

Music and poetry: in perfect harmony?

October 2013

[Mike Garry](#) , [Akala](#) , [Shirley Dent](#) and [Norman Warwick](#) opened a discussion on the artistic tensions involved in blending poetry with music, chaired by [Rania Hafez](#)



While **performance poets** and **popular songwriters** used to revel in their status outside the poetry establishment, the critical acclaim afforded to veteran performers such as **John Cooper Clarke** , feted lyricists such as **Bob Dylan** and rising stars such as **Kate Tempest** point towards its contemporary respectability.



Yet if the celebration of such artists by the literary world is no longer controversial, there seems less consensus that their work fits into a poetic tradition. Some point towards the rich history of collaboration between the '*sister arts*' of **poetry and music**, and see performance artists and rappers as a contemporary extension of the Bardic tradition or the lyric poets. Yet some critics and performers remain sceptical over whether such judgements are being made on a purely artistic basis, or whether they're driven more by a desire to prove poetry can still be popular and relevant in the 21st century.



Where is the line drawn between a witty rap or a catchy lyric and the intense lyricism of poetry? Does music enhance what is innately powerful and unique about poetry or embellish poetry with a veneer that makes it less intellectual and less challenging? When poetry becomes sung performance what happens to the interior experience of how we encounter poetry as individuals?



But what is really added to each art form by blending music and poetry? It could be said that the music adds a greater emotional weight to the poem. But what should the audience be doing: appreciating the poem or the music? And is the media and cultural elite's embracing of hip hop and R & B in recent years, a way of trying to deliver moral and behavioural messages to audiences they find difficult to reach?

Some background readings

[Why poetry and pop are not such strange bedfellows](#) , by Graeme Thomson, Guardian, 11 March 2010

[Mike Garry and Joe Duddell Announce Musical Poetry Collaboration](#) , by David Brown, Louder than war, 5 June 2013

[In defence of the public's judgement](#) , by Alka Sehgal Cuthbert, spiked 20 June 2013

[Blending poetry and music](#) , by Denis Joe, Manchester Salon opinions August 2013

Watch the video of the discussion below. Thanks to Dan Clayton the [Leeds documentary filmmaker](#) for this.



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