

The Jazz Haikus of James Emmanuel: Revolutionizing Poetry through Music

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Abstract

The Haiku originated as a form of traditional Japanese poetry many centuries ago. With time, it has undergone cultural appropriation in several ways, yielding to modernist adaptations and influences at the hands of eminent poets such as Jack Kerouac, Ezra Pound and others. However, even in its modernist appropriations, the new kind of haiku that has emerged remains faithful to the Zen concept of drawing inspiration from nature. While several poets have adopted and revisited the haiku form time and again, few have attempted to completely revolutionize the traditional concept to which it is associated. This paper concerns itself with one such poet who has successfully managed to bring about a harmonious union of the haiku form with jazz music. By tracing the origins of the haiku, its subsequent adaptations and then posing these in contrast to the experimentations by James Emmanuel, I will attempt to show how Emmanuel has managed to revolutionize the haiku in both aspect and form. His poems do not merely appropriate connotations of jazz in their content, investing themselves with multiple layers of meaning, but are also structured in a way so as to imitate the rhythm of jazz riffs, making for a transformative reading experience that is at once poetic and musical.

Keywords: Haiku, *waka*, *renga*, Jazz, poetry, sexuality, desire

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In an age of pocket-sized transistor radios, pocket-sized phones and even pocket-sized pet dogs, it is only a matter of time before widespread interest veers towards the pocket-sized poetry. This pocket-sized poetry, by which I mean the Haiku, is a form of poetry that is by no means new, although the West has discovered its pleasures more wholly in the last twenty years or so. The haiku, a poem traditional to the Japanese culture, developed over a hundred years ago and owes much of its origins to the *waka*, the oldest verse form that exists in Japanese songs with thirty-one syllables in five lines (5-7-5-7-7). The first three lines of the *waka* follow an arrangement of 5-7-5 with occasional variations of 5-7-6 and 5-8-5. From the *waka*, another verse form that came about was the *renga*, better known as ‘linked song’ because of the way it forms a continuous chain comprising alternatively of fourteen (7-7) and seventeen (5-7-5) syllable verses, each of which are composed separately but linked together to form a single poem. The starting verse of the *renga*, better known as the *hokku*, became the most important verse of poetic vision. By the time Matsuo Basho (1664-94) wrote his famous haiku on the frog in the pond, the *haikai* had become the dominant verse of poetic vision. It was the innovation of this *haikai* that brought about the haiku as we know it today.¹

The haiku, in accordance with its adaptation in modern day English poetry, is a three line verse comprising of seventeen syllables divided in the sequence of 5-7-5, that is, 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second and 5 syllables again in the last line. In the last twenty years, the haiku has gained precedence in English poetry changing hands from the famous Imagist figure Ezra Pound to the beatnik Jack Kerouac. These writers have, in turn, played with the form and content of the poem while remaining true to its structural composition and its literary trope of dealing with the interpersonal relationship between man and nature. Of the several poets who have adopted the haiku and experimented with it, one poet worth the special mention is James Emmanuel for the creation of the *Jazz Haiku*. The aim of this paper is to present, through a detailed study of Emmanuel’s poetry, how the poet has incorporated in his creation of the Jazz Haiku a distinct innovation of content, revolutionizing it entirely through the incorporation of music and musical references.

¹ For more information on the genesis of the haiku, refer to Yoshinobu Hakutani’s “The Genesis and Development of Haiku in Japan”, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*, (Palgrave, Macmillan: 2009) 07.

The Jazz Haiku is a phenomenon that came about with Emmanuel's book *Jazz from the Haiku King* in 1999. In its treatment of content, the jazz haiku differs significantly from the traditional haiku in that it does not directly deal with nature-human interpersonal relationship. Despite this, it retains the label of 'haiku' without much opposition. If one is to ask how this is possible, it would perhaps aid in a better understanding of the matter if one turns to what Yoshinobu Hakutani has to tell us in his book *Haiku and Modernist Poetics*—

“Even on the surface there is much in common between jazz and haiku. As jazz performance thrives on an endless improvisation that the composer makes out of traditional materials, so does haiku composition on an infinite improvisation on beautiful objects in nature and humanity. Because of improvisation, the composer in both genres must efface his or her identity. In jazz, play changes on ideas as well as on sounds, thus creating unexpected sensations. In both genres, the composer and the composed, subject and object, coalesce as the identity of the composer disappears in the wake of the creation.” (p.140)

Like jazz music that evolves on improvisations, the haiku too has emerged on the basis of repeated improvisations. James Emmanuel's contribution to the haiku comes in the form of innovation of the content. The haiku, ever since its genesis has revolved primarily around nature, drawing heavily on Zen and Buddhist influences. This is evident from compositions of famous Japanese poets such as Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki. What Emmanuel does, in his jazz haiku, is to revolutionize the content by making it an experience centered on jazz music. For this, let us consider the first of the four poems from the first group of poems titled “Jazzanatomy” –

EVERYTHING is jazz:
snails, jails, rails, tails, males, females,
snow-white cotton bales.

(02)

Unlike Basho who paints an image through minimum commentary relying on intuition to bring this image to life, Emmanuel here uses images that are fragmented and incapable of painting a complete scenario, such as “snails, jails, rails”, “cotton bales”. To him, all of these embody the jazz experience – “EVERYTHING is jazz”. The reference to “jails” and “cotton bales” may be a subtle hint at the history of slavery of the African-Americans and their unjustified imprisonment in America where they were forced to work on cotton plantations. Emmanuel takes a light-hearted, nature-centric form of poetry to highlight an issue of considerable weightage. However, we do not receive the assortment of “snails, rails, jails” provided to us with reasoning, trying forcefully to bring them to life. On the contrary, we accept the abstraction of these images as the experience of jazz itself.

Kenneth Yasuda says, in his book *Haiku: Its Essential Nature and History, and Possibilities in English*, “The haiku attitude is the readiness for an experience for its own sake.” (13) Emmanuel's jazz haiku is precisely this readiness to have an experience that requires no reasoning or explanation thereafter. He deconstructs the content of the haiku to provide us fragmented images in return for complete ones, while remaining true to the structural framework of seventeen syllables in three lines (5-7-5). The lack of complementary images hinders our

intuition from playing an active agency in the poem. Emmanuel makes up for this lack by creating poetry that must be complemented by jazz music to enjoy the experience in its entirety. Another poem by Emmanuel goes along the following lines –

Good-grip Jazz, farmer:
Ploughed music like fields, worked late,
Kept all furrows straight.

(64)

Here, Emmanuel draws on nature-man imagery by transforming the Jazz musician to a farmer equivalent. Just as the farmer ploughs his field to keep all the furrows straight, the jazz artist must plough his music to keep all his musical notes flowing in order. While the farmer sows in the expectation of a bountiful harvest, the jazz artist invests heart and soul into his music in the expectation of a masterpiece. In that sense, both the farmer and the jazz musician are cultivators, except they cultivate two very different things. Emmanuel takes the most natural and spontaneous expressions to human life and inculcates them in his poetry. There is no ambivalence in what he describes; the sensibility of his poetry is far removed from the negotiation of any social or political discourse. In his tribute to Dizzy Gillespie, he writes –

Dizzy's bellows pumps.
Jazz balloon inflates, floats high.
Earth listens, stands by.

(44)

Here, the sky and the Earth stand united through Dizzy and his “jazz balloon” that he pumps from his bellows. The “bellows” is a reference to the trumpet, the musical instrument that Dizzy is best known for. Classical haiku, highly influenced by Zen, propagates the idea of the nexus of nature and humanity, expanding on the concept of the infinitude of man. In a similar vein, Emmanuel displays before us the nature-humanity nexus, uniting both through Gillespie's music that “floats high” as “Earth listens, stands by”.

As art forms, both jazz and haiku bear the label of anonymity when it comes to their creators. As has been pointed out previously, the composer of both genres “must efface their identities”. Therein lies the secret to their success. It may be said, then, that the strong affinity that is seen between the Haiku and Jazz as independent, well-established art forms comes from the fact that both harbor an antithesis towards materialism and commercialism. Both genres came about with a need to capture a moment of perfect intuition, with jazz evolving specifically as a voice of rebellion, an echo of “the hatred of the disinherited from which no black man can isolate himself” (Richard Wright, *Conversations*, 108)

Emmanuel's collection *Jazz from the Haiku King* pays a series of tributes to jazz figures that have influenced Emmanuel in his life. From Mahalia Jackson and Ella Fitzgerald to Chet Baker and Louis Armstrong, he incorporates all the big names in Jazz into his poetry. In his haiku on Louis Armstrong, he says –

Jazz-rainbow: skywash
his trumpet blew, cleansing air,
his wonderworld there.

(56)

This “wonder world” that Armstrong creates is akin to the vision of utopia. Armstrong’s music, not only creates rainbows, but is credited with the ability of “cleansing air”, like an act of purification of the soul and everything surrounding it. This “wonder world” echoes the Zen concept of *mu*, the absolute moment of enlightenment.

In *Jazz from the Haiku King*, Emmanuel fashions some of his haikus to resemble the *renga*. For example, the group of poems titled “Jazzanatomy” comprises of four haikus altogether. Other than the first haiku (“EVERYTHING is jazz...”) that has already been discussed previously, the other three haikus also contribute to our understanding of what is included in this “EVERYTHING”–

Knee-bone, thigh, hip-bone.
Jazz slips you percussion bone
classified "unknown."

Slick lizard rhythms,
cigar-smoke tunes, straight-gin sky
laced with double moons.

Second-chance rhythms,
don't-give-up riffs: jazz gets HIGH
off can'ts, buts, and ifs.

(02)

Here each haiku is composed separately, much like in the *renga*, but come together in the end to read like a complete poem. The only difference between the *renga* and Emmanuel’s “Jazzanatomy” is that each haiku in Emmanuel’s collection is of seventeen syllables as opposed to the *renga* arrangement of alternate haikus of fourteen (7-7) and seventeen (5-7-5) syllables.

One of the many experiments that Emmanuel ventures into with his jazz haiku is the exploration of human sexuality and desire. It is a well known fact that jazz, in some of its forms, is conducive to the expressions of sexuality. Similarly, some of Emmanuel’s haikus explore the human body through highly sexualized descriptions of body parts. In the group of poems written under the title “Bojangles and Jo”, Emmanuel talks about the famous American-French dancer, singer and actress Josephine Baker who was well known for her performance of the Daunce Savage in a costume that consisted of a skirt strung with artificial bananas. We hear of her “raised champagne lips”, “banana hips” and “banana panties”. Moreover, the second haiku informs us that “All Paris wooed Jo” only to follow it up in the last haiku with “flushing the bosom of France”. This “bosom of France” is most obviously a reference to Josephine’s bosom; because all Paris woos her, the bosom of France becomes encompassed in her bosom.

Similarly, in the group of poems under ““I’m a Jazz Singer” She Replied”, we come across expressions such as “drowsy lips” and “quick fingerpops”. The first haiku in the collection is suggestive in tone as it tells us – “He dug what she said:/bright jellies, smooth marmalade/ spread on warm brown bread”. The term “dug” is very sexual in its usage, hinting at the act of penetration, cleverly disguised immediately with a reference to digging her words.

The innovation that James Emmanuel brings to the traditional Japanese haiku is not merely the incorporation of jazz music into his poems but also the radically new choice of subject matter. By daring to venture beyond the conventional guidelines of haiku composition, Emmanuel gives this hundred year old poetic form a new life, reviving it quite literally with music and flourish. In order to understand the beauty of Emmanuel’s experiments with this form and undergo the complete experience that the poet has to offer us, one must listen to Emmanuel reciting his poetry in accompaniment to the riffs of the famous jazz musician Noel Howard. The unique experience that this unison of poetry and music creates for its listeners may truly be termed as art for art’s sake.

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