdog* allows us to glean a small amount of information as to how important the Kenneth Patchen collaboration was to him. As I have already indicated, it is mentioned only briefly, in a short section describing the experience of accompanying text with music: “I worked with a poet named Patchen ... We improvised behind him while he read his poems, which I studied ahead of time.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, he describes Patchen as a “real artist,” a rare accolade in a generally disparaging book. In reporting this collaboration in a book elsewhere devoid of reference to music (for it is not an exaggeration to say that the primary focus of *Beneath the Underdog* is sex), Mingus not only suggests his appreciation of poetry, and willingness to study literature (“ahead of time”), but also forges a crucial link between text and sound. The importance of poetry to Mingus, quite possibly revealing the influence that Patchen exerted on him, is also evident in the fact that during one of the lowest periods of his later life, whilst incarcerated at Bellevue mental hospital, he placed great emphasis on writing down his thoughts as poetry, including a “Hellview of Bellevue.”¹⁷

Mingus himself had previously participated in jazz/poetry collaborations, including a 1957 recording in New York of “The Clown” by Jean Shepherd in which Shepherd improvises on the image of the sad clown accompanied by Mingus’s band. This has quite a sinister effect and is, as with the “Lemon Colored Gloves” performance, a true amalgamation of poetry and jazz.¹⁸ One of his more famous jazz and poetry collaborations is undoubtedly that with Langston Hughes, resulting in the 1958 recording *Weary Blues*, in which Hughes reads his poetry to the accompaniment of music composed partly by Mingus and partly by the British composer and lyricist Leonard Feather.¹⁹

In contrast to Kenneth Patchen’s improvisational style – which was examined earlier with reference to his recording with the Alan Neil Quartet – Hughes, Feather and Mingus appear to have carefully coordinated their artistic cohesion at an earlier stage of the process. Hughes and Mingus

¹⁶ Mingus, Charles, *Beneath the Underdog* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 207. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁸ Mingus also released a 1958 recording on the Bethlehem label entitled *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry*, which he subtitled “A demonstration and discussion of the modern jazz idiom, its place, and its purpose with the great names in jazz.” In fact this contains only narration, not poetry, and only as part of the first track.

¹⁹ This recording has recently been reissued on the Verve label (CD 841 660-2).

had performed together at the Village Vanguard earlier that same year, collaborating with the pianist Phineas Newborn, and the strength of this previous experience is palpable on the recording. While Hughes does not keep exactly to the printed versions of his poems (substituting, for example, the more expressive "one-bulb light" for "old gas light" in the title track), he does not improvise in the same extended way as Patchen.

The prejudgement and communication between poet and musician is perhaps most obvious in the persuasive word-painting, particularly present in the poem-piece "Midnight Stroll," in which, as Hughes's protagonist stands on top of a tall building contemplating suicide, the trombone and tenor sax mimic his fears in their sudden high-pitched downward scales ("But it was high/It was high!").

In a similar manner, the poem "Could Be," a fast-moving poem in terms of imagery ("make it short and sweet your loving, so I can roll along") is also fast-paced by the band: a piano roll accompanies this phrase. Throughout the recording, the music does not overpower the poetry, and during significant phrases such as the final few lines of "Note on Commercial Theatre" ("I reckon it'll be/Me myself!/Yes, it'll be me"), Hughes's voice is all we can hear. Thus the fusion of jazz and poetry seems almost faultless.

Both Kenneth Patchen and Charles Mingus were thus intimately involved in jazz/poetry collaborations and Patchen also absorbed himself in other forms of artistic fusion. The actual meeting between the two artists took place in 1959, the year after Patchen's "Lemon Colored Gloves" recording, referenced above, was released. Around this time Patchen was exploring a further aspect of interdisciplinarity, creating picture poems such as those to be found in his posthumously published 1984 collection *What Shall we do Without Us?*

Influenced by, amongst others, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire,²⁰ he had begun to produce his own covers for his books of poetry. When a prolonged period of illness in early 1959 forced him to stay at home confined to his bed, these covers evolved into a succession of silkscreens and eventually a series of picture poems. In total, Patchen made approximately two hundred of these. His wife Miriam claimed in a 1976 interview that "generally they were an almost identical development in the head – the figure and the words."²¹ The blend of painting and poetry is seamless, akin to his best jazz/poetry collaborations such as this recording, in which one art form is created from two. The existence of these picture poems confirms

²⁰ Smith 1978, 134.

²¹ Morgan, *Kenneth Patchen*, 66.

the immersion into interdisciplinary art forms which Patchen undertook during his lifetime.

Meetings between Patchen and Mingus, both for rehearsal time and for the final gig, were engineered by the civil rights activist David Dellinger. The performance itself took place in March 1959 at the Living Theatre in New York, where Patchen's jazz play "Don't Look Now" was due to be produced later that year. Unfortunately, not only did the theatre not honour this contract, but also no recording of the event has yet been found.²²

While it has been shown that there were both problems and successes with such overt displays of interdisciplinarity and art fusion, this meeting of jazz musician and poet was a crucial event in the history of American literature and music. The jazz/poetry movement was a short-lived yet remarkable phenomenon, a true amalgamation of two distinct art forms. One reason for its curtailed existence may well have been the practical difficulties involved in sound levels at concerts. In addition, these artists were not without their critics. Mingus's autobiography has been heavily criticized for its deviancy and lack of musical content. There is no comprehensive edition of Kenneth Patchen's complete works currently in print. Yet both artists need to be heard. A recording of the Patchen–Mingus collaboration would undoubtedly be both a fascinating and inspirational art work, were it to come to light. Meanwhile, we may listen to Patchen reading to jazz, and Mingus performing with poetry, and we may wonder.

²² *Don't Look Now* was in fact finally produced for the first time in 1968 by Joel Climenhaga. See Smith, *Kenneth Patchen*.