

An Interview with Dan Jaffe, author of
Playing the Word: Jazz Poems

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City
\$13.95
ISBN 1-886157-34-0

Interview by Kevin Rabas
Poet, Jazz Drummer and Historian

RABAS: You knew a lot of the players in these poems. For instance, you were good friends with George Salisbury. Tell me a little bit about how you not only knew musicians, but about how you actually participated in the jazz life.

JAFFE: It came about indirectly. I was involved in the civil rights movement. I began to participate in demonstrations in Kansas City. George Salisbury played often at concerts meant to benefit civil rights. When I was asked in 1962 to do a program at the Jewish Community Center in Kansas City, I called George. We did a poetry/jazz program. It was Arch Martin on trombone, Vince Bilardo on drums, Milt Abel on bass, George Salisbury on piano, and Dick Busey on sax, as I remember. That was just after I got to KC. It was the first poetry reading that I ever participated in that included music—and the first concert that included jazz. I read a few of my poems, but I mainly read poems by other poets. They weren't jazz poems, and I read them only in between the numbers. It was a great experience. I remember George played a version of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," alone, on the stage of the Jewish Community Center. It must have gone on for 20 minutes. It was magnificent playing. I'll never forget it. That was when I realized George was a genius.

George and I continued to do poetry and jazz concerts until shortly before his death. But they changed. What I did with George changed over the years. More and more, the poetry became mine. More and more, the poems were about jazz. As I experienced more of Kansas City jazz, I began to write about it. I got to know the players. I had the opportunity because I knew George first. Many of them are not in the book. I just haven't gotten around to writing them all.

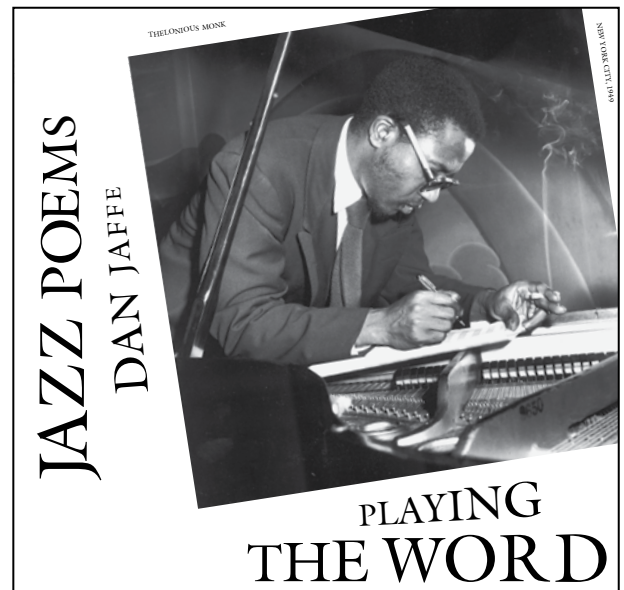
I remember one night stopping by a joint George was playing at on Troost, the Baghdad. I was bringing Langston Hughes back to his hotel after a poetry reading. George and I had were going to do a concert next week. I had the program with me, and I was dropping it off. Langston didn't want to wait in the car, so he came in with me. Well, I didn't know it then, but both George and Langston grew up in Lawrence. As soon as Langston came in the door, George knew who it was. And Langston knew as soon as he could hear George what a great player George was! We all stayed until 4 a.m., talking. I just sat there, awed by this conversation between Langston and George and the other jazz people. One of the great nights! George became important in my life, among the men I most admire.

George hated bragging of any kind. He didn't play for the audience or to demonstrate his skills. He played to *find* what was in the music. That was why he was such a great player. Everybody knew it.

When a new joint opened up, they'd ask George. Then all the musicians in town would show up to listen. Everyone would show up for George. Then everyone would know where the place was. Then the owners would fire George, so they could sell more drinks. Because when George was playing, no one would drink as much. They were listening. There's a poem about that in the book, "Over on Main."

RABAS: The beats were very influenced by jazz. Ginsberg called "Howl" a "jazz mass." Kerouac talks about "blowing" in a poem, like a jazz musician would.

JAFFE: I think they liked jazz. I think they liked the idea that jazz was spontaneous.



RABAS: Yeah. You talk about “blowing” in your poems, too. Are there things that you take from jazz and carry into form or presentation in your work? How do the two art forms, jazz and poetry, connect for you?

JAFFE: I try to say something about that in the introduction to the book. Let me just say this: I think beat poetry gets its sounds not from the music as much as from literary sources. My poetry is not beat poetry, as you know. Of course, there are some places where I use beat tactics. But really, I listen to the music and try to get the feel of the music into the rhythms and the sounds of the poems. The best example is in “Turning the Town.”

RABAS: Right: “Kaaaaaaan sas Ciiiiiiiiiiiiiii ty.”

JAFFE: It’s pretty obvious there. Let me give you some other examples. There’s a poem, “Bass Talk.” It’s a consequence of listening to a lot of bass players. One, Ron Roberts, played bass in my jazz opera. If you listen to that poem, it’s written in very short lines. It goes: “Ron’s feet hurt/ from treks he took/ and meant to take./ Now he’d rather sit/ than lumber/ down a trail/ any trail,/ he says.” I’m trying to get a sense of that pizzicato on the bass, you know. “Ron’s feet hurt/ from treks he took/ and meant to take/.” You hear it?

RABAS: Yeah, I hear it.

JAFFE: And the sound of the poem and the shape of the poem come from the sound of the music. I did that, in part, because I love the music so much. But also so I can “read” these poems with the jazz.

My favorite way to read these poems is to sit in and come in like a soloist. The poem, then right back to the tune. That’s the way I like to do it. That’s why the book is called “Playing the Word.” When I perform with Nicky Yarling, and she introduces us, she announces the players: She says, “John on drums...and Dan *playing the word*.”

RABAS: Got it.

JAFFE: Take for instance, “Playing the Cajon.” It’s about Oscar Salas and Ira Sullivan playing together in a Miami joint. Oscar’s an internationally known Cuban drummer. He’s played all over the world. Ira said, “Well, Oscar’s going to play the box.” What he was sitting on, now he was going to play it. “Playing the Cajon” is absolutely meant to be an imitation of the sound. They’re made together. It’s in the section called *Ritmo Latino*.

RABAS: Right.

JAFFE: A lot of the poems in this book are like that. For instance, the whole blues section is meant to sound like the blues, many kinds of blues.

By the way, Ira said he and his wife were sitting at the kitchen table arguing about how the poems should be read. I said, “That’s all right. There’s more than one way.” He laughed, “You tell *that* to a jazz man!” He said, “Listening to them a second time was like listening to jazz solos.” When he said that I said, “Man, that’s what I always wanted to do.” What I wanted was the poetry to feel authentic. He said, “There are a lot of cats here I don’t know, but I know Rusty Tucker is *real*. Tell me about him.”

That’s what I was trying to do, get a sense of the actual jazz world. And to make *real* poems. You know, a lot of people write Holocaust poems. They drop in the names of the camps sometimes. They’re not really good poems. They just depend on a lot of sentimental response. I don’t want a sentimental response. I want real poems—*jazz* poems that are authentic to the world, but, more importantly, that are connected to the music itself. I want someone to say, “This isn’t about jazz. This *is* jazz.”