

## **Jericho Brown: The Music the Work Makes in My Mind**

with Alex Gallo-Brown

*September 7th marks the release of Jericho Brown's much-awaited second collection of poetry—which he has brazenly titled *The New Testament*—from Copper Canyon press. His first collection, *Please*, won the American Book Award in 2008; his second is a powerful and sometimes frightening meditation on death, race, sexuality, and violence.*

*As I read and then reread the new collection in preparation for this interview, I was struck by how much agony the new poems contain. "Too much," I scribbled in the margins of one—as in too much sorrow, too much pain. And yet there is an enduring lightness to be found in these poems, too, a faith that seems to be rooted in the evangelical Christian church with which he was raised, and with whose tradition his poetry regularly quarrels.*

*Brown has previously received the Whiting Writers' Award and fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Believer*. Originally from Shreveport, Louisiana, he now lives in Atlanta, where he teaches at Emory University. We corresponded in July of 2014.*

**Alex Gallo-Brown:** The first thing I noticed, reading through the new collection—which, I have to say, I think is tremendous—is that there were very few allusions to music. In "Please," the poems were often "tracks," "performed" by the likes of Diana Ross and Janis Joplin; there were also liner notes in the way that there would be at the end of an album. In "The New Testament," however, the most important textual references are to the bible and Christianity—"the voice of God and other old music," as you write in the poem, "To Be Seen." Can you talk about the relationship for you between music, religion, and poetry?

**Jericho Brown:** Thanks for loving on the new book, Alex. I'm glad it's been of use to you, and I'm thankful that so many people are championing it in a way I could have never expected.

Writing *The New Testament* meant setting for myself a new constraint, a new challenge. I consciously stopped making any reference to music because of its predominance in my first book. I literally refused to write the words "song," "voice," "tune," etc., in anything on which I was working. I wanted a brand new lexicon for myself. I believe there is always new terrain to be discovered in the mind and soul of any human being. How does the Terence saying go? "I am human. Nothing human can be alien to me."

The relationship between music and faith and poetry is hard for me to discuss because they are hard for me to separate. All three make up the backbone of my life. What they have in common is that they know through feeling rather than through understanding.

Don't get me wrong: I want poems to have meaning, but I also think that having comprehensible meaning is not the end of the conversation about poetry—or about faith.

Other than that, I can say that I grew up loving music and going to church and reading poetry and believing that all three were necessary and black.

**AGB:** The poems in *The New Testament* are named after Bible verses, psalms, The Ten Commandments, and so on. I know that you grew up in an intensely religious home in Shreveport, Louisiana, where the church was vital for both you and your family. Can you talk about your relationship to that church as an adult? Do you feel like there is a place for you there now, as a gay man?

**JB:** We were active in church. My father is a deacon there, making my mother a deaconess. They both still teach a Sunday school class. The man who was pastor the entire time I grew up is still the pastor there. His name is Reverend Harry Blake, and in the 1960s, the police rode horses into a church sanctuary near our church and beat him silly in front of the congregation. Silly as in close to death.

Yes, there is a place for me there. I can sit wherever I want when I go there, any pew or even in the choir stand, although not the pulpit, of course. And when I visit, the pastor always asks me to say a few words.

I still love going to church, but I'm wiser than to sit myself in so-called Christian churches every Sunday if I know they are places where it's okay to say hurtful, dumb things. Many churches don't think Sunday service is complete without someone saying something meant to break you. If I'm going to get my heart broken, I want a lover to do it.

So, no, I don't go to the kinds of churches (all Christian) I attended up until I was about 25 years old. But corporate worship and prayer and community praise and gratitude are still important to me. To better and more directly answer your question, I started attending Reverend Michael Bernard Beckwith's Agape International in 2007 when I moved to California, and I felt so spiritually enhanced there that the New Thought movement has become where I'd place myself spiritually now, if I was pushed into titling such a place. These days, I attend the Spiritual Living Center of Atlanta where Reverend David Ault is Senior Minister. And as I type this, I'm realizing I still have a lot of shame about it, because poets who go to church are outcasts even among poets.

But I think I'm okay with that because poets who are too cool or too hip bore me to tears with their coolness and hipness and in-crowd sensibilities. I'd rather us think of the best poets as the ones who write the best poems rather than think of them as some group of people who write any certain way or drink at some certain bar or live in some certain part of the country.

**AGB:** You mention your move to California, where you spent five years teaching creative writing at the University of San Diego. I am reminded of the poem "Receiving Line," set and presumably written in California in 2008. In it, you write, "My name is Jericho Brown and / I am in unlegislated love with a man bound / To grab for me when he sleeps." Of course, 2008 was the year of when a famously high black voter turnout helped propel Obama to the presidency. It also aided in passing Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage in the state. What was it like living there at that time? What did those events mean to you?

**JB:** I wrote that poem for an anthology edited by Sonia Sanchez, Lita Hooper (an Atlanta poet and very old friend), and Michael Simanga called *44 on 44: Forty-four African American Writers on the Election of the Forty-fourth President of the United States*. I never take on anthology assignments because I don't think it bodes well for good writing from me, but in this case I thought no one in the book might have the chance to say something as conflicted as I felt in that moment. It seemed necessary for me to make sure this other thought was represented because I was pretty sure I wasn't the only one having that thought.

Mind you, I don't think black people hate gay people any more or less than anyone else hates gay people. . . including gay people themselves. Still, the pain for me as a black gay man when I'm faced with hatred from black people does sting more than it does when anyone else bothers to make clear their hatred.

**AGB:** It felt like to me like the book was, in some ways, a reclamation of the church and religion that you were raised with. I love that your poem "The Ten Commandments," for instance, is about a man coveting someone else's husband instead of wife.

**JB:** Yes, that was part of the point. I always want to work with and work out whatever is racking my brain. I've learned now that many people feel exiled from the church and can use the poems to represent that feeling, or can use the poems to reclaim their faith. But it's very important to me that the poems start with me and not from outside of myself, not from a place of attempting to stand for anyone. I want the poems to do that, but not while I'm writing them. While I'm writing them, I just want to feel like I'm up to something worthwhile because of the music the work makes in my mind while I'm putting it on the page.

**AGB:** You said to me something recently about *The New Testament* that was very interesting—you said, "All of the poems die young." Of course, not just the poems but the characters, too. The poem "What the Holy Do" is dedicated to Previn Keith Butler (1978 – 2009), "another poorly recorded life," you write, that terminated too soon. Who was Previn Keith Butler? Who was Messiah Demery, the man to whom the book is dedicated and who appears in the poem "Found: Messiah" with a bullet in his chest? Or Dwayne Betts, who, in the poem "Hustle," you write, "deserves more than this dry ink for his teenage years in prison." I've Googled these names and I know they are all real

people. How important are they to you?

**JB:** Previn was a fraternity brother and good friend of mine from my undergrad years at Dillard University. Before he died, he and I spent a lot of time talking about how to go about thinking for ourselves and to create the lives we wanted to live. We both had a love/hate relationship with tradition. I think he was incapable of guilt, though he often felt shame. I still think of him as one of the smartest people I ever met. I might cry typing this. I spent a lot of time in my life envious of his willingness to do whatever the hell he wanted and afraid for him because of that willingness. When he told me he was going to try porn, I believed him and acted like I didn't. Then I saw it for myself just a few weeks before I got word that he was gone.

Messiah was my cousin. He's probably the real reason why the book is titled *The New Testament*. I didn't know anyone could name a child "Messiah" until my aunt did it. He and my sister were best friends growing up. He was something of a badass, though, and stayed in the kinds of trouble folks love to associate with young black men. He was funny and determined and a great dominoes player. . . as in, great at cheating. Some of his first words were cuss words, and I still wish I could make my cussing work as effortlessly as he did. For a while, he lived with us, making my sister the happiest little girl in the world. I knew he was special because my mother would cry when she had to whup him (had to?). That woman never cried when she whupped me. After his baptism, when everyone in the church came to hug and congratulate him, he embraced them and patted them on the back, and as if he was comforting them, said "everything is going to be okay." Strangest thing.

Dwayne Betts is a poet the country tried to kill, but he's a survivor. We agree to disagree. He's in law school now and has a son he loves more than anything on this planet.

I always wanted to write a book about black men, so I did. I figure with as much as I love them and to be looked at by them, it makes sense for me to write about them if I'm going to be calling myself a poet.

**AGB:** You seem to feel fraternally towards these men. And there is the important character of the speaker's brother who recurs throughout the book. Eventually, we learn that his girlfriend Angel has killed him in a domestic dispute. However, in the poem "Make-Believe," the speaker states, "No, I don't have a brother. . . My / mother and father had only one son. This, / My Brother, is a metaphor." Can you talk about the figure of the brother?

**JB:** How about I tell a very, very short story instead? Almost a year ago now, I saw Pearl Cleage give a reading (with Amiri Baraka at Albany State in Georgia!). One of the sentences in the essay she read went something like, "And the last time I called one of the black men in my neighborhood brother, he looked at me confused like I was a fool."

Now what's sadder than that? You think you're looking at your brother, and he thinks he's looking at any other stranger who's passing by. I was done with the book before I heard Cleage read this, but that's the answer to your question.

**AGB:** In "Labor," the speaker looks back on the work he used to do helping old women mow lawns, vacuum carpets, change light bulbs, and the like. The poem ends, "I don't do that kind of work anymore. / My job is to look at the childhood I hated and say / I once had something to do with my hands." I love that. Is that the experience of the poet for you? Looking back on the childhood that you hated and crafting poetic utterances about it?

**JB:** Well, sometimes it's the experience you loved too, Alex! Or the experience you haven't figured your feelings out about just yet. Or the experience about which your feelings change as the years pass.

Louise Glück ends her poem "Nostos" with "As one expects of a lyric poet. / We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory." You know, she has a habit of being right about many things.

**AGB:** For me, one of the most striking poems in the book is "The Interrogation," which is written in seven parts. The speaker seems to have died, but he has not yet arrived in the afterlife and is in the process of being interrogated. He says, "In that world, I was a black man. / Now the bridge burns and I / Am as absent as what fire / Leaves behind . . . Who cares what color I was?" And yet, when the inquisitor asks, "And this preoccupation with color . . . What about race?" the speaker answers, "What you call a color I call / A way." Can you talk about that poem, where it came from, how it was written, and even a little, perhaps, about what it means?

**JB:** At some point, I became very interested in attempting to do two things at once. I wanted to write poems that do not return to their beginnings but manage to give a sense of resolution. I wanted to make a poem that would open and open and become more and more open as the reader experienced each line, and I still wanted that reader to feel she indeed was still inside the very same poem. Those were the major goals for "The Interrogation"—a series of transformations that remembered their point of origin.

When I wrote the poem, I thought a lot about the fact that when I die—if anyone ever reads my poems after I'm dead—I will have been a poet of the first half of the twenty-first century. I kept trying to figure what the poems of that century might sound like in retrospect, and what sound they might make in my voice.

The poem also has a lot to do with questions I have about race—whatever "race" may mean these days . . . I want to know where the words "brother" and "sister" went for black people and if those words in all their meanings can be retrieved.

**AGB:** Speaking of the twenty-first century, I read somewhere that "Colosseum," a poem that originally was published in *The New Yorker*, appeared to you in a dream, and that you wrote it, fully-formed, on the notes app of your phone. Can you talk about your writing process a little bit? Do you sit down and make an effort to write poems on a regular basis? Or do you wait for them to appear to you, as if in a vision?

**JB:** I get lines here and there, sometimes overheard, sometimes dropped from the unknown into my head. When I get them, I try to show gratitude for them by writing them down. (They often get written into my phone because my phone is with me at all times.) Once I've accumulated several of them, I try and see if any of them have anything to do with one another musically or thematically. I put them together and push. I get the lines to converse with one another until I feel I've learned something from the conversation they're having. Then I say, that's a poem. ❖