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The Correlation Between Traditional and Modern Day Performance
Poetry: Where Music and Poetry Collide

The combination of words written ever so delicately while also performed with force and passion can easily be known as spoken word. Whether narrating a story or describing an unforgettable experience or feeling, spoken word has created its own home for those who need to be heard. From poetic lyrics to known phrases transformed into rhythmic patterns, spoken word has been able to integrate and influence poetry into music, while creating a remarkable journey for its listeners. The origins of spoken word and how it connects to music will be discussed in this paper. In the Black community, poetry and music have been synonymous and are bursting at the seams especially as radical movements have inspired artists to integrate them into such genres as neo-soul and R&B. While explaining the early beginnings of spoken word and its connection to music, this paper will discuss the merging of poetry and music within the Black community and how performance poetry has inspired artists to use poetic techniques in today's modern day music.

Spoken word began in the early twenty-first century, rooted from protest songs during the Civil Rights Era. Derived from the blues and African griots, spoken word later transitioned into hip hop culture and rap - contributing oral poetry to embrace poetic movements during its time. While spoken word is respected by many, it also has faced its challenges within literature. To some academic critics, it has been labeled as "poor poetry," or not poetic at all. Such opinions travel back to Zulu praise-poems, which were also looked down upon by those in higher education as "artless and uninformed repetitions of trivial culture" and a "crude accompaniment to tribal dancing" (Parmar and Bain 134).

Poetry performed, also known as performance poetry, is a type of poetry specifically created either in advance or in the moment for a live audience. It grew in popularity during the 1980s as people began to perform live at competitions and collectives that we now call 'slams' - a term born from Chicago (Parmar and Bain 135). Compared to printed poetry, performance poets use different techniques and styles to help compliment their performance. Though many are not academically trained, their familiarity with pop culture and connections from their own personal experiences aid them during delivery. As spoken word continued to expand, it began to form its own language - giving many cultures the chance to adopt the beloved art form. One of the communities that has been most impacted by spoken word is the African American and Black community. From the African American oral traditions to slam poetry, the style and voicings have adapted to what they have become today. McNair Scholar Shawnkeisha Stoudamire writes in her journal that "[i]ndividuals who are able to understand the situation, language, and intended messages in my poem are part of the same speech community" (58). She refers to Malcolm Coulthard's book *Introduction to Discourse Analysis* where he defines a speech community as "any group which shares rules for interaction and interpretation" (qtd. in Stoudamire 32). Rather than acquiring such knowledge through academics, this type of community often shares a certain language or dialect with rules or "do's and don'ts" used to comprehend the language. In addition to the language and dialect, members of speech communities tend to share "a common set of normative values which allows them to communicate in different modes of communication. The speech community within Black America uses the language of soul: "a language mixture, adapted to the conditions of slavery and discrimination, a

combination of language and style interwoven with and inextricable from Afro-American culture” (Stoudamire 58). Soul language dates back to when Blacks were enslaved and unable to casually socialize in the 1600s. One modern day hymn that truly represents Soul language is the Black National Anthem, also known as “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.”

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” is a powerful symbolic anthem that was first written as a poem. It was written and composed in Jacksonville, Florida by two brothers, James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson, in 1900. These black ‘brothas’ were Civil Rights evangelists with a passion to spread hope, encouragement, and awareness within the Black community. With the vision of seeing “artistic and cultural excellence as a key to Black advancement in America” (Karimi and Willingham), they were able to create a memorable emblem that is still sung and recited today. The eldest, James Weldon Johnson, was an author, poet, professor, lawyer, diplomat, and the first African American leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When writing “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” James took in account the difficulties and contentment that African Americans felt during times of oppression and in honor of liberty. The poem, known as a symbol of joy, is a painting of African American’s “jubilation and pleasure, [illustrating] how they enjoyed the golden moments, singing and acknowledging their achievements” (“Literary Devices”). The first verse of the poem starts off with themes of endurance and freedom:

*Lift every voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise*

*High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.*

When James Weldon Johnson writes “Ring with the harmonies of Liberty,” he defines “Liberty” as the “rights and protections that citizens of African descent in the United states were promised - but had yet to receive” (Redmond). While the poem was written more than a generation after the enslaved were freed themselves from the US Civil War, the poem was still able to speak “to a world rife with Jim Crow segregation and the threat of mob violence and lynching” (Redmond).

Following the first six lines of verse one were the last lines that spoke upon the dark history of African Americans - discussing the difficulties and violence they endured while in bondage:

*Sing a song full of the faith
That the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope
That the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won*

The first and second lines, “*Sing a song full of the faith / That the dark past has taught us*” speak upon themes of suffering and oppression. These lines offer “an acknowledgment of the conditions that many listeners would have known intimately in the moment of the song's composition: slavery” (Redmond). Knowing how daunting the thought of slavery was, James Weldon included this line with hopes of pinpointing the

system of brutal inhumanity. His choice of speech brought recognition to the African Americans who were captured and who relied on their faith for freedom and redemption. During the 20th century, public marching was a posture that Blacks used as a protest strategy to put pressure on local and national “politicians and institutions” (Redmond). The end of the verse continues on as it finishes with “*Let us march on till victory is won*” - which was a call to action despite the horrendous past during enslavement. As the song continues to the second verse, it recounts the physical beatings and mistreatment that were brought upon by the selfish and abusive white slave owners. The third verse opens the wounds within the poem, revealing the deep cuts within the community:

*Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?*

Tracing all the way back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, James Weldon begins the verse narrating the barriers that hindered Black Americans. The lyrics voice how the political gains during the era of Reconstruction were wiped and replaced with a dehumanizing system fostered by Jim Crow. The second line, “*Bitter the chastening rod,*” brings upon memories of the brutal whippings Black people on plantations were subjected to. At this point, one would wonder how themes of hope or victory could exist in a poem filled with a history of hate and persecution. James Weldon reveals the

answer in the fourth line by writing “*Yet with a steady beat*” to remind listeners of the gradual progression made despite the barriers presented in front of them. The verse continues with a dreamy question “*Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?*” This question refers to the day in which African Americans would be free from slavery - which came true when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st, 1863. Though Black Americans were given freedom prior to Weldon’s work, his choice to include such hope gives singers the right to sing with pride and gratitude.

Even with the daily thought of torture and death, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” became more than an anthem when John Rosamon Johnson composed music to it. With inspiration from musical styles from spirituals and gospel, he decided to compose the song in A flat major, an expressive key that notable Black composers such as Harry T. Burleigh and Thomas A. Dorsey would use. When listening to the tune one, would describe the melody as “word painting,” in which the music would match with what is being sung (Karimi and Willingham). An example of this is demonstrated on an ascending line for “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” and “Let all creation rise” - giving the song a new sense of chapter. As the song continues and reaches the times of the “dark past,” it changes into a minor harmony. The use of the minor chord is uncomfortable but fitting as it rides under the broken words sung by the misunderstood voices. The voices arranged in layered harmonic parts are influenced by African American choral traditions, found in musical styles such as blues, jazz and other gospel traditions. During the writing process, Johnson found other influences from theater and past operettas that he composed. He used the recitative style, a popular device known in opera, to help mirror

how the music and words would be if spoken or performed. A great example of this device is shown during the tempo change during the third verse “*We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.*” This specific part of the song increases in an even tempo, following how it would be said if spoken. Just as “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” left its mark during times of pain and sorrow, it became a staple memory in the Black community.

When linking music and poetry one would instantly think of themes of expression and emotion. Both art forms have a natural flow with specific lines being sung repetitively, which solely connects to rhythm. Lyrical poetry, a form of poetry that is made into music, is a perfect example of how music and poetry can be used in a more technical form. Rap has also been another outlet where artists use poetic attributes and devices such as alliteration, metaphors and similes (Carroll). Lauryn Hill, a known multi-talented artist, uses all of these devices when she warns those in the Black community to avoid “that thing” in her song “*Doo Wop.*” Her message pertains to both men and women, highlighting the negative stereotypes and images African Americans have been given within the media. She dedicates the first verse to the women, urging them to respect themselves by not allowing themselves to be taken advantage of by men (landanquah):

It's been three weeks since you've been looking for your friend

The one you let hit it and never called you again

'Member when he told you he was 'bout the Benjamins

You act like you ain't hear him then gave him a little trim

*To begin, how you think you really gon' pretend
Like you wasn't down then you called him again
Plus when you give it up so easy you ain't even foolin' him
If you did it then, then you'd probably f*** again*

When listening to the song from a poetic and lyrical standpoint, one is able to locate the underlying message of dignity, self love, and respect. As she aims to guide the listener through lessons she then takes a turn with an empowering tone, showcasing her ability to teach and also inspire through song form.

Showing off your a** 'cause you're thinking it's a trend
Girlfriend, let me break it down for you again
You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine
Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem

With influences taken from spoken word and hip hop, Lauryn Hill encourages listeners to not conform to the modern day of living. She sees “respect [as] just a minimum” and uplifts women to see that for themselves. In her hook, she speaks upon “that thing” referring to either sex, money, fame, or any other roadblock stopping the Black community from winning. Such themes of overcoming relate back to the line from “Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing,” *“Let us march on till victory is won.”* In her second verse, Hill asks “How you gon' win when you ain't right within” referring to conquering the modern day battles within the Black community. Despite the pressures to fit into a box within the music industry, Hill broke barriers - challenging topics and themes many artists would never speak upon. Her themes related to stereotypes and misconceptions within the

African American culture connect back to the “dark past” in “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” - which tells the story of the roots of racism and injustices towards the Black community. Just like the Black national anthem, Hill’s words are also an anthem with representation, power, and respect being the foundation of the overall message.

From the historical theme in “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” and Lauryn Hill’s use of internal and imperfect rhymes, listeners are able to follow the poetic structure and locate the moments in which music and poetry collides. Both two pieces of art use poetic techniques to reach their audience, giving them the best of both worlds. From one world to another, music and poetry is still present in today's entertainment industry. Whether found in lyrical poetry or performance poetry the connection between the two is everlasting.

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