

Singing Death: Reflections on Music and Mortality

Chapter Abstracts



Samuel Curkpatrick, Sir Zelman Cowan School of Music, Monash University

Title: Into the Profound Deep: Pulled by a Song

Abstract: *Manikay* (public song) repertoires sung by the Wägilak clan in Australia's remote Arnhem Land offer some interesting perspectives on death. *Manikay* carries ideas that have been passed down the generations, perhaps for centuries, conveyed through complex narratives and the layering of images in song. Demonstrating the depth of thought and creativity in *manikay*, this chapter describes ways that the Wägilak community surrounds death with song. Death is considered as something that illuminates life here and now, directing life toward its essential core, pulling us into deep, profound waters.

If you whittle away the bark and flesh of a hardwood tree, the pure, white bones on the inside are revealed. These bones, also known as *bilma* (clapsticks), lead the singers of mortuary ceremonies, providing a structuring rhythmic skeleton for performance. Impelled by these grooving bones many voices sing, crying for the bones of their dead relative. The *bilma* animate the narratives they carry: without them, death cannot be sung complete nor can there be any celebration at death. In life, death is a constant presence: like human bones that support our bodies and are carried through life, death is here and now, giving shape to life.

For Wägilak, *manikay* (song) saturates all aspects of life: *manikay* is a living tradition that emerges out of, and reaches into, the contexts in which it is performed. *Manikay* accompanies a person's life through stages of initiation and from birth to death, and encodes patterns for society and in song. Surrounding death in the Ngukurr community, *manikay* forges living community in sound, movement, relationship and

narrative. Around the singing bones *bilma* (clapsticks) of ceremony, this chapter demonstrates how *manikay* pulls families and individuals together in a community that is ongoing and not limited by separations of death.

After introducing the basic events of Wägilak mortuary ceremonies in Ngukurr, the interface between *manikay* and death is examined in greater detail. Unpacking key themes and musical forms, aspects of *manikay* explored include: the rhythmic structures of *manikay*; the timbre of a singer's voice; the creation of *yuta manikay* (new songs) during times of sadness or worry. This chapter also draws out multiple significances carried by core images of *raki* (string), *wata* (wind) and *naraka* (bones). This exploration shows *manikay* to be a dynamic tradition that holds deep significance for grieving individuals, surrounding them with living community and shaping experiences of death within a horizon of life.

This chapter will be accompanied by a recording of Wägilak singers performing some of the *manikay* repertoire for a smoking ceremony (funeral purification), recorded by the author.

Frances Miller, York University, Toronto

Title: "Farewell Vain World I'm Going Home": Singing Death in The Sacred Harp

Abstract: Sacred Harp singing is a choral tradition rooted in the American south where church-goers have gathered together for over 150 years to sing from an oblong hymnal of the same name. The words of *The Sacred Harp* (1844) embody the religious culture from which they were derived and focus intently on themes of death, dying and resurrection.

To say that death plays a primary role in the poetry of *The Sacred Harp* would be an understatement. In fact, it is nothing short of the book's leitmotif. The word "death" and its varied tenses occur in *The Sacred Harp* around 230 times. This does not include the many allusions to death present in this historic hymnal. One such metaphor "home," occurs a staggering 148 times. It is most often used to invoke the idea of "going home," the act of dying, the journey through which one finds their way to Heaven. Death, demonstrated in this way, should not be feared. It is an object of hope and a bridge to eternal salvation. It is this way of looking at death that most pervades Sacred Harp singing culture.

This chapter builds upon Kiri Miller's research around Sacred Harp singing's Memorial Lesson tradition (2010) and extends my own fieldwork conducted within The Toronto Shape Note Group (2013). My paper examines death's historic role in *The Sacred Harp* contrasted with the way modern revivalist singers continue to derive meaning from this music's dark lyrics.

My chapter begins with a careful examination of varying uses of the word "home" in the poetry of *The Sacred Harp* through the presentation and analysis of contrasting textual examples and an examination of their original sources. Following this I present and unpack perpetuated revivalist mythologies that suggest these songs can and should be sung with a sense of history, an understanding that death, in the impoverished lives of early southern singers, was not only a part of life but a hopeful prospect. I then proceed to research the

history of American death culture and death ritual in the rural south (Mitford 1963; Crissman 1994) to see if there is any validity to these mythologies. I will follow this by contrasting the lives of early rural singers with prominent early Sacred Harp composers as I once again assess the historical meaning of death in the early years of Sacred Harp singing. Finally, I will examine the modern day Sacred Harp ritual known as the Memorial Lesson and its importance as a means through which modern singers, living in the death-avoiding and death sanitizing culture of modern Western society, can both acknowledge and sing death.

Helen Dell, University of Melbourne

Title: Dying for Love in Troubadour and Trouvère Song

Abstract: 'How does one give oneself death [se donner la mort]? How does one give it to oneself in the sense that putting oneself to death means dying while assuming responsibility for one's own death, committing suicide but also sacrificing oneself for another, dying for the other, thus perhaps giving one's life by giving oneself death, accepting the gift of death, such as Socrates, Christ, and others did in so many different ways ... What is the relationship between ... putting oneself to death and dying for another? What are the relations among sacrifice, suicide, and the economy of this gift' (Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death* 10).

Medieval *roman* and *chanson* often draw us to the nexus between love and death, as if there were in love already something deadly. Dying of love or for love is a common topos and in these fields its status is highly ambiguous as its different grammatical constructions suggest. The implications of this ambiguity are poetic as well as ethical. As medievalists have noted, it is often difficult to disentangle suicide from sacrifice or martyrdom in medieval literature and song, to distinguish death as an act from death as passive, a blow to the sufferer delivered by a heartless beloved or by Love personified. If dying is considered as a deliberate act then Death as a figure loses his agency. If it is passive then Death conspires with Love and the cruel beloved to murder the lover.

The masculine *fin'amant* (refined or pure lover) of twelfth and thirteenth-century troubadour and trouvère song exploits this ambiguity. On the one hand he insists he is a blameless victim of the 'death' inflicted on him by Love and the lady, thus identifying himself as a martyr with no responsibility for his death. On the other he slyly indicates his enjoyment of this death, suggesting perhaps some liability in it, as in Gace Brulé's 'De bien amer grant joie atent': 'Great love cannot harm me/the more it kills me the more I like it' (Rosenberg and Danon, *Lyrics and Melodies of Gace Brulé* 35). This death by love in the songs is difficult to define; one cannot attach an unambiguous signification to any word or expression. It is not possible to trace clearly a structure of grammatical, causal, sequential or logical sequence onto the string of utterances that make up a *chanson* (song of refined love) so that the reader or listener can never be sure exactly what is intended. All possible connotations bubble around together in a seething stew.

Death is ubiquitous in the songs of the troubadours and trouvères. But when, instead of silently reading we listen, what do we hear? What happens to death by love when it is

submitted to the metamorphic processes brought about in song, encased in musical and poetic form, the characteristics of different genres and genders and the sound of a singing voice. Does encapsulation within a song rob death of its sting? Or can the meeting allow a space for death to be present in song for the listener? This chapter investigates how versification, melody, register, gender and genre alter the aspect of death by love in troubadour and trouvère song for the listener.

Helen M. Hickey, University of Melbourne

Title: ‘And the Stars Spell out Your Name’: The Memorial Music of Diana, Princess of Wales, Marilyn Monroe and Princess Charlotte of Wales

Abstract: Princess Diana’s sudden and violent death generated a massive outpouring of public grief. Throughout the following days, reporters scurried to ask ‘ordinary people’ on the street how they felt. Many, from small children to the elderly, wept as they spoke of their love and admiration for the Princess, and their feelings of shock and sadness at her premature death.

Between Diana’s death and burial at Westminster Abbey, the composer and pop star Elton John added lyrics and title to an unashamedly sentimental melody he composed for Marilyn Monroe—‘Candle in the Wind’. John retitled the melody ‘Goodbye England’s Rose’ and performed it at Diana’s funeral. Monroe herself had requested ‘Over the Rainbow’ for her funeral, a song performed by Judy Garland in the celebrated 1939 American film *The Wizard of Oz* (music by H. Arlen and lyrics by E.Y. Harburg). What the two women shared were their tragic deaths, and both were flashpoints of public emotion and mourning.

This chapter explores memorial music that skirts prescribed and customary responses to loss. If the deaths of Diana and Marilyn were unusual (in that they did not die aged and peacefully) their lives were even more so: betrayal, suicide, ostracism, infidelity, drug abuse and thwarted dreams blighted their memory. ‘Goodbye England’s Rose’ (Diana, Princess of Wales) ‘was a song with lyrics that encapsulated longing and regret not only about her death but especially about her broken life. This music spoke the grief created by this death but it was also music that strengthened the legendary status that grew around it. The choice of sentimental music at Diana’s and Marilyn’s memorials exposes the fraught relationship between interpersonal grief and media-generated vicarious loss. Sentimental music though has several problems attached to it, problems that call into question authenticity and the real. Within this dialectic, music plays a crucial role in engaging all of the circuitous emotions and thoughts that accompany and constitute sentimentality. My argument is that sentimental music, through its lyrics and melodies, explicitly connects mourners’ memories of the sad and broken lives of Diana, and Marilyn, and memories of the embodied loss invoked by their premature and tragic deaths: car crash, and suicide.

Henriette Korthals Altes, Queen Mary, University of London

Title: Barthes's Orphic Quest: music and mourning in *Camera Lucida*

Abstract: *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes's essay on photography constitutes an oblique piece of mourning for his late mother, Henriette Barthes. Indeed he wrote the essay a few months after his mother's death in 1977. *Camera Lucida* is only a thinly disguised essay on the evocative powers of photography which are to be found in what Barthes calls the *punctum*, the odd detail which channels the viewer's projections, desires and affects. However the essay also constitutes a veritable orphic quest, which is both ethical and affective. Barthes wants to find the appropriate picture that would bring back his mother back to life symbolically, that would do justice to her as a unique person as well as to his own unique grief. For Barthes, it is the Winter Garden photograph, a picture of his mother as a little girl. Significantly, this picture is the only one that is not printed, thus remaining invisible to the reader. But more interestingly, Barthes compares the power of this picture with Schumann's *Gesang der Frühe*, 'which accords with both my mother's being and my grief at her death.' (p. 70) And Barthes concludes 'but the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*' (p. 70).

In this chapter, I will explore what affective meaning music has for Roland Barthes. I will first recall how Roland Barthes was a practitioner himself—he both sang and played the piano. In the 70s Barthes wrote a series of papers on music, Schumann and Schubert. I will argue that these papers not only make musical writing and musical interpretation a metaphor for an ideal reader-writer relationship. They also betray how Barthes is in search of an embodied form of writing, i.e. a form of writing that would fully encapsulate affect—that precisely which cannot be expressed in an articulated language.

This chapter will also argue that Schumann's music, bound up with the Winter Garden photograph allows him to commune with his absent mother. Jacques Derrida in his obituary tribute to Barthes brought up the question, 'Barthes musician?', as he compares the photographic *punctum* with its musical counterpart, the *counterpoint*. Taking my cue from Derrida, I will show how Schumann's music transports Barthes beyond the visual and musical frame by virtue of a tension between the visible and invisible, consonance and dissonance, between silence, music and writing. This paper explores what functions and powers Barthes attributed to music, as he obsessively asked how we can do justice to the dead when we commemorate and commune with them. Drawing on a long and sinuous tradition that associates music and the unspeakable—Plato, the mystical tradition, Kant's notion of the Sublime, Adorno—I will show how Barthes's late return to musical and lyrical self-expression corresponds to a need to both express and curb his grief as well memorialize the dead.

Mary McLaughlin, Graduate of University of Limerick, Ireland

Title: Moving Between Worlds (Death, The Otherworld and Traditional Irish Song)

Abstract: Within the Irish song tradition there is more than one approach to the subject of death—some songs confront the subject directly, while others approach it more obliquely.

The song form known as *lament* encompasses more than one concept. The *Keen* is extempore and performed over a corpse; *death songs* or *eulogies* are usually composed in response to a death. In addition, there can be a metaphorical approach to death, where the death is not necessarily a physical one— these songs also come under the umbrella of *laments*. In this essay I would like to explore two of the ways in which the Irish have traditionally faced death through song: the *keen* and the *lament* as used in a metaphorical context.

Embedded in both these examples there is an implicit understanding of the Otherworld, a concept still prevalent throughout Ireland that synthesizes pre-Christian, mythological and Christian belief systems. The *keener* (singer of the *keen*) enables the mourners to weave back and forth between this world and the next within the ritual of the wake. The combined effect of the improvised singing and the ritual surrounding it acts as a powerful propellant to both grief and mystical exploration, suggesting a continuum between the temporal and Otherworld, rather than a divide.

An Mhaighdean Mhara [The Mermaid] connects this world to the Otherworld through a conversation between a mother who is a *selkie* (mythological seal-person), and her two children. As is common within the Irish tradition, the song is preceded by a story which contextualises it. There are always limitations placed on the transformational ability of a selkie and, in this instance, the selkie has given birth to two children in the human realm, returned to seal form and is unable to again become human. In the song both children and mother are lamenting her fate. The themes of separation, sorrow and awe are intrinsic to death and this song-story creates a bridge between the 'earth-bound' and the 'not earth-bound'. The song has a powerful way of (literally) speaking death while it draws on the country's rich mythological background to address profound questions.

Not only the texts, but also the melodies and individual singers' interpretations of the songs could be seen to have a representational and operational engagement with the processes of death and transformation. In the case of the *Keen* the performance is key to its impact. As an individualized and highly personal lament within its own conventions, it facilitates both the outpouring of grief at a human level while acknowledging the profound nature of the Otherworld at a spiritual level. In the case of *The Mermaid* the nature of the melody with its swells and dips could be seen to highlight the poignancy of the song while evoking the waves of the ocean where it is situated. These musical encounters speak to the inevitable sorrow that separation and loss bring, whether the death is actual or metaphorical. They also open a window into the Otherworld and the great mystery of death itself.

Kip Pegley, Queen's University , Kingston, Canada

Title: "Public Mourning, The Nation, and Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*" Kip Pegley, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Abstract: Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936) is the most widely-performed musical work for public mourning in the Western art music repertoire. In this regard, the *Adagio* has an impressive history: it was played on radio after Roosevelt's sudden death in '45, then at

the funeral of Einstein in '55, during the radio report of J.F.K.'s assassination, and at the funeral of Princess Grace of Monaco, not to mention its performances after the Challenger explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing, and innumerable renditions worldwide after 9/11. Indeed, many listeners know the emotional import of this piece of music: in 2007, when BBC Radio asked its audience to nominate the "saddest piece of music ever written," Barber's *Adagio* received more votes than the other top four pieces combined. But this isn't what all listeners in the 1930s said about the work: reviewers of early *Adagio* recordings described the work as "dull" and suffering from "thinness of content"; over the 20th century, however, performances of the work and our relationship to it changed so drastically that after a performance by the BBC Orchestra in a Proms concert led by American conductor Leonard Slatkin on September 15, 2001, four days after the 9/11 attacks, one reviewer described the event as "the most emotional night I spent in a concert hall." What happened to the *Adagio* that night? Why?

Jean-Luc Nancy describes mourning as the work that gives meaning to death; in doing so, he argues, mourning returns a community to a unified self-identity, separating insiders from outsiders, "us" from "them." By examining three recordings of the *Adagio* (Toscanini, 1938; Stokowski, 1958 and Slatkin, 2001), I will explore how the work transformed over a period of seventy years to become, by 9/11, an emotionally- drenched, *American* anthem of mourning. I argue that when the *Adagio* was performed on September 15, 2001, the sonic codes sounded intelligible and familiar to modern ears, yet listeners likely were unaware how these grammars were shaped by societal influences that encouraged them to remember *particular* people in in *particular* ways, resulting in a subtle yet powerful form of political violence.

Lindsay Ann Reid, National University of Ireland, Galway

Title: To the Tune of Queen Dido: Spectre and Subtext in Early Modern English Ballads

Abstract: It is a fact well known to scholars of early modern English culture that the vast majority of the era's ballads were printed sans musical notation. Rather, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century broadside ballads *textually* indicated for their audiences a recognizable, preexisting melody to which the printed lyrics were meant to be sung. Nonetheless, as Christopher Marsh's recent work on English balladry has revealed, there remains much work to be done on the ways in which ballads' reliance on recycled tunes likely shaped their meanings for early modern audiences. Beginning with the premise that shared melodies can position ballads in conversation with one another, in this chapter, I explore how a common tune might serve a hermeneutic function, intertextually linking discrete ballads and guiding audiences' interpretations of their lyrics. The central melody that I am concerned with in this case study was one of early modern England's best known and most frequently reused. Described variously as 'Queen Dido' or 'Troy Town', this tune was originally associated with the enormously popular (and frequently reprinted) sixteenth-century 'The Wandering Prince of Troy', a ballad that narrates the classical tale of Dido's ill-fated affair with Aeneas and her subsequent act of suicide. Central to my argument is the assumption that early modern audiences, when prompted to

sing new lyrics ‘to the tune of’ an existing ballad, remembered not only relevant melodies but also words and themes.

Put otherwise, later ballads sung ‘to the tune of Queen Dido’ are haunted (and I mean this in a Derridean sense, as well) by the ghostly presence of the lovelorn Carthaginian heroine. Examining a selection of seventeenth-century ballads sung to the melody of ‘The Wandering Prince of Troy’—that is, ‘Of the Inconveniences by Marriage’, ‘The Fair Maid of Dunsmore’s Lamentation’, ‘The London Damsels Fate by Unjust Tyranny’, ‘A Looking-Glass for Ladies’, and ‘The Sorrowful Mother’—I query how the narrative of Dido’s abandonment and death functions as a spectral subtext for each of these later, thematically interrelated pieces.

Abigail Shupe, The College of Wooster, Ohio

Title: “Crossing over, Returning Home: Expressions of Death as a Place in George Crumb’s *River of Life*.”

Abstract: In George Crumb’s song cycle *River of Life* (2003), Appalachian folk song and sonic depictions of physical landscapes attempt to chart that unknowable experience, death. *River of Life* accomplishes this by connecting death and the experience of dying with a strong notion of place. Through a combination of percussion timbres and vocal effects, Crumb creates musical echoes meant to evoke his mountainous West Virginian childhood home. The sounds of Appalachia, for the composer, signify a lost time and a personal place accessible only through music and memory. I thus interpret *River of Life* as a deeply personal statement about how to approach one’s own death. In this case, Crumb depicts death as a longed-for homecoming.

In this essay, I examine Crumb’s depiction of death as a return to a specific physical landscape, and I focus on his use of the echo to musically portray that landscape. To frame my discussion of the echo as both a musical and acoustic phenomenon, I draw on the ecocriticism of Gyorgyi Voros. For Voros, the echo is a poetic device that represents Nature’s voice, an ‘other’ that the self constantly desires. However, unification with Nature requires that the self lose its identity. As the subject passes away, it becomes a part of Nature and surrenders its individual characteristics.

I argue that through death, the subject in *River of Life* is united with Nature by dissolving into an echo. A musical echo accompanies the subject on a journey through the sonic landscape, ultimately culminating in the narrative agent peacefully passing away and becoming part of Nature. Three of the songs of the cycle, “Shall We Gather at the River?,” “Amazing Grace,” and “Deep River,” as well as the instrumental interlude movement employ the echo as a symbol of spiritual presence. In order to analyze the blend of American, Afro-American, and classical styles found in these songs, I draw on scholarship on the Afro-American spiritual tradition, as well as ecocritical musicology that deals with musical landscapes. I also incorporate pitch-set theory to show how Crumb’s characteristic blend of tonal and atonal harmonic languages provides musical closure at the moment of the narrator’s death in the final song. As musical and narrative ideas echo one another across *River of Life*, their reverberations enhance our sense of death as a return to a place in which we feel at home. For Crumb, the piece

suggests that this place is the rural, mountainous region of his childhood. Through his use of musical echoes and symmetrical harmonic materials, Crumb portrays death as the ultimate dichotomy. Death is both a departure and a return to the familiar; both a finality and a continuation of the journey into the unknown.

Heather Sparling , Cape Breton University

Title: “Sad and Solemn Requiems”: Disaster Songs and Complicated Grief in the Aftermath of Nova Scotia Mining Disasters

Abstract: Grief is an emotional reaction to loss. Following a mass death tragedy such as a mining disaster, there are many losses: the loss of individuals, often the loss of an entire economy (since mines frequently close after a major disaster), sometimes the loss of a community (as friends and neighbours move away in search of work in the aftermath of a mine closure), and the loss of a sense of security. Psychologists refer to the atypical grief that arises after a trauma as “complicated” (Corr, Nabe, and Corr 2003:239).

Songs often emerge in large numbers after major disasters; this is as true today as it was in the past. For example, I have documented over two dozen songs about the 1992 Westray mining disaster, the last major Nova Scotia mining disaster before the final remaining underground coal mine in the province closed in 2001 (one remaining open-pit coal mine remains active, although it will be closed within three years). All 26 miners working at the time were killed in the explosion that ripped through the mine in the early hours of May 9. The mine never reopened. I am constantly discovering more Westray songs. The fact that so many songs are continually being written in response to disasters—many by amateur songwriters—suggests that these songs are important in some way. What drives people to write disaster songs? What purpose do these songs serve?

Disaster songs may help process complicated grief. First, people create disaster songs (sometimes several) after a disaster. Disaster songs are not an anachronistic song form from an era when oral transmission and folk culture reigned. Wikipedia lists dozens of songs written in response to, for example, 9/11 (2001) and Hurricane Katrina (2005). Second, people listen to (by which I mean use, need, consume, and respond to) disaster songs. Benefit concerts played significant roles after 9/11 and Katrina, as they did after Westray. Third, people perform disaster songs. For example, Nova Scotia’s well-known choir of retired coal miners, The Men of the Deeps, has performed, recorded, and published numerous mining disaster songs.

Despite much literature addressing related topics such as music and death rituals, music therapy, complicated grief, and balladry, there is surprisingly little addressing disaster songs as a genre, let alone their role within grieving communities. By drawing on multidisciplinary literature (psychology, music therapy, anthropology, and history), and with reference to a Canadian context, this paper will explore how music helps with processing complicated grief.

**Penny Spirou, University of Notre Dame, Australia / The University of New South Wales
Natalie Lewandowski Editor Screen Sound Journal /Treasurer IASPM-ANZ**

Title: 'Break on through to the other side': Songs of Death in Supernatural Horror Films

Abstract: Music, sound and effects are a crucial aspect of horror genre films. These sonic elements set the tone, mood and assist the film audience to understand narrative and character development/relationships. Many contemporary Hollywood horror films use pre-recorded rock music tracks to signify death, the afterlife, and beings that exist beyond the realm of the living (including demons and spirits). Songs that are linked to certain people, places or things are termed 'leitmotif's' in screen soundtrack studies. The following films showcase this musical element as a way of more deeply exploring the theme of death. In *Fallen* (1998), a demon sings 'Time Is On My Side' by The Rolling Stones, before the criminal that it embodies, dies in the electric chair. The demon moves from body to body (by touch) and sings the song throughout the film. Here 'Time Is On My Side' signals that the demon resides in any living being. *Final Destination* (2000) is a teen thriller film which bridges on the idea of fate. After a group of students escape a plane crash which one student in particular had envisioned, they come to realise that they were destined to die and, one by one, are killed in the order that they would have, if they had remained on the flight. In *Final Destination*, 'Rocky Mountain High' by John Denver plays diegetically (within the world of the film), immediately before another victim is killed. Upon hearing the song, the victim learns that his or her death is imminent. The premise of the horror film *1408* (2007), based on the short story by Stephen King, is Mike Enslin's investigation of a haunted hotel room at the Dolphin Hotel, New York City. In *1408*, 'We've Only Just Begun' by the Carpenters plays through the clock radio in the hotel that the protagonist stays in, which is haunted and traps him in a time warp. Enslin has visions of his own death and attempts to commit suicide to escape the hotel room. *Deliver Us From Evil* (2014) is an exorcism film where the demon spirit and those that are embodied by it is connected to The Doors' music, particularly 'People are Strange' and 'Break on Through (To The Other Side)'. The music is integrated into the film's narrative sonically and visually.

This paper will focus on the aforementioned films and examine inter/textuality of the selected pre-recorded rock songs, discussing the lyrics, tone and musicians/performers history. Utilising (horror) genre theory and screen soundtrack theory, this paper argues that pre-recorded rock songs sonically symbolise death and the afterlife in the horror film. Death is directly linked to songs in the horror genre as a way to make sense of and understand the elusive and potentially frightening imminence of death and what could exist in the afterlife.

Walter van de Leur, University of Amsterdam / Conservatory of Amsterdam

Title: Swinging in Heaven, Boppin' in Hell: Jazz and Death

Abstract: Jazz histories and documentaries appear to have a special fascination with death. In Ken Burns's 19-hour TV-documentary "Jazz" (2001), Charlie Parker's death is spun out to drive home what seems to be a Faustian parable. Parker is a dangerous genius—elsewhere in the film he is likened to the Pied Piper of Hameln—whose music is full of Devil's intervals. But his virtuosity clearly comes at a cost, and at thirty-four Parker is dead of substance

abuse. Jazz biographies tend to be full of such Romantic notions, from the death of the misunderstood Bix Beiderbecke to the larger-than-life Duke Ellington for whom death was “the only problem he couldn’t solve.” Such is the fascination with death that there is an entire monograph dedicated to Jazz and Death (Spencer 2002), which “reveals the truth behind the deaths of jazz artists,” neatly organized in categories such as “trauma” and “syphilis.”

True, there is a very concrete practice where jazz and death are connected, in the so-called “jazz funerals” in New Orleans, which may date back to the early genesis of the music. The jazz funeral resonates with overtones of authentic, ancient African practices. Resonates, because proof is elusive, even though rather essentialist readings of African elements in African American culture conveniently connect the slave dances in Congo Square in the early 1800s to present-day second line parades and consequently to jazz. It roots the music in an authentic practice.

That very quest for authenticity in jazz, I argue, is one of the reasons for the fascination of many for jazz and death. Jazz improvisation is a deeply mysterious process to most, and therefore it easily invites mystifications. Apparently the heroes, icons and legends that shaped this music cannot simply die from diseases or accidents like other mortals; there must be some higher meaning to their passing. Various mythologies, fantasies and tropes circulate, some of which this proposed chapter will discuss and contextualize:

Tragic deaths: Proof of the misunderstood and suffering genius (Bix Beiderbecke);

Faustian metaphors: Jazz and improvisation are dangerous adventures and invite a pact with the devil. The price is an early death (Charlie Parker) or insanity (Buddy Bolden);

Biblical metaphors: Louis Armstrong “was sent by God to this earth to be a special messenger,” and now he’s “up there with the Angels, blowing his horn with Gabriel”;

Swan Songs: Last recordings and final concerts, such as the death of trumpeter Chet Baker, who famously fell from an Amsterdam hotel window, and the final concert of Ben Webster, who shared a childhood memory with the audience: “I heard, when I was a kid, from an old man: Son, you are young, and growing and I’m old and going, so have your fun while you can.”

My chapter will look at these fascinating narratives of jazz and death, and discuss how they represent certain ideas about jazz, which evolve around authenticity, genius, success and failure.