

# “The Midnight Rabbit Jumps Through the Sky”

Welcoming Music into Your Poetry Curriculum

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**A**FTER teaching poetry for nearly thirty years in the public schools, from grades one through six, I can say without reservation that the best poems I have helped my students birth have come from integrating music into my curriculum. Whether the poems were written during free writing time as I played instrumental jazz, Native American flute, or classical music; or during structured lessons using jazz-themed poetry, the resulting poems have always worn a richer, more lyrical cloak than any others.

I've used the following exercise in mainstream (regular education) classes as well as in the self-enclosed, third- through sixth-grade special education classes I teach at P.S. 156 in Brownsville, Brooklyn. My special-needs students may at times require more time getting started, or in completing their poems, and perhaps need more carefully elaborated instructions, but their poems are no less elegant and unexpectedly delightful than those of their less-challenged counterparts.

To elicit lines of poetry like the one by fifth-grader Carlif, quoted in the title above, I present a few uncomplicated ingredients: the lyrics to Thelonious Monk's jazz standard, “Round Midnight,” and two CD's, one of Monk playing the same tune, and another of Sarah Vaughan's deep voice slowly teasing out the lyrics.

Before I give the students these prompts, I start the lesson by asking them to personify midnight. If they haven't been taught personification yet, I simply ask the class to call out images of how midnight would look if it were an animal, a person, a color, or a shape, and lurking outside their windows. Where might it go, how might it move, where might it take them, and how might it sound if it made noise, had a texture? Sometimes I throw out a few ideas with active imagery to get them rolling. Does it creep like a snake? Does it cry out like a sleeping child? In response to these prompts, Carlif told us more about his midnight rabbit, who “. . . takes the / sunlight out / and puts the midnight in. / He takes the sun, / puts it in the bag, / and takes it away.” I also ask the students to call out images and sounds from midnight in their home environment. Elijah gave us these chilling images: “Round midnight, / while I'm lying in my bed, / I

can hear the sounds of gun-shots / running through my head. / 'Round midnight / in my room, the sound /of the video game kills / the moon."

At this point I like to throw in another writing prompt as well. For several years in a row now during my annual jazz curriculum, usually occurring in the springtime, I pair this "Round Midnight" exercise with the poem "April Rain Song" by Langston Hughes. I keep the poem on hand for use on that proverbial "rainy day" in April, and have simply written the words of the poem on the board. We talk first about the feeling and sound of constant rain, about springtime, and about how, as demonstrated by the title, "April Rain Song," a poem can also be a song. We write April words and spring words on the board: mud, daffodils, magnolias, leaf sprouts, wind, rain, etc. and discuss line patterns and repetitions.

Next I hand out the lyrics to "Round Midnight," and play my CD of Sarah Vaughan singing it. When the song is over, I ask students to call out images and sounds from midnight or dawn, and maybe more from each season, and then, to mix it up, we throw in the names of various musical instruments. Sometimes I help the students get going by reading aloud a few very short class poems from previous years, and then finally, we begin our own poem. I switch from the blackboard to chart paper as we begin our "class poem" so I can bring it home and type it.

I tell the students that we are going to try to somehow weave musical language in with images from times of day and seasons, and then just let go and see what comes out. I do always beg them to use surprising language, and interesting verbs. As students begin to call out ideas of lines to begin our class poem, I write them down, and after a few lines, I put on the CD of Thelonious Monk (I always play music for students to write to, usually instrumental jazz piano or wind instruments, or Native American flute music) and free them to go off and write their own poems, with the following suggestions:

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I tell them they can try to mimic the repetitive pattern of Hughes' poem, with each line beginning with "Let the..." and using nouns related to *any* musical image or instrument, season, or time of day. To demonstrate this I borrow words off the blackboard and give them lines such as, "Let the saxophone blow April sky," or "Let the mud wriggle through the dawn," "Let the midnight beat the party in the apartment below me," "Let the daffodils tumble into spring," etc.

Another way they can get started, I tell them, is to give their poems the title "Round Midnight" or "Round Dawn." I always add the caveat that they can ignore my suggestions and write whatever they want as long as it somehow relates to the themes of music, seasons, or times of day and as long as they attempt to work from their own sensory experiences.

As they write I walk around the classroom reading aloud lines from students who “get it.” When, towards the end of class, they share what they have written, I steal lines from their individual poems to add to our final class poem.

On days like this, when I do what others may consider way too much, I get the best, most varied and original poetry. The following are two exquisite poems from a class using this exercise.

**April Sky**

The April sky sings with the stars.


The April sky swings  
from side to side.

The April sky hangs  
with the sun over the  
sea.

— Rachelle

Midnight, spread your wings.  
Moonlight hums like a six-inch drum.  
Midnight sings like a trumpet  
on a red and white swing.  
Flowers bloom and groom on the tip  
of my midnight finger.

— Elise

One of my most enthusiastic and prolific student poets was a girl named Erica, now in middle school. She participated for two years in the jazz curriculum, and teaching her to personify inanimate ideas like “midnight” and even to speak to music as if it could hear her, resulted in such pearls as “Reggae, you spin me/ like gold . . . / Reggae, you knock the shoes off my feet. / . . . Reggae, do you love me? / You attack my system like a shark.” At some point in Erica’s first year, she handed me a poem as I entered the room. I read it aloud, and we all immediately memorized it: “Jazz, jazz, jazz is cool. / Jazz is why we come to school.” 

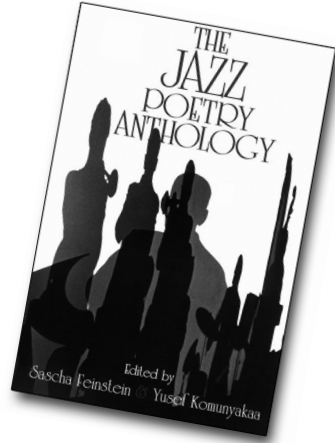
## Resources for Using Music to Elicit Poetry

### *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*

Edited by Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa,  
Indiana Univ. Press, 1991.

Some recommended poems in the anthology to use for teaching:

- "Witch Doctor Lady," by Paulette White
- "In My Father's House," by George Barlow
- "Midsummer," by Claire Collett
- "Playing the Invisible Saxophone,"  
by Harryette Mullen
- "I Live in Music," by Ntozake Shange  
(with Romare Bearden illustrations)
- "The Imaginary Piano," by Michael Fulop
- "Dance With Me" and "Fill My World With Music," by D'Sandra Marie Esteves



### Recommended Jazz CD's

- Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*
- Sarah Vaughan, *Round Midnight* (or anything else!)
- Thelonious Monk, *Round Midnight*
- Billie Holiday, *In My Solitude* (and print out lyrics)
- Louis Armstrong, any CD (get students to write about his voice, or his trumpet)
- Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell On You*

### Other Teaching Ideas

- On the Teachers & Writers website there is an amazing writing lesson by David Hollander called "The Imaginary Piano," which he came up with for a T&W residency conducted in conjunction with Carnegie Hall, designed to integrate classical music and poetry writing:  
[www.twc.org/forums/writers\\_on\\_teaching/fwir\\_dhollander.html](http://www.twc.org/forums/writers_on_teaching/fwir_dhollander.html)
- Write the following line by Art Blakey on the board: "Jazz washes away the dust of everyday life." Use it to show students how to personify music. If necessary, substitute any genre of music—classical, folk, rock—in place of "jazz."