

Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Hymn

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JAZZ POETRY

Hymn

Let me sing you a hymn. Not
the kind grandmothers start humming
at 6am. I want to sing the strains
that stem from the strains of living.
My lips will be openings to rock

-veiled tunnels that pour forth pain
from crevices so dry that water only serves
to hurt them; and every passage of air
from lung to tongue will carry
lacerations: from the backs of slaves,

from the veins of junkies,
from the minds of the tortured.
See, I want to sing you a hymn like
Dinah Watts sang on Sundays; every week
I'd watch her lips looking for secrets –

because somehow the air, the dust,
the gloss upon her lips held a direct link
to ancient suffering and future pain.
Even her silence was desert wind
blowing over decaying bodies. Then

she'd sing "Amazing Grace," jazz it
into the air we were breathing, leave
it haunted, riddled with cataclysmic catastrophes,
unrequited love pangs, mass lynchings,
rape, internal displacements . . .

Tears, sobs and sighs would come
tumbling from her open voice.

Pain stripped down like old wallpaper,
scraped and scrubbed to reveal pure
soul. Soul that soared with the organ's
crescendo, "Amazing Grace" spilling
like a horn's lament out of the building.

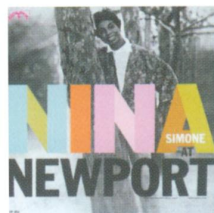
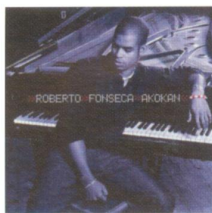
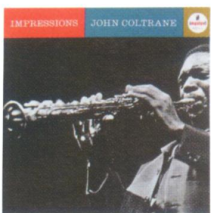
Eventually I found her secret. On her
lower lip: a bruise. And my seven-year-old
hands reached for my mother's
when I saw the man beside her
with a nasty curl in his fist. It was HIM.

Every Sunday she raised her voice
and sung HIM. She crooned away all
the world's cruelty so she could endure
that man another Monday.
And I can't sing hymns, can't jazz

like Dinah Watts because I can't sing HIM.
So I tell her story.

Q: How were you first introduced to jazz?

A: My exposure to jazz was by default. My father, a one-time saxophonist, would occasionally remind us that he had to give up his sax—literally—to pay the bills and raise us, but his enduring love for the music meant that we had to suffer long jazz listening sessions on weekends. We hated it—well, I know I did. Then one day, he slipped an audio tape of Jimmy Smith into my pocket and said, in a very *Alice in Wonderland* manner, "Listen to this." It was a gentle, genius way to drag me into jazz, and I haven't quit listening since.



Selections from Parkes's Playlist

- << John Coltrane, *Impressions* (1963)
- << Roberto Fonseca, *Akokan* (2009)
- Ahmad Jamal Trio, *The Awakening* (1970)
- << *Nina Simone at Newport* (live 1960)
- Cassandra Wilson, *Belly of the Sun* (2002)