

## **Degree Project**

Level: Bachelor's

### **On the Road to "IT"**

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#### **Kerouac and Spontaneity**

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## Introduction

Spontaneity is a key feature of Jack Kerouac's ground-breaking 1957 novel *On The Road*. The plot of *On The Road* consists of the impulsive road trips that the novel's narrator, Sal Paradise, takes with his friend Dean Moriarty. The novel – like all of Kerouac's novels – is a so-called roman à clef: a novel in which real people or actual events figure under different names. In *On The Road*, “Sal Paradise” is Kerouac's fictional name for himself, and “Dean Moriarty” is the fictional name for Kerouac's real-life friend Neal Cassady. The voices of the novel's characters are not distinct from the voices of the real people that they portray, and the events of *On The Road* are events that took place in real life. Although *On The Road* is narrated by Sal Paradise, the novel's true hero is undisputedly Dean Moriarty whose unshackled and impulsive nature Sal is deeply fascinated by. Dean would stop at nothing to live his life to the fullest; in the words of William T. Lawlor, author of *Beat Culture: Icons, Lifestyles, and Impact*, Dean would “move from road trip to jazz club to sexual liaison in a seemingly endless and largely improvised quest for continually escalating kicks” (Lawlor 340). Here, Lawlor connects *On The Road*'s depiction of Dean's impulsive lifestyle with “the Beat Generation's emerging sense of life and art as a series of spontaneous improvisations” (Lawlor 340).

The Beat Generation is the name given to the countercultural literary movement that Kerouac belonged to. *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary* defines the Beat Generation as “a movement of young people chiefly in the US in the 1950's and early 1960's who rejected conventional society, valuing free self-expression and favouring modern jazz and life on the road” (“Beat generation”). The Beats “loathed the ivory-tower entrapment of poetry” and wanted to “take poetry out of the classrooms and into the streets” (Theado 748-749), shunning

the constraints of academia and the idea that one had to stick to a conventional, well-proven form in order to write prose or poetry. Instead, the Beat Generation believed that the true value of life lied in impulsive, uninhibited self-expression, and these ideas were certainly ideas that Kerouac put forth with *On The Road* by documenting his and Neal Cassady's spontaneous and thrill-seeking trips around America.

It is, however, arguable that *On The Road's* true literary value lies in the way it is written, for the initial act of writing the novel was itself characterised by spontaneity. Fellow beatnik, John Clellon Holmes, remembers that before commencing to write the first draft of *On The Road*, Kerouac came into Holmes' apartment to talk about how he was going to write his novel:

You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get me a roll of shelf-paper, feed it into the typewriter, and just write it down as fast as I can, exactly like it happened, all in a rush, the hell with these phony architectures – and worry about it later (Charters 118)

With this said, Kerouac finished his first draft of *On The Road*, written on a single 120-foot scroll without margins or paragraph breaks, after a three-week marathon writing session (Charters 118).

Although the published version of *On The Road* was a revision of the original manuscript, it still contains, according to Lawlor, “the spontaneous energy of Kerouac's initial composition process” (Lawlor 340). To sum up the impact of *On The Road*, Lawlor further states that

*On the Road* established itself as the testament of the Beat Generation largely because it developed a new aesthetic strategy for expressing the spontaneous, uninhibited adventures of Dean (Neal Cassady) in the spontaneous, uninhibited narrative voice of Sal (Kerouac). In this sense, Kerouac turned to spontaneity both to articulate the Beat Generation's alternative countercultural worldview and to develop its new spontaneous literary style. (Lawlor 340)

In other words, Neal's spontaneous and free-flowing nature was something that Kerouac was deeply passionate about, and he ended up transmuting it into *On The Road* - the novel that would manifest itself as the immaculate example of the Beat Generation's new and spontaneous literary style.

I have hitherto established that spontaneity was important for Kerouac, and Kerouac's strong relationship with spontaneity has certainly been discussed in a number of books and essays. This essay, too, will investigate Kerouac's relationship with spontaneity. It argues that spontaneity was of great importance to the spiritually inclined Kerouac, and in *On The Road* spontaneity is a gateway to a mystical experience of transcendence referred to as "IT". The essay will commence by looking at how "IT" is thematized in the novel, and, in order to do so, the essay focuses in on a conversation about a night in a jazz club – a night during which "IT" arose from a jazz musician's performance. This conversation, as well as the conversation that directly follows it, are illuminated and discussed in the essay not only because they present the notion of "IT", but also because they are passages that contain the gist of *On The Road* as a whole in the sense that the passages underline *On The Road's* gusto for spontaneity and uninhibited self-expression which reverberates all throughout the novel.

Whereas many other essays concerned with Jack Kerouac's relationship with spontaneity are focused on the linguistic aspects of Kerouac's spontaneous prose method, this essay aims to show how *On The Road's* description of the jazz musician's performance can be viewed as an artistic statement by Kerouac – a statement that praises the notion of the spontaneous, uninhibited creative process that the jazz performance entailed. After exploring the concept of "IT", the essay considers the qualities of jazz music and investigates how jazz is portrayed in *On The Road*, in order to show why the creative process of a jazz performance specifically is a potent gateway to "IT". Doing so will, in turn, help to show why Kerouac would embed his artistic statement in the description of a jazz performance.

By way of concluding, the essay will make a brief analogy between how Kerouac is said to have written *On The Road's* first draft and the jazz musician's performance – an analogy that aims to show how Kerouac, as a writer, incorporated the characteristics of the musician's performance into his writing process in order to infuse his prose with "IT". Ultimately, this analogy will lead into a small biographical account of when Kerouac presented *On The Road's* first draft to his editor. This biographical account serves to show just how much Kerouac valued his vision of true art as a result of spontaneous, uninhibited creation, and how he did not, as a creator himself, want to stray away from this artistic ideal.

## “IT”

Dean, the hero of the novel, is an object of deep fascination for the narrator Sal. This fascination is so profound that it seems like Sal experiences holiness in Dean's spontaneous and unfettered nature. At one point in the novel, Sal says that Dean “had the tremendous energy of a new kind

of American saint” (Kerouac 25), and at another point Sal describes how

a kind of holy lightning flashed from his excitement and visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the “overexcited nut” (Kerouac 4)

During one of Dean’s “holy lightning” moments, he and Sal are having a conversation about an evening in a jazz club:

“Now, man, that alto man last night had IT – he held it once he found it; I’ve never seen a guy who could hold so long.” I wanted to know what “IT” meant. “Ah well” – Dean laughed – “now you’re asking me impon-de-rables-ahem! Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he gets it – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confession of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT-“ Dean could go no further; he was sweating telling about it. (Kerouac 131)



Dean's "IT" seems to refer to a kind of mystical experience - an experience of timelessness that is "picked up by the musician in the middle of the chorus" and in that same moment projected onto the audience which suddenly "looks up, knows and listens". In the words of Jason Haslam

"IT" is a moment of bridge-building and community-formation that arises from the artistic creation of one individual but is ultimately expressed as a communal feeling of transcendence: "it's not the tune that counts but IT." "IT" becomes a form of universal communication – a prelapsarian, or pre-Babel monologism – that nonetheless fragments itself, destroying that very communicability. "IT" is not only imponderable but can only exist in the dashes that disrupt even the meaning of "impond-erables." (Haslam 12)

"IT" in the novel is in this sense something that is imponderable in its essence. It cannot truly be grasped by thought; it is rather grasped between thoughts, or as Haslam writes, "in the dashes that disrupt even the meaning of "im-pond-erables". Haslam utilises Christian terms in order to grasp at the imponderable nature of "IT", which in turn highlights that the most absolute qualities of "IT" definitely lie within the abode of spirituality - an abode in which Kerouac would reside for all his life. Indeed, Ben Giamo defines Kerouac as "a ragged priest of the word, a prose artist on a spiritual quest for the ultimate meaning of existence and suffering and the celebration of joy in the meantime" (qtd in Miller 648), while also stating that Kerouac's whole literary career was "a quest, through the development of his prose style, for the elusive 'IT', a condition of transcendence whose definition changes as Kerouac changes", and Kerouac

himself was certainly ever-changing. Ann Charters – who wrote a biography of Kerouac – points out in her book’s introduction that Kerouac, throughout his whole life, “played games with himself, giving himself new roles and identities, vanities as he called them in his last years, and his belief in himself as a writer was his main identity” (Charters 13). Here, Charters underlines the notion that Kerouac’s “essence lay in a romantic vision of himself” - that

it lay in his fantasies: as a child, the fantasy of living with a saintly older brother Gerard; as an adolescent, of fighting evil alongside the mysterious Doctor Sax, of going with a football scholarship from a small town high school to All-America fame at an Ivy League college; then, as an adult, the fantasy of being the greatest writer in the English language since Shakespeare and James Joyce, and when that success didn’t come, in desperation, successive fantasies of being a drifter, a railroad brakeman, a Zen mountaineer, a holy mystic living on simple foods cooked along lonely streams (Charters 14)

It seems, then, that Kerouac’s identity was just as elusive as “IT” in the sense that Kerouac would give himself various identities throughout his life just as he would define “IT” in different ways throughout his life. Whenever he shed skin, “IT” also shed skin - its true colours forever eluding Kerouac.

It is Kerouac’s identity as Sal Paradise in *On The Road* that is of interest for this essay, and this identity is one of a spontaneous drifter - the identity of a restless young man who follows his highly impulsive companion Dean Moriarty on various road trips around America, constantly pursuing new thrills and experiences, and the “IT” in *On The Road* is intimately

connected with impulsiveness and with drifting about without a definite goal in mind. What Haslam does not point out in his lucid explanation of “IT” is that the alt-man is in fact *improvising* when he plays the chorus and picks up “IT” in the middle of it. Haslam states that “IT” derives from the artistic creation of an individual, but he does not recognize that “IT” seems to derive from a *spontaneous* kind of creativity, and, furthermore, the spiritual qualities of “IT” are still very vague in definition at this moment. Thus, to come as close as possible to *what* “IT” really is, it is wise to thoroughly examine *how* “IT” arises.

### **Picking up “IT”**

In the jazz club, “IT” is picked up by the alto-saxophonist somewhere *in the middle* of the chorus, and in that same moment “IT” reaches the audience who “looks up, knows and listens” (Kerouac 131). The notion that “IT” is picked up *in the middle* can be analysed in the context of the following statement from Sal Paradise:

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!” (Kerouac 5)

Just like it is *in the middle* “when the blue centerlight pops” that these people make everybody go “Awww!”, it is *in the middle* of the chorus that the alt-man picks up “IT” and makes everybody look up and listen. Herein lies a strong connection, namely the one between “IT” and

“Awww!” Since “IT” is truly imponderable and transcends language, an “Awww!” would perhaps be the best sound to express the mystical state of mind that “IT” represents: when the altman picks up “IT”, he makes the audience go “Awww!” (it should be noted here that “Awww!” is semantically meaningless as it solely functions as a verbal indication of that “IT” has arisen). So in other words, the only people for Sal are arguably the people who, just like the jazz musician, can pick up “IT” and engulf others in it. However, they do it through different means. The jazz musician does it through music, and Sal’s “madmen” do it through their ecstatic impulsiveness and their unconventionality, and a writer might do it through his writing. But, as Dean points out, “it is not the tune that counts but “IT”, further suggesting that “IT” can be picked up in a multitude of ways. However, “IT” seems to always be picked up *in the middle* of a happening, and furthermore “IT” seems to always manifest itself through spontaneity.

The reason why “IT” is picked up *in the middle* is presumably because the middle is not contrived in the same sense as the beginning. It is an active choice to start an activity, but at a certain point one will perhaps be so absorbed in the activity that one will not experience one’s choices of actions as active but rather as passive in the sense that things are being carried out “by themselves” without one having to actively think about carrying them out. This experience of “passiveness” is not so unlike what modern psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as “Flow”: a harmonious state of mind in which “concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems” (Csikszentmihalyi 71). In Flow, then, a person is so deeply engrossed in what he/she is doing that there is not even “enough attention left over to allow one to consider either the past or the future” (Csikszentmihalyi 62), and thus the experience of Flow lies out of temporal bounds, precisely like Dean’s “IT”. During Flow, there is, according to Csikszentmihalyi, not even the notion of

“our self”. In order to underline this, he quotes a climber who, talking about the experience of Flow during climbing, says that “when things become automatic, it’s like an egoless thing, in a way. Somehow the right thing is done without you ever thinking about it or doing anything at all ... It just happens.” (Csikszentmihalyi 63). This statement can be compared with how “IT” is always picked up in the middle of a happening; to say that it is an egoless thing when things become automatic implies that it takes a while before things become automatic, and that it therefore takes some time to attain Flow in an activity. In other words, a climber must feel out the mountain before he can attain Flow in his climbing, just like how the jazz musician in the novel had to feel out the music before he could “lose himself” in it. In *On The Road*, this “loss of self” is represented as a kind of mystical experience in which one’s usual, controlled sense of self is transcended and substituted by the sensation that one is automatically being carried forth in the right direction by some intellectually imponderable spontaneous force – a “power” that could be perceived as spiritual and divine in nature.

In the novel, both Dean and Sal seem to experience something akin to Flow as they become engaged in a spontaneous, high octane conversation with each other – a conversation that takes place immediately after Dean describes how the alt-man picked up “IT” in the jazz club. Their conversation, which is about childhood memories, is so intense that they are sweating; they are so absorbed in the conversation that they are completely unconscious of any outside stimuli, including the other people being present in the car. Ultimately, the driver gets annoyed and blurs out: “For God’s sake, you’re rocking the boat back there.” This makes Sal realize that

Actually we were; the car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm

and the IT of our final excited joy in talking and living to the blank traced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives (Kerouac 131)

In other words, they are “pouring their hearts out” to each other, speaking - perhaps for the first time in their lives - directly and freely from their souls without filtering their essentially “riotous” and “angelic” content in any way. In this sense, they have completely surrendered themselves to the happening of the conversation and lost their usual notion of “self” in it, and this experience of transcendence makes them feel profoundly joyous and ecstatic – like they are truly in touch with - as well as steered by - the blissful infinity of angelic particulars in their souls, and it is this transcendent sensation that “IT” entails. The conversation is about childhood memories, although it is not the topic itself that gives rise to “IT”, but rather the uninhibited, spontaneous, from-the-heart-nature of the conversation. It should be pointed out here that although the conversation between Sal and Dean is not artistic in the same sense as the jazz musician’s performance in the club, the conversation is nevertheless an act of creation. It seems, then, that “IT” can also arise from a conversation as long as it is carried out in a way that harbours the characteristics of Flow. It is, after all, “not the tune that counts, but IT” (Kerouac 131).

By comparing “IT” with Flow, it is perhaps more clear exactly what “IT” entails and how it is picked up. Both experiences involve a loss of ego and the sensation that one is being spontaneously, freely and “automatically” driven forward. Also, both experiences can be ascribed spiritual properties. Indeed, the experiences of Flow and “IT” are very alike and connected, their likeness seemingly uncanny, but there seems to be a main difference between the

concepts. Haslam points out that “IT” “arises from the artistic creation of one individual but is ultimately expressed as a communal feeling of transcendence”, and the difference, then, between “IT” and Flow is that the latter is an *individual* experience and not a communal one. However, as “IT” arises from the artistic creation of an individual, the individual has without a doubt attained Flow in whatever artistic activity he/she is carrying out; the person is so engulfed in the artistic activity that things happen spontaneously, and the individual’s everyday ego has imploded into the activity. It is not farfetched to conclude that the experience of “IT” is simply the communal experience of an individual’s Flow. For “IT” to arise, however, there must exist a medium through which the individual’s Flow can be transferred onto the surroundings. In the case of Sal and Dean’s conversation, the medium is their voices, and in the jazz club the medium is jazz music, which in the novel is presented as an especially potent gateway to “IT”.

### **Jazz and “IT”**

According to Douglas Malcolm, author of *Jazz America: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac’s On The Road*, “improvisation is the principal formal rule which distinguishes jazz from other types of music” (Malcolm 87). For him, the true value of jazz lies in its improvisational nature, and when the alto-saxophone player picks up “IT” somewhere in the middle of the chorus, he is improvising. “What musicians meant by the term *chorus*”, Malcolm explains, “was simply that segment of a solo which used the thirty-two measure AABA chord progression or entire twelve measure blues progression” (Malcolm 88). In the performance in the jazz club, the chorus consists of the alto-saxophonist’s improvised solo upon the

song's given chord progression and rhythm that is kept by the other band members. The musician makes the active choice of which note to blow first in the start of the solo, but in the middle of the solo he becomes so absorbed in the music that his ego dissolves in it, and he knows exactly what to play without having to think about it. In this moment he attains Flow: he turns "passive", and his loss of ego blesses his playing with an uncontrived, holy and true quality.

In her book *Experiencing "flow" in jazz performance*, which is based on interviews with jazz performers and concerns their experiences of Csikszentmihalyi's Flow during their performances, Elina Hytönen-Ng highlights just how spiritual the experience of Flow can feel for a jazz performer. She states that moments of Flow in western jazz performance are similar to trancelike states of mind (qtd in Hurley 125). To her, Flow certainly has a spiritual character, but she points out that most Western musicians do not connect the experience of Flow at all with spirituality, mainly because of their secular upbringing. In this light, she establishes Flow as "a socially acceptable way to connect with the unconscious and spiritual realm at the same time as major religions are losing their hold on the collective imagination" (qtd in Hurley 125). What happens in *On The Road's* jazz club, in this view then, is that the secular audience gets to experience the alt-man's Flow. One might say that the alt-man's solo "taps into the angelic particulars" (to borrow Kerouac's words) of the audience members' souls, thus obliterating their usual notions of "self" and "time" and presenting them with the experience of transcendence that "IT" entails.

One notion that needs to be pointed out here is that the alt-man would not have been able to reach out to the audience if he was not a skilful musician. Anybody can play the saxophone spontaneously, but it is only by spontaneous actions within a proper context in which one is knowledgeable that "IT" can arise; the alto-saxophonist had to be skilled enough to know how



to properly improvise upon the song's specific rhythm and chord progression in order for the music to sound good – he had to abide to the formal rules of the song. If he suddenly would have played notes from a completely different key during the solo, his Flow would certainly halter and the “IT” -experience would dissipate. Bjorn Alterhaug, in his *Improvisation on a triple theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication*, supports this notion about the importance of having the proper skills in order to be able to master the art of improvisational playing. He believes that jazz improvisation “constitutes an activity that requires thorough preparation of a set of skills that need to be internalized” (Alterhaug 9). He believes that it is very crucial for a jazz performer to have a good balance between challenges and skills. These notions will soon be found to connect with Kerouac's artistic vision of spontaneous creation, but it is now, however, more adequate to look closer at – as well as make clear – what it is that really makes jazz to be such a potent gateway to “IT”.

Music, as a phenomenon and art form, is possibly the perfect embodiment of the proverb “it is not the destination that matters, but the journey”. The successions of tones that constitute music do not strive to arrive in any particular place; music does not really *go* anywhere. Rather, the value of music lies in its movement – if music stops, there is simply no music anymore. What makes jazz into such a potent gateway to “IT”, then, is simply because the movement of jazz is spontaneous and not set in stone before the onset of a performance, and, as have been shown, “IT” can only arise through spontaneity.

Since the value of music lies in its movement, a musical performance can quite naturally be viewed as a road trip from its start to finish in the sense that it takes the listener from silence to silence through a succession of tones. In this sense, the jazz musician in the club took Sal, Dean and the rest of the audience on a road trip with his playing – a road trip which value lay

*not* in its destination, but in its movement which is improvised, frantic and spontaneous, precisely like the nature of Sal and Dean's road trips. Indeed, Malcolm points out that in the beginning on *On The Road*, Sal "directly links bop and the aimless travelling of himself and his friends: 'And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop had come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about'" (Malcolm 97). Malcolm further points out that "it is the 'frantic and rushing-about' quality that Sal finds whenever he encounters jazz; significantly, he finds it played on both coasts, thus geographically embracing the nation." (Malcolm 97). Thus, even if Sal and Dean would go from one coast to the other, they would still arrive at the same restlessness that they came from, but it would not really matter where they would go because they would always feel the frantic ecstasies of jazz reverberate in all of America and resonate with their souls. During their trips they have, just like the alt-man during his solo in the club, a notion of where they are going, but they do not have a definite goal in mind at which they will ultimately end up, and even if they did, they would certainly not know exactly how they would get there. One might say that it is by truly feeling out the "groove of the road" – just like how the alt-man feels out the groove of the music – that they pick up "IT" which spontaneously and truthfully lead them onward while at the same time gifting them with a multitude of ecstatic experiences.

In conclusion, jazz music is, due to its improvisational nature, a very potent gateway and bridge to "IT". Also, the gist of *On The Road* is very comparable to the qualities of jazz music, which is why Sal and Dean's conversation about the night in the jazz club truly illuminates the core ideals and values that the novel puts forth. One might say that the stuff of *On The Road* truly breathes jazz, and it is thus no wonder why Kerouac utilized the description of a jazz

musician's performance in order to put forth his artistic vision of spontaneous creation.

### **Kerouac's spontaneous prose**

Jack Kerouac had, for all his spiritually inclined life, chased the mystical and elusive "IT", and he had now found it and experienced it with Neal Cassady during their spontaneous, jazz-like flow of experiences on the road. Since Kerouac had found especially jazz to be such a potent gateway to "IT", he used the jazz musician's performance as a metaphor for his vision of the spontaneous, artistic creative process. Many scholars have analysed precisely how Kerouac's own art – his writing – is connected with jazz. For example, Steven Henderson argues that Kerouac and The Beats often were "striving to capture the rhythms and phrasings of Black music, to notate somehow those sounds on the printed page" (qtd in Jones 71). However, according to Malcolm, "Kerouac's use of jazz as a means of structuring his prose was less formal than it was inspirational" (Malcolm 93), and it is to this notion that this essay adheres. Here, it is possible to make a simple and quick but arguably striking analogy between how Kerouac is said to have written *On The Road's* first draft and the alto-saxophonist's performance in the jazz club. This analogy aims to show that it is possible to devise a creative *writing* process that mirrors the creative process of the alt-man's solo. In doing so, the spontaneous quality of the alt-man's solo would be channelled into one's writing process, which in turn makes it possible for "IT" to arise from one's writing.

If one puts Kerouac in the alt-man's shoes, it is possible to view his personal experiences with Neal as the chord progression and rhythm upon which Kerouac has to improvise in order for his words to ring true, and his instrument can be viewed as his writing voice which in turn

is made up by his language skills which he had honed all throughout his life by constantly reading and writing. The famous jazz-musician Charlie Parker once said: “music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (Formanek 3), and this is precisely what Kerouac, who was an avid admirer of Parker (Charters 200), had realised. Here, then, exists the balance between challenge and skill that Alterhaug talks about: Kerouac’s experiences with Neal on the road act as the “formal rules” (challenge) to which Kerouac has to abide in order for his improvised “solo” (skill) to truly harmonize with its backdrop. Thus, in order to write *On The Road’s* first draft, Kerouac can be said to have taken on the role - or the vanity - of the alt-man, as he felt confident enough in his skills to “blow his improvised solo” and eventually attain the same Flow in his writing as the alt-man attained in his music.

Just as a piece of music can be seen as a road trip from its first sound to its last, a novel, too, can be seen as a road trip from its first word to its last, and *the process of writing a novel* can also be viewed as a road trip from the process’s beginning to its end. In order to write a novel in a typewriter one obviously needs paper to write on, but in order to play music one needs only air “to play on”, and air does not have to be changed like paper in a typewriter. This discrepancy between music and writing was, however, solved by Kerouac by taping together sheets of paper into one long roll so that he would not need to change the paper in his typewriter (Cunnell 24) – an action that would certainly hinder the flow of his writing. One might say that his “music” would stop if he would have to change papers, which would cause him to be “flung out of the groove” of his writing. Therefore, by having a long and seamless supply of paper to write on, Kerouac could sit down and start writing and eventually become so absorbed in the

writing that he would attain what Csikszentmihalyi calls Flow and pick up “IT”. By this moment, Kerouac’s fingers would be controlled by the “riotous angelic particulars” of his soul that would make him write spontaneously and truthfully from within the context of his experiences with Neal, and the bridge over which the “IT”-experience is projected outward from Kerouac is simply his words.

Another aspect that connects the writing process of *On The Road’s* first draft with the jazz musician’s performance is the notion that Kerouac does not exactly know how his novel will turn out. He writes from within the context of his experiences with Neal, but he does not know exactly how he will put them on paper. Thus, the framework of the novel is rigid, but not the picture that he will paint; but if he knew from the beginning exactly what he would write, which words he would use and so on, there would simply be no possibility for spontaneous creation, and Kerouac’s artistic vision of spontaneous creation would shatter. In this sense, the road trip that consists of Kerouac’s writing process is closely connected to the spontaneous movement of the alt-man’s solo in the jazz club.

By making this analogy between Kerouac’s creative process of writing *On The Road’s* first draft and the alt-man’s creative process of playing his improvised solo, one certainly finds a number of similarities. However, one is sooner or later bound to arrive at an obstacle: music is temporary, but written words are permanent. Thus, it is impossible to “go back in time” and revise a piece of music once it has been played, but it is certainly possible to revise a piece of text after it has been written. The idea of revising his spontaneously written, 120-foot long manuscript of *On The Road*, however, did not appeal to Kerouac:

Robert Giroux remembers that Kerouac phoned him from the loft in great excitement to say he'd just finished *On The Road*. The next day he appeared at Giroux's office with the huge roll of paper under his arm and threw it across the floor shouting: 'Here's you novel!' Jack had pasted the sheets of teletype paper together – Giroux said they felt rubbery, like Thermo-fax paper – to make one big roll. Giroux was so startled that he said the wrong thing: 'But Jack, how can you make corrections on a manuscript like that?' Later he realized that Jack was in a state of ecstasy and wanted a ceremonial reaction, dancing around the paper carpet of manuscript. Kerouac drew back, obviously hurt at his editor's response. Belligerently insisting he wouldn't change a word for anyone, he rolled up his manuscript and disappeared. Giroux heard nothing more from him for several years. (Charters 119)

When faced by the fact that his 120-foot scroll could not be published in its current form, Kerouac was fiercely dragged out of his state of spiritual euphoria that had been induced by the "IT"-experience deriving from his spontaneous, uninhibited writing process of *On The Road's* first draft. It is interesting here to note that the notion that Kerouac "belligerently insisted he wouldn't change a word for anyone" actually connects with his artistic statement embedded in *On The Road's* depiction of the jazz musician's performance. If Kerouac's idea of art was all about spontaneous and uninhibited self-expression, it makes sense that he insisted on not revising his spontaneously written manuscript. If he would revise it, the prose would simply not be spontaneous anymore: it would lose its original, free-flowing and "spiritual" quality - its "IT" would disappear. In this light, the manuscript that Kerouac presented to his editor can be viewed as the pure result of Kerouac's three-week spontaneous writing process; Kerouac's

manuscript can thus be likened with the alt-man's solo, which was the pure result of the alt-man's improvised playing. The difference between these two creative processes is that it was impossible for the alt-man to revise his solo, but it was possible for Kerouac to revise his manuscript. So by choosing not to revise his manuscript, it took on, in a sense, the un-revisable quality of the alt-man's solo, and Kerouac stayed true to his artistic vision of art as a result of spontaneous, uninhibited and un-revised self-expression. However, Kerouac eventually swallowed his pride and revised his manuscript in order to get it published, but this is not something that he wanted to admit. In a television interview with Steve Allen in *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959, two years after *On The Road* was published, Allen asks Kerouac how long it took to write *On The Road*, whereupon Kerouac gives the short answer "three weeks" ("Jack Kerouac; Frankie Laine; William Bendix; Pam Garner"). While this answer is not true, it nevertheless illustrates Kerouac's strong desire to stick to his artistic ideals that he put forth in *On The Road*.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the description of the jazz musician's performance in *On The Road* can certainly be viewed as an artistic statement by Jack Kerouac. It puts forth the notion of the transcendental, spiritual "IT"-experience while also showing how "IT" arises through an alto-saxophonist's spontaneous, uninhibited creative process – a creative process that the essay has shown to be characterized by Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow. In a way, the passage also functions as a guide to how an artist can channel the spontaneous qualities of the jazz musician's creative

process into his own creative process in order to be able to override his ego so that his art will be “passively” created by the “riotous angelic particulars” of his soul, which, in turn, will infuse his art with “IT”. This kind of spontaneously created art, then, is Kerouac’s idea of true art, as well as the kind of art that he aimed to create himself. Since such art spontaneously flows from deep within the artist himself, it has a pure and holy quality to it. It is everything but pretentious: it is a result of uninhibited self-expression, completely untainted by the artist’s everyday ego, and it might, if it is skilfully executed, have the power to totally captivate its perceivers, presenting them with the “IT”-experience while making them go “Awww!”.

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