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Eudora Welty: Listening to "Powerhouse"

Thomas H. Getz

We experience music as a pattern of movement, as a gesture.

—Roger Sessions, *Questions about Music*

African drumming was originally a form of sign language. If we grasp the significance of this single idea, it is easy to understand that all art, but improvised jazz particularly, is a way of moving, a way of listening. If we have actually performed music, painted pictures, written stories, we are not likely to think of the results of our work as finished products or static artifacts. If our own activity—physical and mental—has been energetic, muscular, gestural, then even when attending to someone else's work, we remember, at least with our bodies, the physical qualities of production.

One of the most important aspects of a Eudora Welty story, as well as a performance of jazz, is the movement of the characters, the musicians. Welty gives us a slow walk down a path, a dive to the bottom of a river, breath turned visible in frozen air, a movement of butterflies. The jazz musician presents a gesture of shoulders or torso, a bending of knees, fingers rippling over strings, a forehead creasing. In each, the body releases a spoken or played sound; along with a voice or instrument, the body physically performs feeling. Explicitly, in her early story "Powerhouse,"¹ and implicitly, in most of her short stories, Welty presents the interaction of body and mind, the imaginative interaction—in performance—of physical movement and idea or feeling. As a performing artist, she knows that mere mental concentration squeezes the life out of bodily response. A pianist, for example, doesn't learn to play by scrutinizing his hands. The hands—the embodied mind—learn to play. Powerhouse plays with his whole body:

When Powerhouse first came back from intermission, no doubt full of beer, they said, he got the band tuned up again in his own way. He didn't strike the piano keys for pitch—he

simply opened his mouth and gave falsetto howls—in A, D and so on—they tuned by him. Then he took hold of the piano, as if he saw it for the first time in his life, and tested it for strength, hit it down in the bass, played an octave with his elbow, lifted the top, looked inside, and leaned against it with all his might. He sat down and played it for a few minutes with outrageous force and got it under his power—a bass deep and coarse as a sea net—then produced something glimmering and fragile, and smiled. (pp. 140-41)

The quality and character of Powerhouse's musical activity, as created by Welty's verbal activity, constitutes the essence of the story. Welty's language expresses her act of listening to Powerhouse and is also her *performance* of his music—a translation of his medium into hers. "Powerhouse" suggests an important quality of all of Welty's work: it is dense with gesture. In its art is recognized as a form of human action, and also a form of social interaction. It is best thought of as the performance of the interaction between speaker and listener, in a community or within oneself.

"Powerhouse" is a verbal portrait of the jazz pianist Thomas "Fats" Waller, who had an extraordinary performing career in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. The portrait takes the form of a musical performance of the essential nature of Waller's jazz improvisation. There are direct or indirect references to many songs Waller composed or brought to public attention: "Your Feet's Too Big," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Honeysuckle Rose," "Pagan Love Song." But more importantly, the story has the aural and rhythmic quality of much of Waller's music. Reading "Powerhouse" is like listening to good jazz, and it is only the fact that we are *reading* that makes the simile necessary. Welty has listened closely to "Fats" Waller's music, and her story is the expression of that act of listening. However, far from being a passive audience, she enters into the improvisational activity of the jazz.

The beginning of the story establishes the improvisational nature of the man and his music and of Eudora Welty's interaction with both. Welty initiates the verbal improvisation with a playful attempt to label Powerhouse: "Negro man?—he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil." A series of similes continues the improvisational style:

heavy lids, maybe horny like a lizard's

looks like a preacher when his mouth is shut

And his mouth is going every minute: like a monkey's when it looks for something. Improvising, coming on a light and childish melody—*smooch*—he loves it with his mouth. (p. 31)

Following her own imaginative improvisation, Welty points out two important qualities of Powerhouse's music: "He listens as much as he performs," and his improvisation is physical—"you need to see him." Both qualities are dramatized on the following page as Powerhouse begins playing:

His hands over the keys, he says sternly, "You—all ready? You—all ready to do some serious walking?"—waits—then, STAMP. Quiet. STAMP, for the second time. This is absolute. Then a set of rhythmic kicks against the floor to communicate the tempo. Then, O Lord! say the distended eyes from beyond the boundary of the trumpets, Hello and good-bye and they are all down the first note like a waterfall. (p. 132)

In the first two pages of the story, playfulness, energy, listening, physical gesture, along with a dreamlike quality ("he himself seems lost"; "he's in a trance") are the basic elements of improvisation. This complex musical gesture is in preparation for the first mention of the telegram which Powerhouse has received or pretends to have received. The jazz continues, subtly, in support of the telegram theme. Improvisation pervades the language of Powerhouse's and Welty's stories. As he begins to play the "Pagan Love Song,"

Powerhouse's head rolls and sinks like a weight between his waving shoulders. He groans, and his fingers drag into the keys heavily, holding on to the notes, retrieving. It is a sad song. (p. 133)

In response to the sad waltz, Powerhouse says, "You know what happened to me?" Welty continues: "Valentine hums a response, dreaming at the bass. 'I got a telegram my wife is dead,' says Powerhouse, with wandering fingers." Powerhouse is not merely talking while his fingers are wandering; he talks with his fingers. The wandering fingers are the direct, physical-musical equivalent of his wandering improvisational imagination. The music causes and



Fats Waller

Courtesy of Frank Driggs

expresses the imagined, dramatic experience indicated by the telegram. "I got a telegram my wife is dead" is the statement of a theme; the variations on that theme, verbal and musical, will follow.

As he plays, Powerhouse continues, "Telegram say—here the words: Your wife is dead." And Welty, "He puts 4/4 over the 3/4." Powerhouse is one of those musicians who talk as they play; the four words coming out of his mouth affect the rhythm of the waltz. Similarly, as Powerhouse says, "Tell me, tell me, tell me," he "makes triplets." Then, back firmly in 3/4 time, he chooses or at least enunciates his words to match: "cor-ri-dor." Theme and improvised variation are the form of the telegram-story and of the waltz. As Powerhouse begins a new chorus, Valentine asks that the story, too, be started over again: "You say you got a telegram." Powerhouse begins again, and this time "is elaborate." They talk and play. Question and answer. Finally, after five paragraphs, "They all laugh. End of that chorus."

This instance of the interaction of spoken and played language, of literary and musical fiction, is based on Eudora Welty's personal experience with jazz and with the act of writing stories. But it has its roots in a total vision of life expressed in African native music and early American jazz. Gunther Schuller, in *Early Jazz*, explains the quality of this interdependence:

In the African Negro's way of life, words and their meanings are related to musical sound. Instrumental music independent of verbal functions in the sense of European "absolute" music is almost totally unknown to the African native. . . . Basically, language functions only in conjunction with rhythm. All verbal activity, whether quotidian social life or religion and magic, is rhythmicized.²

Throughout this section of the story, the feeling of reality is generated by the imaginative interaction *per se* rather than by reference to externals. The only things we feel certain of are that Powerhouse has a wife named Gypsy and that the band is a long distance from home. But there is no external verification, outside of the band itself, even of this. Fantasy or imaginative play dominates verifiable reality. We are in a "season of dreams," as in many of Welty's early stories: "What time is it?" Powerhouse calls. "What the hell place is this? Where is my watch and chain?"

Nevertheless, we vividly experience Powerhouse, his band, their music, Welty as fellow improviser, and even ourselves, as active listeners.

In the second main scene of the story, the improvisation moves to a different theatre—the World Café, “a waiting, silent, limp room.” The shift in setting allows Welty to enter even more fully into the working out of Powerhouse’s art, as she is further separated from the relatively passive white audience in the dance hall, who are characterized early in the story:

When any group, any performers, come to town, don’t people always come out and hover near, leaning inward about them, to learn what it is? What is it? Listen. Remember how it was with the acrobats. Watch them carefully, hear the least word, especially what they say to one another, in another language—don’t let them escape you; it’s the only time for hallucination, the last time. They can’t stay. They’ll be somewhere else this time tomorrow. (p. 132)

“Hallucination” here is mere entertainment; it is passive and treats art as fictitious. In contrast, the social setting of the World Café allows us to realize fully the communicative possibilities of literary and musical fiction. The communal activity in the World Café, with the band members sitting around a table, drinking beer, talking, playing jazz on the nickelodeon—all of it a rhythmic ritual—authenticates the music played in the dance hall. Jazz is authenticated by social interaction, just as the cafe is transformed and animated by the fictional power of Powerhouse and Welty. Welty demonstrates that what we know is what we make; that the act of making—the fundamental act of metaphor—shapes reality not only in art but also in life, in the World. What we experience in this section of the story is the act of feeling being expressed and an overarching self-awareness, which is, in music or literature, an act of intent listening. Throughout the story everyone listens to Powerhouse. In addition to the white people at the dance, he is heard by the “hundred dark, ragged, silent, delighted Negroes” waiting outside the hall, and even more intently by the inner circle of his band and the waitress in the World Café. In the cafe, as in the dance hall, as in the street, Powerhouse is the essential improviser with a large fund of imagination and emotion, and the genuine artist’s knack of encouraging the audience with whom he

feels closest to listen and interact, to play along.

A waitress watches.

"Come here, living statue, and get all this big order of beer we fixing to give."

"Never seen you before anywhere." The waitress moves and comes forward and slowly shows little gold leaves and tendrils over her teeth. She shoves up her shoulders and breasts.

"How I going to know who you might be? Robbers? Coming in out of the black of night right at midnight, setting down so big at my table?"

"Boogers," says Powerhouse, his eyes opening lazily as in a cave.

The girl screams delicately with pleasure. O Lord, she likes talk and scares. (p. 136)

On the next page, Powerhouse, wanting to fill silence with the sound of his voice, first creates silence:

"Listen!" whispers Powerhouse . . .

"Listen how it is."

Then he retells the story of Gypsy's suicide, with variations. Gradually, the other band members, unable merely to listen, join in until finally the story becomes a genuine communal activity:

"Why, he picks her up and carries her off!" he says.

"Ya! Ha!"

"Carries her *back* around the corner. . . ."

"Oh, Powerhouse!"

"You know him."

"Uranus Knockwood."

"Yeahhh!"

"He take our wives when we gone!"

"He come in when we goes out!"

"Uh-huh!"

"He go out when we comes in!"

"Yeahhh!"

"He standing behind the door!"

"Old Uranus Knockwood."

"You know him."
"Middle-size man."
"Wears a hat."
"That's him."

Everybody in the room moans with pleasure. (p. 138)

Here, all distinction between speech pattern and the rhythmic shape of music disappears. Speech is improvisation; language is rhythm with a social function.

Powerhouse's imagined response to the telegram reinforces the idea of the importance, in the music hall, in the world, of playfulness: " 'What in the hell you talking about? Don't make any difference: I gotcha.' " What does make a difference, as Welty says in her preface to the *Collected Stories*, is the act of imagination itself:

I have been told, both in approval and in accusation, that I seem to love all my characters. What I do in writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself. It is the act of a writer's imagination that I set most high.³

In the World Café, the question of phenomenological reality is explicitly asked and answered. Valentine's question about Powerhouse's response to the telegram, "That going to reach him, Powerhouse?" is like the waitress's ingenuous "All that the truth?" Powerhouse's answer, "Reach him and come out the other side," sets them straight, though Scoot, the unpopular drummer, persists in wanting verification. For Powerhouse, Uranus Knockwood (no matter how you spell it) is as actual as the most vividly experienced dream, the most fully imagined fiction, a complete act of imagination.

Even if Eudora Welty had not written "Powerhouse," the performance of jazz would be a suggestive analogy for what she accomplishes in many of her early stories. Even though none of the other stories deals extensively with music, they are full of rhythmic gestures which Welty presents through a language dense with a simile—her mode of improvisation. Her imagery is the constantly changing point of sensory contact between the elemental world and

the individual, and it is the most adequate, intimate *act* of interaction between two individuals. Like the members of Powerhouse's band, the characters in these stories live as though life itself were a form of improvisation: they create and perform their lives simultaneously.

Like Powerhouse's name, any one of Eudora Welty's stories, taken as a performance, is a metaphor. Performance is an expression of power. Powerhouse's and Welty's fictions—musical or literary—are acts of metaphor which compete with "reality" for our attention. Through imaginatively characterizing people with an improvisational attitude toward love, ritual, society, communication, Welty expresses the dramatic quality of her own mind. She sympathizes with other people without becoming those people or even being like them. All of her stories demonstrate that if she listens carefully enough, she can create Powerhouse and herself.

NOTES

¹Eudora Welty, "Powerhouse," in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980). All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

²Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 5.

³Welty, *Collected Stories*, p. xi.