

Jazz Lyrics/Poetry Analysis
Annotated analysis (discussion starters)

Title Believe, Believe

Writer Bob Kaufman

List two details from the writer's biography that might have influenced the writing or your understanding of the poem.

1. born in New Orleans, experienced Jewish, Catholic, and voodoo culture and ceremonies
2. part of the beat generation, and heavily influenced by jazz

As you read the poem: Underline parts that relate to historical facts, especially African American issues
Circle words/phrases that stir up emotions
Place a question mark next to ideas that you don't recognize and may need to research
Place [] around parts of the poem that seem musical (call and response, rhythm, refrain, repetition, etc.)

After you read the poem, answer the following questions, quoting parts of the poem that led to your responses:

1. What historical background does a reader need to better understand this poem?

Beat generation and accompanying rejection of social norms and mores
Oral tradition of poetry and other literature
The "Bomb," and "mushroom time" in the poem refer to atomic/nuclear arms

2. How does the poem relate to African American issues or jazz? Refer to historical context and text of the poem.

The poem refers to the ability of the "swinging sounds of jazz," to logically put the world back together
The speaker wants the audience to listen to the "dead poets" and the "music of centuries" rather than the newspapers, and probably, society as a whole

3. Look at the emotional words you circled. Are those emotions more negative, or more positive? Both?
What emotions do you think the writer wanted those words make you feel?

"blue-suited insects, /infesting society's garments" is very negative; the insects probably refer to traditional business people, or mainstream society, who are ruining society
"sick controllers" probably refers to governments, or the military, who created nuclear bombs
"mildewed editorials" negatively implies old, smelly ideas espoused by the newspapers, or mainstream society
The poet wants the audience to relate to his negative feelings about society

4. What musical qualities of the poem or song lyrics might influence the audience? How?

Riff: "Believe in...Not"
Groove: Positive images have long vowel sounds that must be said slowly; negative images have short, harsher sounding syllables; the result is syncopation
Call and Response: each stanza calls out a positive image, which is followed by a negative response image—a conversation in each stanza

5. Think about your responses to questions 2-4. What might the poet be persuading the audience to think or do? Write your responses in a sentence.

The speaker wants the audience to reject the negative "blue-suits," "controllers," and "editorials" that have resulted in war and dissent ("mushroom time") and believe in the good things, like nature, jazz, the old poets and "the music of centuries."

6. What did you learn from reading this poem?