Music is the Remedy

Yusef Komunyakaa was born the year of 1947 during the Civil Rights Movement which was near the establishment of jazz (Brown 153+). Serving in the United States army during the Vietnam War created a chapter in Komunyakaa’s life where he mainly focuses most of poems on the impact from his experience, problems, and involvement with certain relations throughout his life (‘Yusef’ 89). In Yusef Komunyakaa’s poems, “Tuesday Night at the Savoy Ballroom” and “Translating Footsteps” in Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, each seems to have music as a very important factor. From segregation to music, Komunyakaa relates to it all. Susan Conley declares in her abstract, “The soul music which Yusef Komunyakaa heard as a child has influenced much of his poetry” (Conley 202+). Music becomes the “base” line for connecting most of his poems, especially for these in particular. These poems create a rhythmic form in-between their meanings, though, the structure by the word choice are different. Poetry, written for the reader to analyze in one’s own way, will not only construct one but many aspects to the writing as a main idea may be identified. One’s interpretation is going to vary since not all minds think alike. The sense of having no same message is the beauty of poetry. An analysis on the similarities between these two poems will exhibit the great importance for Yusef Komunyakaa’s influential poems.

Starting off with the poem “Tuesday Night at the Savoy Ballroom”, it is clear from the title what is going to be read might deal with dancing and music since the poem is taking place in
a ballroom on a Tuesday night. The first stanza states, “Entangled in one motion / of hues stolen from innuendo, / their exulted limbs couple” (Komunyakaa lines 1-3). Questions arise as why the choice of words “entangled” and “motion” to describe a couple dancing together? It could have been said in a different manner. Moving on, Line 3 states “their exulted limbs couple” (Komunyakaa 3) which describes foot and leg work that could have been easily written simpler. The third stanza is read, “With a touch of blood / & congealed tempera, / black & white faces surge” (Komunyakaa 7-9). Komunyakaa is pointing out “a touch of blood” (Komunyakaa 7) which is a small amount. It may not be as significant for this poem. Though, blood seems to be a very important symbol in this book. The poem follows with “black & white faces surge” (Komunyakaa 9) as if a crowd suddenly moves upward on this dance floor. This is already somewhat imaginary. So far, this poem is explaining the narrator watching a couple dancing together, surrounded by many people of color.

The poem finishes with “…They work / hard for fun, twirling / through sighing loops” to “of fray & splendor, / watering down pain till naked / hope glimmers in a shot glass” (Komunyakaa 19-24). It can be concluded from the beginning to the end, this couple, dancing from being entangled to working hard, might not always have times like this to have fun. Why might it be so? From Komunyakaa’s background, segregation was found to be a major problem. Stating “black & white faces” (Komunyakaa 9) specifically directs people of opposite race. People in that moment were most likely not able to socialize with anybody besides their racial type. The last lines of this poem, “watering down pain till naked / hope glimmers in a shot glass” (Komunyakaa 23-24) can be identified as a strong metaphor. Usually in the end of a poem, there is a turn which explains the point of the poem. The narrator can be explaining an undisguised or blatant sense of feeling that is causing pain. Most depressed people decide to go to places where
they can have fun in order to forget or get away from any problems. This can explain why the setting takes place in this ballroom. The point of drinking is that alcohol, from the psychological view, interferes with one’s brain activity therefore causing one to be impaired for the moment, forgetting their memory as effects can take place mentally and physically. Hope is then given to those who want an opportunity to escape any stress or discomfort. I know this for a fact since I took a psychology class not so long ago. Alcohol was an important topic discussed for us, adolescents.

Komunyakaa’s poem “Translating Footsteps” begins with “footsteps” in the title which is a type of rhythm. This title is probably going to create some type of shape to form the poem. When first reading the lines, the word choice is utilized to set a certain attitude. Words are capitalized to give importance to their meanings as well as emphasis to the words being said. The first stanza begins with “She says Go fuck yourself / when I say Good-bye & good luck / with potted plants / under a granite moon” (Komunyakaa 1-4). There seems to be tension between a female and male during the night. The female stating “Go fuck yourself” (Komunyakaa 1) is very harsh. Anger causes one to say non-meaningful words which can draw close to the reason why this statement is being said in this manner. The response “Good-bye & good luck” (Komunyakaa 2) is calmer, though, straightforward. In the case, the male is put in a situation where he’s deciding to leave so his response claims that he might have got his partner disappointed. “Plotted plants” (Komunyakaa 3) comes to be very interesting because it can be relating to flowers that the male figure might have brought to this woman. He could have done something wrong and is trying to make up for his mistake. This man and woman are probably in a relationship together.
Reading further into the poem, the next stanza is a bit confusing to interpret. The second part reads, “A hand reaches from behind / to slash my throat. / Some things refuse translation: / the way I place my hands under / red silk to hear / a thin-skinned drum” (Komunyakaa 5-10). The interpretation which is possible to comprehend is that the man who gives the impression of being in love with this woman is getting to a romantic state. “A hand reaches from behind / to slash my throat” (Komunyakaa 5-6) means this women was angry but came from behind the man, in the form of grabbing him from the neck to stop him from leaving her. The woman ends up changing her mood. She goes from being upset to being passionate. This couple then attracts one another into an intimate fluster. A few lines follow to this certain part, “Translate this / mojo song, footsteps in a midnight hallway” (Komunyakaa 16-18). The couple leads to having sexual intercourse. The chemistry between the two generates a rhythm or song that clearly does not relate to being actual music.

In the last stanza, the man seems to leave this woman noticing the window is black to clarify he left as she was asleep. It seems that he goes for a walk. These couple of lines end the poem, “my mouth kisses the blues harp / my heart hides like notes / locked in a cedar chest” (Komunyakaa 21-23). The speaker states a blues harp which is a jazz instrument. This man probably decides to play his instrument, in the sense of joy. In happy moments, it may be music which helps the poet express himself. The part where his heart hides like notes to being locked in a cedar chest might be referring to feelings that he has for this woman. This man, making reference to his emotions for this woman, probably cares for her and wants to continue to adore her for a long period of time. This means that he doesn’t plan on catching feelings for anyone else as long as his feelings are locked in a cedar chest.
In both poems, music is of great significance. It connects the poems together. The theme is one way of seeing the association. Though, when seeing the structures of the poems, the preferences of words are a complete opposite selection. In “Tuesday Night at the Savoy Ballroom” the vocabulary terms are smooth with ease. Many art terms are used. Some examples include hues, tempera, brush strokes, bedazzlement, watering, and glimmers. There are other words used to describe dance movements such as entangled, motion, couple, twirling, and loops. These are the words which form a structure for this poem. They help give the poem a way to flow for an easier perception of imagery. The theme leads to music becoming an escape. Stressors lead people to fun-filled places where one can feel free to enjoy some time without worrying about any problems. As for “Translating Footsteps”, the options for words are strong and intense vulgar terms making it difficult to understand what is happening in the context. The wording is mainly explicit, describing a graphic scene. Music in part of the poem is only found within a few stanzas. It is giving the reader a reason to question why it may have been placed there. Music is first shown as a “mojo song” (Komunyakaa 17). Mojo refers to a magic charm and a song is noises, sounds, or words meant to create a chant or harmony. Therefore, in this case, the writer wants to make note of the melody that is made within two people. In the end of the poem, music also is placed as an instrument considering the worthiness it has to the speaker in ending the poem in a good note. The connection to the theme is that problems will arise through hard times but moments like this are when people come together. Music has a way of bringing peace and joy to people. It helps one express their emotions.

The significance for the relation between both of these poems correlating to music and problems comes from Yusef Komunyakaa growing up with music since childhood and experiencing difficult times which leads him to writing about it all. Conley states, “Not afraid to
confront complex moral issues, much of Komunyakaa's work embraces the duality of despair and hope, and music often provides the panacea” (Conley 202+). Therefore, “Tuesday Night at the Savoy Ballroom” and “Translating Footsteps” are great examples for understanding how music is a cure to problems that Komunyakaa might have faced throughout his life. It is shown from the poems Yusef Komunyakaa either played instruments or spent a lot for time going to places where there was music. Ashley Brown explains, “The major public event during Komunyakaa's early career was the war in Vietnam” (Brown 153+). The Vietnam War most likely affected Yusef Komunyakaa dramatically. Whether Komunyakaa wants his readers to relate to him or be in his position, it all depends on how one chooses to interpret the message from his poems. Poetry has the advantage to allow the intentions of the writer to vary for the reader; it’s the beauty of poetry.
Works Cited


