



Parliamentary Poet Laureate



POETRY CONNECTION: LINK UP WITH CANADIAN POETRY

Douglas Barbour (1940 –) is Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta. He is a prolific critic, reviewer, and poet. He has published many books of poetry, including an early selected, *Visible Visions* (1984), which won Alberta's Stephan Stephansson Award for poetry. He has worked with the Sound Poetry ensemble "Re:Sounding," and collaborated with American poet Sheila Murphy on *Continuations* (2006). *Recording Dates* is a chapbook published by Rubicon Press in 2012.

Poem for discussion:

From: *Recording Dates*
Rubicon Press, Edmonton, 2012

May 15 1953:

Perdido but nothings ever they may
salt the fields someone wrote it down / someone got it on tape the Intro to Salt
Peanuts as 'my worthy constituent' took up his horn &
all the breath he needed & then blew
the highest notes you'd ever heard. There are some
things we are meant to know to hear. The tale told over & over &
you read it too ten years later those few hours
are part of your memory now, your secret history: thousands listening into the
wee small hours as five musicians from somewhere else made

hot music hotter & faster & more brilliant till the
 house lights came on & the audience was too small for the stories later.
 A listener weeps now with frustration wanting to believe the
 night was that full that more of the citizens
 in strait-laced Toronto knew their greatness & wanted to hear A Night in
 Tunisia & other classics to be to be there to be hearing it (again (now

October 26 1956:

It means something more than
 never stepping into the same note twice They
 entered & enter still a space made of sound but still
 my heart feels blues notes we were paid no never
 mind to focusing attention wholly through them to
 four ways of being precisely there
 in the breath & the melody made now in
 your mind listening & playing both You
 own it & let it go knowing with
 sweet abandon each note is
 way beyond possession & even leaving
 the stand's a way of taking a stand That
 theme runs through every improvised solo & now
 Trane's rushing up & down scales where angels fear to trace the
 blues tells all tells nothing How it got there gathering shards of
 Ahmad's story or Miles's story or all their stories are just the
 blues writ large against the backdrop of white America
 Half a continent drenched in it that they can't hear in
 Nelson or Salt Lake City or even New York City sometimes
 the stark & bitter news of a cabaret card taken becomes a
 theme for another lengthy solo & the silence it bares

October 9 & 10 1974:

Death behind or before this chord
and that one interchangeable then
the final sounding expansive horn of a
flower or dilemma opening into night all contra in a
prayer so profound or far away how
great to open sky through which the last
bird spreads its wings & soars beyond the moon

October 9 & 10 1974:

Death comes in many guises, a black bird
and a white whale equally partake of the great,
the intense and final prayer,
flower of the atom, atomy of the flower .
Prayer is both response to and refusal of the
great journey now begun, whale and
bird both taking the shortest route possible to death

January 12 1956:

I was 16 in Montreal & you'd never
guess who my friends were anyway
I'll tell you all I knew of jazz wouldn't
have filled a single notebook page . I want
to go back to that long ago &
change things so the world then matches
my nostalgic eclectic dreaming . How else
plan to be somewhere these cats were playing .

I'd wish to have heard them live but
didn't even know their names then, didn't
know that music it wasn't
what I heard on the radio . At that
time we listened to The Hit Parade:
it wasn't even real rock & roll yet
was just something striving for muzak without realizing it .

Gigantic figures in their world of mostly unheard
blues they played America even if most refused to hear .

This was 'the jazz life' & one
year's records or gigs floated away a memory of
kisses & as hard to recall once the lips are gone

You know it too & whether opera or jazz we
can only receive its gifts when we no longer
depend on them. Or anyone needs them? Put
on your high heeled sneakers, dance with
me to the end of these brand new old tunes .

For discussion:

1. On the internet or elsewhere, listen to recordings of the jazz numbers mentioned in "May 15, 1953", "Salt Peanuts" by Dizzy Gillespie and "A Night in Tunisia" which has been recorded in many versions by many artists. How do these recordings connect to the poem?
2. Find out about the lives of John Coltrane ("Trane"), Ahmad Jamal and Miles Davis, mentioned in "October 26, 1956." How do the stories of their lives relate to other things mentioned in this poem?

3. On the internet or in another reference source, find explanations of "jazz improvisation" and "riff." Listen to some Coltrane, Jamal and Davis recordings. In which of Barbour's lines can you hear riffs and improvisations like those of the jazz musicians?
4. Apart from musicians' names, find as many places as you can where music or the playing of music is referred to in these poems. How do these references connect to another important theme in these poems, namely the shape of a human life or the shape of a human society?
5. Barbour regrets that the Hit Parade and musak kept him from hearing great jazz musicians of the day. Name some examples of today's hit songs and musak. What might these be preventing you from hearing? What could you do to change that?

Writing prompts:

1. While listening to a favorite piece of instrumental music (music without words) rapidly jot down as many images and ideas as you can which are suggested to you by the music. Compose a poem from these.
2. Play a favorite piece of non-vocal jazz music several times until you can remember some of its phrases when the music is off. Copy the rhythm of each musical phrase in a phrase of words. Don't worry about making logical sense. Now put some of these jazz-rhythm phrases into a poem.
3. Jot down as many examples as you can of possession and abandonment in your own experience. Weave some of these into a poem.
4. Engage in some "eclectic dreaming" with the words "whale" and "bird." Fill a page as quickly as you can with memories, images and ideas suggested to you by these words. If you draw a blank, just write "bird makes me think of _____" or "whale makes me think of _____" to start yourself off again. Weave some of these dreamings into a poem.
5. Choose any line from Barbour's poems. What memories, events, ideas or thoughts does the line bring to you? List as many as you can, then write a poem based on your list.