

sound-on-the-spot

I grew up in Los Angeles, about seven miles from Hermosa Beach, home of The Lighthouse, a jazz club, maybe one-hundred feet from the beach. When I was about seventeen to twenty years-old, I went to jazz performances at The Lighthouse, & those experiences in listening closely to live jazz are the seeds for the later efforts toward innovation in growing the trees of *sound-on-the-spot*. For a \$2.50 ticket & 75¢ soda per set, you could enjoy first-rate jazz musicians. I saw Dexter Gordon, Freddie Hubbard, The Weather Report, Kenny Burrell, Elvin Jones, Tim Weissberg, Gábor Szabó, & many others. It was an intimate setting, where you could practically touch the performers. I loved being in the audience.

I knew very little about the music, but soon learned about improvisation, one of the foundations of jazz. One of the prime components of improvisation is termed “the singing mind,” by jazz scholar Paul F. Berliner.

To illustrate, Berliner quotes composer & alto saxophonist Lee Konitz: “Improvising is a singing, whistling phenomenon when it’s really happening. It’s the expression of the sound that you can conceptualize on your own steam....” Further, Berliner quotes New Orleans trumpeter Mutt Carey: “When I’m improvising, I’m singing in my mind. I sing what I feel and then try to reproduce it on the horn.”¹ *Sound-on-the-spot* finds its ground in the lyrical rhythm of language rather than song; improvisation in words is my procedure, but I won’t deny the music. While words do the heavy lifting, it’s often the phrasing & music that makes poetry worth re-reading & savoring.

The practice of improvisation is highly compatible with lyrical poetry. This is not usually the case for dramatic or epic poetry, nor for personal narrative poetry. Lyric poetry is

¹Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Jazz Improvisation*, pp. 180-81.

always involved in sound. The way I hear lines of poetry involves vowel chiming in no set pattern, occasionally as slant end-rhyme.

More than anything, I frame the rhythm of my language with verbs, action, movement, not a lyrical ego, standing on stage directing, visible to all. Action is the ground from which improvisation develops. The skill of following the sound of the poem is the heart & nervous system of *sound-on-the-spot*, writing it down as the words come forth rapidly, in accordance with their flow, rhythm, & verbal significance. *Sound-on-the-spot* keeps the poet alive to all possible ways that vowels can change our listening awareness. All the senses become engaged.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky pointed out that the senses are reciprocal, supporting one another synesthetically. In practice, the ear engages a rhythm, & the poet builds that rhythm with words. The process is dynamic, building words into an improvised line, one long prepared for through practice & through training of perception for combinations of sounds. *Sound-on-the-spot* has the potential to work around the clock, training a poet, sharpening perception in the storehouse of color, sound, & imagery. This approach allows for the unconscious to play a role, but it does not privilege unconscious operations as a foundation for poetry writing.

Sound-on-the-spot, rather, is about making mindful choices in the rhythm, texture, & significance of the poem, giving the poem shape & form. Conscious mindful choice combines with the music of chance as the poet recognizes the two.

Shape as the poet finds it, guides the process, & that dance is a balance of *sound-on-the-spot* among structure, lyrical sound, & improvisation. We are surrounded by improvised sounds during every time we walk through city, country, village, & coast. Giving shape to improvisation is the choice of words in the lyric flow. We are everywhere surrounded by routine

& improvisation. *Sound-on-the-spot* gives words to the poet that break routine open into a new synthesis of hearing & seeing.

Sound-on-the-spot is a practice available to anyone who trains their mind for the way lyric sound develops. As such, the practice offers the poet a means of generating poetry *on-the-spot*. While *sound-on-the-spot* involves the complexity of language, the experience of its practice is exciting, exhilarating, & liberating. It appeals to the desire one has to make lyrical language fresh, rhythmic, & dynamic.

Since I gave up using justified left margins in my poetry almost fifteen years ago, *sound-on-the-spot* continues to be my “go-to” procedure. The form on the page helps generate the poem, which comes through a hands-on process of practicing *sound-on-the-spot*.

Sometimes I use the meditative tone of the Nepalese singing bowl as impetus. Occasionally I meditate on an object, such as beetle-eaten inner spruce bark. Or I meditate without language at all, & empty out (temporarily) language.

When Peter Gizzi writes in “The Outernational,” “Start from nothing / and let sound reach you” (*In Defense of Nothing* 157), I take that to mean that the poet should prepare for composition by allowing the sound for the poem to come forth. Gizzi suggests that we ought to empty ourselves of preconception, at the same time that our senses are sharpened, at the ready, so that the sound & rhythm of the poem reaches the poet.

The work of the lyric poet is to set the sound in a rhythm that suits the poem’s significance. To improvise is to remain mindful. Clark Coolidge writes, “Open the mind to everything, and then follow the ink” (*The Crystal Text* 53). That openness is a contemplative ground from which the action of poetry is made.

Not only is this openness an approach to writing improvisation, but also it is a cultivation of the state of mind enabling its composition. The mindful sharpened senses are both cause & result of *sound-on-the-spot*. If the art of poetry is a way of thinking in images, as Viktor Shklovsky suggests, then *sound-on-the-spot* is a way of hearing & writing poetry on-the-fly.

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