

How Musing on a Jazz Giant Can Help Unlock Our Stories

If we could write the way jazz artist John Coltrane played the saxophone, all our problems as writers might be resolved. When Coltrane hits a note, our senses are heightened, and we are transported as we attach meaning to the music. Even without words, we are touched by the artist's musical message. From the depths of his subconscious and through the vehicle of music, Coltrane expressed pain and suffering, beauty and joy, fear and resolution. He was willing to take a leap, go to the edge, and bring us back again. Suppose as writers we could also write that way. Go beneath our self-editing surface, loosen the reins, and bring forth the words to awaken the same in readers. When I listen to Coltrane, I don't hear any walls he may have put up to stop short of what he wanted to express. I do, however, see those walls when I write.

We live our lives as observers and feel the need to explain it in our own unique way, whether we fold it into fiction, memoirs, horror, romance, mystery, or poetry. But what we write can sometimes feel like we're releasing pages from our journal where so much of our personal selves or those we love will be laid bare on the page. So, we stop short and are then disappointed when our work is rejected because it lacked depth, character, or any other descriptive that we didn't include. Writing in a way as Shakespeare intoned in *Hamlet* as just "Words, words, words!" (29;2.2.). Creating noise, not words with any depth or meaning.

So, when writing about painful or emotional experiences or reactions to events that have touched us on a deeper level, why not liberate ourselves and release those feelings into the holy ether instead of holding onto them like close friends? Pain, suffering, sadness, and anger ought to be explored and released into the collective consciousness, such as when we take to the streets to cry out against racial and social injustices. We raise our voices, sing, chant, and yell until we reach a crescendo—because we want to be heard. Just as Coltrane reaches a crescendo at the end

of “Alabama” a mournful tune recorded in 1963 after the bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham. The song starts with a slow incantation from his saxophone until its striking finish when the final note resounds. Coltrane used his instrument to express a painful event as jazz vocalist Billie Holiday used her unique voice a few decades before him in the 1930s when she sang the haunting lyrics of “Strange Fruit.” Originally a poem later set to music, the song was written by English teacher Abel Meeropol after he saw the disturbing Lawrence Beitler photo of the lynching of two African American teenagers, an image that “haunted him for days” (Pelisson). The image, as Meeropol wrote, of the “Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze...” is as horrifying as the crowd of onlookers in the shot, a few even grinning towards the camera. Audiences were equally stunned when they heard the tune because at that time “[t]hings like that weren’t talked about” (Miller). Like the brutal scene depicted in the photograph, an author’s words also have the power to shock and ask us to see things differently.

These above examples may seem extreme to some, but life is not always a picnic, and as writers we offer the world our interpretation of what we witness. Although we may fear judgement in the form of bad reviews, family disapproval, angry or hurt friends, or the “viral” pandemic of social media scorn, writers have never been left off the hook and were disparaged in print long before the internet. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* was dismissed by author Truman Capote as, “That’s not writing! It’s just typing” (qtd. in Clark). Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* shocked readers of 1855 for its “frank portrayal of sexuality and its obvious homoerotic overtones” (“Banned, Burned, Bowdlerized”). Of the now classic work one reviewer had then stated, “. . . it is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth” (Griswold). And it is impossible to imagine the literary canon without works by

either Kerouac or Whitman, both who continued to write, the latter putting out an additional five editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

Every writer has their reasons for what they fear. Horror writers may despair they'll never match up to such genre giants as Stephen King, an author whose wife thankfully rescued his manuscript *Carrie* from the trash where he had tossed it. Writers of vampire lore may worry they'll never create a character as intriguing as the Vampire Lestat, whose creator Anne Rice went against the grain of what was popular to write about in the 1970s. Poets may hesitate to expose too much of their inner world and never share their work. Writers working on memoirs may fear outrage from persons they write about or personal events as they remember them. We write, though, to help ourselves complete the picture, even if our version of events may not be well received. Comparing ourselves to established authors and worrying we won't match up is a futile business. Rather, we should look to their work for inspiration and study their style, if so inclined.

I envy jazz musicians because they don't have to explain why they chose the notes in their improvised solos. Nobody asks if they were mad at someone when they wrote an instrumental piece, or maybe they do because it's all open to interpretation, but only the composer knows if the inspiration was love, anger, envy, sadness, or loss. As listeners and readers, we create our own stories and connections. Whenever I hear a B.B. King song, I'm transported back to a small beachside club in Southern California, my friend and I sitting awestruck at the foot of the stage where the legendary blues guitarist stood larger than life. In that memory, I am reliving a personal rite of passage, my entry out into the world of live music, witnessing a musician whose records spent a lot of time on my turntable. Ask any book lover or

writer the first book that made them excited, and they will most likely remember it with equal enthusiasm. Try to imagine though how immemorable some books would have been if the authors were not willing to go deep enough in their writing. Such as, if William Burroughs wrote stories that only scratched the surface of what it was like to be a junkie or “queer”; Jean Genet never explored on paper the “close relationship between convicts and flowers” (9) in *A Thief’s Journal*; Henry Miller tempered down *Tropic of Cancer*; Luis J. Rodriguez told only part of the story in his memoir *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*; or how flat Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would have read were it not written in the vein of magical realism. Well-written stories have the power to inspire us to tell our own stories in our chosen medium and reveal something that others can relate to.

Doing research for this essay, I came across various tips on writers’ websites about overcoming our fears when writing. The tips were many of the same I had read before, and some may find them useful. But when you have spent years building up a wall as I have, you need to seek out a personal trainer who can help you build up your muscles to scale it and get to the other side--instead of always trying to go around it. Searching on Masterclass for deeper insight, I came across “Roxane Gay Teaches Writing for Social Change,” an author whose work I had not yet read. Gay’s essays, memoirs, and graphic novels are often praised as one review publication stated, “intense, unsparingly honest” (Review of *Hunger*). As someone known for frank discussions in her essays and *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* that detailed being gang raped at 12 years old and subsequent weight gain, it was not surprising in her Masterclass to hear Gay assert, “You don’t need to be brave when you’re writing—you need to acknowledge that you’re terrified and do it anyway” (Gay, 11:36-11:40). But fears don’t die overnight. Gay admits that

she had previously “discussed the assault cursorily” and always “wrote around it,” and that it took three decades before she was “ready to share the details” (7). In writing about painful personal experiences, Gay ignites us when she emphasizes, “There is no pleasure to be had in writing about trauma. It requires opening a wound, looking into the bloody gape of it, and cleaning it out, one word at a time” (37).

As I listen to Coltrane and the way he fearlessly reaches for all the right notes, it’s starting to affect how I write. To exorcise my fears, it feels necessary to take the first step. When we write, revelations often unfold as one door leads to another. We uncover memories and things we hadn’t considered or find missing pieces of the puzzle. We then stand at the crossroads and pick our direction to either write about it or not. For example, I searched for a detail about a great aunt’s suicide (that happened long before I was born, and by the worst means possible, though not uncommon in her day), and messaged a recently discovered cousin who found me via a family genealogy site. She provided the answer--and then some. Family histories are sometimes edited for “family viewing,” or not passed down, and the real truths disappear like spirits in the wind when taken to the grave as older generations pass, specifically the Silent Generation (1928-1945). Unfortunately, the next generation loses out when truths are buried that could have provided more insight and information. What my cousin revealed were parts of the story my mother neglected to include (because my father didn’t want us to know any of it). Knowing the whole story, I now understand the why of things and how it trickled down into my writing and possibly laid the groundwork for the wall I constructed that stands before me when I write. Why my father never told us that our great aunt, my grandmother’s sister committed suicide because her husband assaulted our grandmother at age 16 and that one of our

uncles was this man's son. I now know why Grandma looked so forlorn in her photos, even though I had seen her sometimes laugh or smile. I now understand why my father never relayed any part of this story to us, as it was probably too painful for him to talk about or maybe he feared something I haven't yet quite figured out. I can only in time put my fingers on the keyboard and write through it to thread the strands back together.

But this is what I mean—our stories, when told honestly, help us make sense of our lives, and if we instead hand over control to our fears, they will sit and fester like open wounds. I can see now how that silence worked its way into my writing and why I don't always speak my own truth in my work. Instead of creating a finely improvised solo that somehow magically hits all the notes, my writing sometimes reads as if there's a missing piece, an emotion not emphasized, like a song without a bridge. I have ghosted myself because of my own fears.

Writing is an act of redemption and a way of reclaiming some sense of ourselves we may have lost along the way. Writing is freeing, and “is deeper than therapy. You write *through* your pain, and even your suffering must be written out, and let go of” (Goldberg 190). Rather than burying it in endless revisions and drafts, of which I am guilty, creating what is more like a fat journal locked in a drawer to eventually be discovered by someone, leaving more questions than answers. Writing is a long and arduous journey, and the first step is taking our foot off the brake and at least starting by getting out of the driveway.

When John Coltrane hits the first note of any tune, we know we are in for a ride, and if you're willing to go there with him, it can take you places that will surprise you. As readers we are fortunate to have writers like Jack Kerouac, who fused the rhythms of jazz into his prose, detailing his journey across the United States and into Mexico in the seminal Beat Generation

novel *On the Road*. A novel that continues to inspire generations of rucksack-carrying dharma bums to explore the God-like wonder of the mythical road or make pilgrimages to Desolation Peak. When we take the leap and dive deeply in our writing, readers will want to take that journey with us to help make sense of their own. “By choosing to tell your story, you help bring the messy, the hard, the true stories of life into the light—and give others going through the same thing confidence that they are not alone.” (Box and Mocine-McQueen 27). That may seem like a burden to bear, but as writers when we read others’ work, aren’t we also doing the same?

Maybe it’s time we hit the delete key and start erasing those fears, one backspace at a time. I know that I need to do so with the group of faces I call my “imaginary council,” who hover over or stand before me when I write. Some of them exist in real life, others meld into a sea of faces that were many years in the making. A few of those faces encourage me no matter what I write, some are persons from my past who I won’t likely run into again, some have crossed over and exist in a parallel world. Some come when summoned whenever I light my “santos” candles for guidance and light. If truth can be found in writing, then I’m all for it, considering how much of my life has been devoted to the solitude of it. Well, in the company of John Coltrane and a long list of his contemporaries anyway.

Maybe we need to answer Rilke’s question he posed to a young poet, “ask yourself in the most silent hour of the night: must I write?” (6). If the answer is yes, then that’s a start, and then perhaps we take a page from James Baldwin who urged, “...you have to decide who you are and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you.” Write about who we are, not what others expect of us or think we should write. I also agree with Anne Frank who probably understood better than most about the solace writing offers in that “The finest thing of all is that I

can at least write down what I think and feel; otherwise, I would suffocate completely.” And maybe that’s all it takes, one breath at a time, one word at a time, one paragraph at a time, one page at a time, following our muse until we hit send, publish, or post once all the notes fall into place.

###

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley." Melville House, 19 June 2020,

<https://www.mhpbooks.com/james-baldwin-debates-william-f-buckley/>

"Banned, Burned, Bowdlerized." *Walk Through the Exhibit*. University of Virginia Library 2021,

<https://explore.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/show/censored/walkthrough/bowdlerized>

Box, Heather, and Julian Mocine-McQueen. *How Your Story Sets You Free*. Chronicle Books, 2019. Print.

Clark, Tom. *Jack Kerouac*. Marlowe & Company, 1984. Print.

Frank, Anne. "The Complete Works of Anne Frank." Anne Frank House.

<https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/diary/complete-works-anne-frank/>

Gay, Roxane. "Roxane Gay Teaches Writing for Social Change – Getting Started as a Writer."

Masterclass, 2021. <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/roxane-gay-teaches-writing-for-social-change>

Gay, Roxane. *Writing into the Wound*. Scribd Originals, 2021. E-book.

<https://www.scribd.com/book/490048177/Writing-into-the-Wound-Understanding-trauma-truth-and-language>

Genet, Jean. *A Thief's Journal*. Grove Press, 1964. Print.

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1986. Print.

Griswold, Rufus W. [unsigned in original]. "[Review of Leaves of Grass (1855)]." 10 November 1855. The Walt Whitman Archive. Gen. ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M.

Price. Accessed 22 April 2021. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>

Miller, Marcus. "The Strange Story of the Man Behind 'Strange Fruit.'" NPR, 5 Sept. 2012,

<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>

Pelisson, Gerard. "The Strange Story of the Man Behind 'Strange Fruit.'" NPR, 5 Sept. 2012,

<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>

Review of *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, by Roxane Gay. Kirkus, 2 May 2017.

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/roxane-gay/hunger-gay/>

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*, Translated and With a Foreword by

Stephen Mitchell. Vintage Books, Random House, 1986. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Dover Thrift Study Edition, 2009. eBook.

Works Consulted

Box, Heather, and Julian Moccine-McQueen. *How Your Story Sets You Free*. Chronicle Books, 2019. Print. Pages 8 - 28