



THREE OR FOUR HUES OF HUGHES



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A presentation of jazz and poetry by the Makanda Project featuring Ricky Ford and Regie Gibson – December 16, 2025, Providence Performing Arts Center

Study Guide

This event will be a performance of selections from **Ricky Ford's** jazz composition project, featuring the **MAKANDA PROJECT Big Band** in collaboration with **Poet Laureate Regie Gibson** and the timeless poetry of **Langston Hughes**. Together with our audience of Rhode Island **students and teachers** we will explore the swing of Hughes's poetry and the poetry of Big Band Jazz.

In addition to the musical performance and the poetry reading (which will take place as part of the musical compositions), we will present a slide show in the auditorium which will offer historical and cultural context in a visual mode. We are focused on the real connections between "now" and the time of the Harlem Renaissance. We intend to bring a strong performance of Ricky Ford's unique collaboration with Hughes and the MAKANDA PROJECT. We bring information and provide a swinging space for a dance with our hard earned cultural continuity. Enjoy...

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Langston Hughes



JAMES MERCER LANGSTON HUGHES was born on February 1, 1901, in Joplin, Missouri. He was raised by his maternal grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, who was nearly seventy when Hughes was born, until he was thirteen. He then moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and her husband, before the family eventually settled in Cleveland. It was in Lincoln that Hughes began writing poetry.

Langston Hughes was a leading figure in one of the most fruitful periods in American literary history, the Harlem Renaissance. -- a period from about 1918-1937-- in which African-American music, art, and literature transformed American Culture. Though Hughes is best known for his poetry, he wrote widely in many genres including fiction, non-fiction, plays, musicals, children's books, news articles, essays and auto-biographies. Much, if not most, of his writing

captured the experiences of working-class Black Americans-- many of whom had migrated from the American South into the Northern cities. It is said that he would go out on the stoop of his brownstone apartment building in Harlem, sit down, close his eyes, and just listen to the voices, cadences and conversations of people as they walked by. Langston captured many of those peoples' witty sayings as well as the rhythm and cadence of their speech-- which he used in his poems and stories.

He was a pioneer in jazz poetry and performed with great jazz musicians, most notably bassist/composer Charles Mingus. Hughes used his works to serve as a powerful voice for racial consciousness and equality and has been cited as a major influence by generations of poets, rappers, writers and activists such as The Last Poets, The Watts Prophets, Gil Scott Heron, Tupak Shakur, Nas, Mos Def, A\$AP Rocky, and Pulitzer Prize winner, Kendrick Lamar.

Langston Hughes' Poetry and Jazz

Langston Hughes was never far from jazz. He listened to it at nightclubs, often held readings accompanied by jazz combos, collaborated with great jazz musicians including bassist/composer Charles Mingus, and even wrote a children's book called *The First Book of Jazz*. For Hughes, jazz was a way of life. He was, of course, not an ordinary jazz fan simply enamored with the sound. A

vocal proponent of racial consciousness, the poet considered jazz and the blues to be uniquely African-American art forms, both of which spurned the desire for assimilation and acceptance by white culture, and instead rejoiced in black heritage and creativity.

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To learn more and see a video of Hughes performing his poetry to live jazz,
click here: <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2014/jazz-poetry-langston-hughes>

Langston Hughes Poems to Be Heard in the Presentation:

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Red Clay Blues (by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright)

I miss that red clay, Lawd, I
Need to feel it in my shoes.
Says miss that red clay, Lawd, I
Need to feel it in my shoes.
I want to get to Georgia cause I
Got them red clay blues.

Pavement's hard on my feet, I'm
Tired o' this concrete street.
Pavement's hard on my feet, I'm
Tired o' this city street.
Goin' back to Georgia where
That red clay can't be beat.

I want to tramp in the red mud, Lawd, and
Feel the red clay round my toes.
I want to wade in that red muc,
Feel that red clay suckin' at my toes.
I want my little farm back and I
Don't care where that landlord goes.

I want to be in Goergia, when the
Big storm starts to blow.
Yes, I want to be in Georgia when that
Big storm starts to blow.
I want to see the landlords runnin' cause I
Wonder where they gonna go!

I got them red clay blues.

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Jazz Big Bands

BIG BANDS were becoming popular during the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s, the same time that Langston Hughes was beginning his career as a poet. The bands that played during that time set the tone for an important American art form that has continued through today, and which we will see in the performance by Ricky Ford and the Makanda Project.

The big band is a special kind of jazz ensemble. Most typically, it includes three groups of horns



saxophones



trumpets



trombones

along with the “rhythm section” of piano, bass, and drums. Sometimes all the horns play the same thing together, and other times the saxophones have one part, the trumpets another part, and the trombones another part. In a jazz big band, sometimes the musicians are reading written music, and sometimes they are improvising (which means they are creating their part in the moment).

The leading big band, during the 1920s and for all time, was led by DUKE ELLINGTON.



Duke Ellington led the band from the 1920s until his death in the 1970s. They played many famous songs, including “Take the A Train,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “Satin Doll,” and “Mood Indigo.”

Here is a link to a video of “Take the A Train.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6mFGy4g_n8

That’s Mr. Ellington playing the piano. Notice how the saxophones, trumpets, and trombones have different parts that they play. The trumpet player who comes to the front is the soloist. He is improvising.

Another important big band during that time was led by FLETCHER HENDERSON.



Here is a link to one of Fletcher Henderson's famous pieces, "Christopher Columbus." (This is audio from a recording. We know of no video footage of this band performing.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzFPhFsrmmM>

Again, notice that there are different parts that the different sections (saxophones, trumpets, and trombones) play. There are also improvised solos by trumpet, trombone, and tenor saxophone. The saxophone soloist's name is COLEMAN HAWKINS; he was also a band leader and is considered one of the most important saxophonists in the history of jazz.

One more important big band during the 1920s was led by CAB CALLOWAY.



Mr. Calloway was a vocalist. Big bands often feature vocalists, with the horns providing accompaniment along with the rhythm section. In this video, we see Mr. Calloway at 85 years old, performing with a big band of younger musicians and still bringing the energy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcyuMhu99Mk>

Jazz As It Relates to Poetry

While jazz is probably most often thought of as instrumental music, here are various ways that human voices and words are incorporated into jazz. One way is for a singer to be singing a song that is composed with lyrics, as in the Cab Calloway video above. But there are other ways as well.

One very famous piece is called “Moody’s Mood for Love,” by the saxophonist JAMES MOODY. Originally Mr. Moody recorded his interpretation of a standard composition, called “I’m in the Mood for Love,” on the alto saxophone:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi9Xv7XO8AY>

Then, a singer named EDDIE JEFFERSON took the exact lines that Mr. Moody played on the saxophone and put words to it (a technique known as “vocalese”). This version, “Moody’s Mood for Love,” was first recorded by a vocalist named KING PLEASURE:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kv55-8EQCf0>

If we switch back and forth between these two versions, we can hear that the vocal and instrumental versions have the exact same melody lines. What makes this unique is that the melody lines, created by a jazz saxophonist, are very complex: still, Mr. Jefferson was able to craft words that tell a clear story, fitting into those melodies. It is often said that when a jazz musician takes a good improvised solo, he or she “tells a story.” Here, there are words to that story.

Another common technique is known as “scat singing.” This is when a vocalist improvises without words, taking a solo in the same way that a horn player would. ELLA FITZGERALD was one of the great masters of scat singing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkcXxggFId4>

An especially unique version of scat singing is “Mumbles,” by the great trumpeter CLARK TERRY. Here, he uses nonsense syllables, but says them in a way that it sounds as if he is saying something with words:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=is-xo1YFFMo>

This is meant to be humorous, but it also illustrates a point about the rhythmic and melodic nature of human speech.

The Performers in the Presentation

RICKY FORD

RICKY FORD is the composer and featured artist for this performance. When he graduated from New England Conservatory in the 1970s, Duke Ellington had just died but the Duke Ellington Orchestra continued playing with Mercer Ellington, Duke's son, directing. Ricky Ford was invited to play tenor saxophone in the band, where he played with some of the legendary musicians who had been with Duke for many years. Mr. Ford has had a very successful career since then, as a bandleader and also working with other great musicians such as Charles Mingus.



Ricky Ford in front of Langston Hughes' house in Harlem, NY, 2008.

REGIE GIBSON



Literary performer and educator REGIE GIBSON is the Inaugural Poet Laureate of Massachusetts—which means he gets to go all over the state promoting poetry! He served as a consultant for both the National Endowment for the Arts “How Art Works” initiative and the “Mere Distinction of Color” exhibit at James Madison’s Montpelier, examining the legacy of slavery and the U.S. Constitution. He is one half of the duo, Shakespeare to Hip-Hop: An education & performance group combining Shakespeare scholarship & texts with jazz, blues, pop, funk, hiphop & country music. He currently teaches at both Clark University (Worcester, MA) and Berklee College of Music (Boston, MA).

THE MAKANDA PROJECT

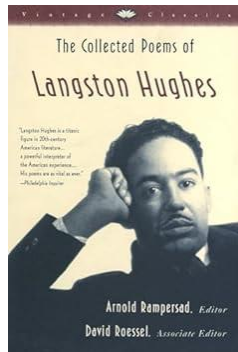
THE MAKANDA PROJECT is a big band based in Boston, MA. The group has been in existence for 20 years. The group's name derives from the fact that they were originally formed to explore the previously unheard compositions by the brilliant musician Makanda Ken McIntyre. They perform regularly in Boston – where they present regular free concerts in the Roxbury neighborhood – and have also travelled around the U.S. and overseas. Many of the individual members are well known musicians who have worked with some of the greatest names in jazz.



Bibliography: Collections of Langston Hughes' Poems

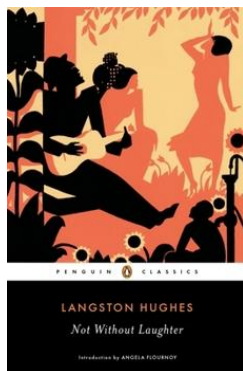
The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (Vintage Classics)

Edited by Arnold Rampersad; ISBN 9780679764083



Not Without Laughter (Penguin Classics)

Edited by Angela Fournoy; ISBN 0143131869



Blues in Stereo: The Early Works of Langston Hughes

Edited by Danez Smith; EAN/Upc 9781538768914

