

Charles Bukowski – Words and Music

by Robert Sandarg

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Robert Sandarg had been doing researches on Bukowski's relationship to classical music for years. His first publication on the subject, we printed in our yearbook of 1998. Here he offers what has gone on since then.

Having spoken at the first Bukowski Symposium here in Andernach in 1998, I would like to thank the organizing committee for inviting me to participate in this year's events. As Charles Bukowski said when he returned to Germany in 1978, "It's good to be back." And that's exactly how I feel.

The most desirable destiny for a writer is not to be discussed, but is simply to be read; and Bukowski certainly is read. The number of his books, translations and fans is enormous. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to discuss one major aspect of his writing: the tremendous role that music plays throughout his poetry and prose; for despite his reputation as a beer-drinking barbarian, Hank was an intelligent man with a highly cultivated side. If you don't believe me, just add up the number of references he makes to other writers, to painters, and even to philosophers.

Moreover, no writer that I know of, male or female, living or dead, has made as many references to classical music as Bukowski has. Throughout his oeuvre, he makes approximately 800 separate allusions to the works of more than 90 different composers. This is unique in the history of world literature. No other writer has ever provided us with such a complete record of both the music he listened to and his reactions to it, over such a lengthy period – nearly half a century.

For years, I have felt that Bukowski's close connection with classical music merits serious investigation, and since my paper at the first Symposium treated Bukowski and classical music until 1998, today's paper will examine Bukowski and classical music between 1999 and the present. This includes a significant literary corpus:

five collections of poetry and two volumes of letters, which contain over 100 references to classical composers and their compositions.

During this later period, Bukowski's tastes changed little. The figures he refers to most, and whom he continues to prefer, are Bach (with 10 references), Beethoven (8), Mozart (7) and Sibelius (7). Bukowski refers to Wagner 5 times and makes 5 disparaging allusions to Tchaikovsky. Hank makes 4 references to Bruckner, Mahler, Ravel and Shostakovitch; 3 to Schubert and Chopin; 2 to Vivaldi (whom he continues to despise), as well as 2 to Handel, Liszt, Richard Strauss and Stravinsky. There are also references to Verdi, Brahms, Johann Strauss, Schumann, Berlioz, Debussy, Cesar Franck, Borodin, Rachmaninoff, Grieg, Hindemith, Moussourgsky, the Hungarian, Zoltan Kodaly, the Americans, George Gershwin and Charles Ives, plus the English composer Ralph Vaughn Williams.

Now, Bukowski's poetry in itself is not at all musical in the traditional sense of the term, musical: it is harsh and raw. It is not lyrical, for it lacks both meter and rhyme. In a poem entitled "regrets of a sort," from the collection *Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way* (p. 19), Bukowski defines the music of language not as something that resides in rhythm and rhyme, but as a quality that resides in the proper choice of a surprising and unique word. He writes:

the music of language [is]
the curl of the unexpected
word
the sensation
of a
tasty
almost never-used
near-virgin
word.

there are so many
of them
at times
I read the dictionary
marveling
at the immensity of
that untouched backlog.

Thus, what we encounter throughout Bukowski's poetry is not a musicality in the age-old, lyrical sense, but a modern musicality that is based on the two following items: first, Hank's use of the "tasty/almost never-used/near-virgin word" and second, his seemingly endless references to music. These two things – the perfect word and musical reference – joined together, form what I call the musicality of Charles Bukowski.

Bukowski's works are based on words and music, two very different artistic mediums, two fundamentally separate aspects of art, two creative worlds brought together. By returning to the Greek, we might even find a term for this technique, and that term is melopoiesis – melody and poetry, music and writing. Clearly, Bukowski utilizes melopoiesis throughout his works in his careful choice of words and in his copious use of musical references.

It is no surprise that Bukowski mixes words and music, because, as he tells us countless times, he always wrote with the radio on and tuned to a classical station. To quote from a letter published in *Reach For the Sun*: "I always write with the radio on and tuned to classical music." (p. 203) In another letter from the same collection, he is even more specific: "Music (classical) has helped me get through. I have never written anything without the radio on classical music. I listen ... from 2 to 5 hours ... a night." (p. 284)

In the poem "a mechanical Lazarus," (Sifting, p. 41) Hank paints a picture of himself and his faithful typewriter:

I don't know how many hours
of classical music we've listened
to together.
the nights have always been
long and good . . .
the bottle of beer
is to my left, and the little
radio to my right is
playing
Bach.

The radio is a fixture in Bukowski's writing because he listened to music almost exclusively on the radio. And there were at least 3 radios in his life. The first was a simple AM model. The most famous was the little red radio that brought him so much pleasure and absorbed a certain amount of punishment along the way. Hank recounts throwing it out the window once in a fit of rage; but when he calmed down and retrieved it, it still, miraculously, worked. Later, he moved upscale to a high-tech "solid-state AM-FM Panasonic, where the red dot selects the station." ("panasonic," *The Night Torn Mad With Footsteps*, p. 231)

For a brief period as a young man, Bukowski collected records, as he tells us in the touching poem "albums." (*The Night*, p. 335)

I sat in my cheap room . .
totally out of place in the world.
I hardly ate, just wine and
classical music
sustained
me.

I lived like a goddamned fly, or maybe like
a confused
rat.
Where I scrounged funds, I no longer
remember

but I do remember the record shop
where you could exchange 3 used albums for 2.
by buying the occasional album and by continually
trading
I gradually listened to almost all the
classical albums
in that store. . .

I drank and listened
until
each note and musical phrase . . .
became part of me
forever.

now
decades later
I sometimes hear

one of those familiar albums
on the radio –
the same conductor, the same
orchestra –
and I immediately
turn the volume
up

and fondly remember
that distant
melancholy
time.

Years later, Hank enjoyed playing audio cassettes in his sleek BMW sedan that he called Black Beauty, after the famous horse. He writes: "On the way to the track I often slip in a little Sibelius and listen to him over the front and rear speakers, sun roof open." (Reach, p. 13)

I doubt that there is a more autobiographical writer than Bukowski. When we read him, we enter his world, a real world, and this gives his writing its great authenticity. And, as an autobiographical writer, Hank leaves us a reliable record of the music he listened to and his opinion of it. However, let us not forget that since he listened to music primarily on the radio, his choices were limited to what was broadcast. And what is generally offered over the airwaves is the not a wide variety, but rather the standard repertory. As Bukowski laments in the poem "observations on music," (Sifting, p. 94) "the same 50 or 60 classical compositions/are played over and over/and over again." Thus, his musical taste was shaped by traditional works and is, indeed, quite mainstream.

Avant-garde music was not pleasing to his ear, and he rarely comments on it. Mathematical, serial, twelve-tone or aleatory (that is, chance) music was simply beyond him, and if it was broadcast on the radio, my guess is that he ignored it or turned it down. Bukowski makes only a single, neutral reference to the American experimentalist, Charles Ives – an interesting character who sold insurance by day and wrote music by night –and he never mentions Iannis Xenakis, Schonberg, Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez or Philip Glass. Chance played a tremendous role in Bukowski's life, as it does in all our lives, but he never enjoyed chance, or aleatory, music.

Although Hank claimed to use a variety of successful scientific systems as a horse player, betting on the ponies is, as we all know, a highly chance endeavor. Bukowski took a tremendous chance when he started drinking again after being treated for a bleeding ulcer: one more drink, the doctor told him, would probably be fatal. This presented the most serious of wagers: heads you win, tails you die. Bukowski took the chance and downed the drink -- it tasted damn good and he lived to tell about it. Chance smiled upon him that day, and chance was a factor in his literary fame. After all, he could have died young or toiled grimly on in obscurity or near-obscurity; but Bukowski made it big. To use the language of the racetrack, he was the longest longshot that ever finished first. He was a hard-working man, laboring in low-wage Hells by day and hunched over the typewriter by night, but he was also a lucky man, favored by chance.

Charles Bukowski rolled dice with the gods and he won! And let us not forget that the term aleatory comes from alea, the Latin word for dice. Nevertheless, please don't play any aleatory music in Bukowski's presence!

Now, Bukowski does mention one composer associated with aleatory music, and that is the American, John Cage, who died in 1992. In an early work, Bukowski sourly remarks that Cage once earned \$500 for eating an apple onstage. In addition, I feel that Buk's poem, sarcastically entitled "Genius unfettered," (Sifting, p. 141) is a mockery of Cage, whom he calls "Colskey."

The poem begins: "Mr. Colskey studied under Bartmouth at/the Zale Institute." Bartmouth probably comes from the name of the American University, Dartmouth (and we all know Bukowski's low opinion of universities), while Zales's is an American chain of cut-rate jewelry stores.

The poem goes on to lampoon Colskey's works:

the best known being
his symphony in Two Movements
The Coffin, The Burial,
a lengthy work of almost total
silence.

This reminds me of John Cage's infamous composition, Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds, which is . . . 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence. In "Genius unfettered," Colskey, who is described as "eccentric in approach and/manner,/difficult, reproachful,/demanding, errant at times," takes the stage, unzips his trousers and urinates in front of the stunned audience, then stalks out of the concert hall. But the orchestra bravely

strikes up and begins
to play
Anton Bruckner's
Symphony #6
in A major
without
Mr. Colskey

This poem asks the question: who needs the Colskeys of the musical world? And the answer is, certainly not Bukowski; nor the audience, for that matter, because timeless tradition, here in the form of Bruckner, will always prevail over modern phoniness.

Now, if Bukowski did not like the aleatory avant-garde, he did not much like present-day academic composers, either. He says: "Too much contemporary music is written from the safe haven of a university; a composer must still experience life in its raw form in order to write well." ("observations on music," Sifting, p. 94) Therefore, Hank never mentions 3 prominent Americans: Alan Hovhaness (who has written more symphonies than anyone else, although they do tend to be short); the neo-Romantic, Howard Hanson, associated with the Eastman School of Music; and Ned Rorem, who is probably a better writer than a composer, anyway.

In the poem "a musical difference" (The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain, p. 284) Hank continues:

I've done much listening and some
thinking
and it seems to me
that our contemporary composers
(at least those here in the U.S.A.)
are mostly university-sponsored

and comfortable
and their work lacks that
old world desperate
romanticism and
gamble.

Let us now turn to those desperate, old-world musical gamblers.

The great German baroque composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, was number one on Bukowski's classical hit parade from 1998 on. Hank calls him a "giant" in the poem "1966 Volkswagen minivan," (The Night, p. 23) and in the same work says that "I listen to Bach as often as I can." For Bukowski, Bach creates "palaces of sound" ("burning, burning," Sifting, p. 359) and is "the hardest [composer] to play badly because he makes so few spiritual mistakes." ("observations on music, Sifting, p. 94)

In a poem entitled "life of the king," (What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Flames, p. 221) Bukowski describes how he rises leisurely at 11:30 a.m., opens a beer and turns on the radio to organ music:

something by Bach
and I leave the door open
stand on the porch
walk out front
hot damn
that air is good

Bach has brightened up Bukowski's morning. Interestingly, certain people think of Hank as a baroque poet, which is a very engaging idea.

Moving on, there are several brief references to Beethoven, to the The Bee whom Bukowski so admired, but the most interesting one occurs in the poem "Beethoven conducted his last symphony while totally deaf." (What Matters, p. 46) Here, Bukowski laments the fact that artists are not as durable as their art; tragically, creator and creation cannot endure as one. And he adds that "this is one of the dirty tricks/of the ages."

The image of the suffering artist continues with Mozart. Although Mozart can make you feel wonderful as his music “works/its way into your brain and slides down along your bones and/out through your shoes,” (“gamblers all,” *The Night*, p. 319) Bukowski is haunted by the composer’s material struggles and by the thought of his remains lying in a pauper’s grave beneath a freezing rain. (“one learns,” *The Night*, p. 339) And in 1993, one year before his own demise, deathly ill but feeling surprisingly good one evening, Bukowski asks:

Mozart, what do you think?
why do the gods tease us as
we approach the final
darkness?
yet, who’d want to stay here
FOREVER?
a day at a time is difficult
enough.
so I guess everything is all right.

(“one for Wolfgang,” *The Flash*, p. 96)

Bukowski had tremendous esteem for the great Romantic, Franz Liszt. Referring to his symphonic poem, *Hungaria*, an orchestral work in one movement, Hank writes:

I am listening to a composer now who is taking me completely
out of this world and suddenly
I don’t give a damn if I live or die or pay the
gas bill on time, I
just want to listen,
I feel like hugging the radio to my chest so
that I can be part of the
music . . .

Bukowski also loved the great “iceberg” symphonies of the Finn, Jean Sibelius, whom he considered “a proud and beautiful man/composer of powerful music” (“a sickness?” *Sifting*, p. 159) and as imposing as “a landscape.” (Reach, p. 13) Moreover, Hank, who always craved solitude, was fascinated by the legend of Sibelius’ retreat from the world at age forty. He tells how Sibelius “shaved his head,/ went into his house/vanished and was never seen/ again.” (“Beethoven conducted his last symphony while totally deaf,” *What Matters*, p. 46)

Frankly, Bukowski's version of this anecdote slightly exaggerates the facts of Sibelius' self-imposed exile. Although the composer did indeed leave Helsinki in order to regain his creativity in a calmer environment, his sylvan retreat in Jarvenpaa was just outside the capital, a mere 15 minutes by train from the city, which he regularly visited. Moreover, Sibelius, far from being a recluse, continued to travel abroad, namely to Germany, Italy and France.

Bukowski particularly loved the German composers, and Wagner's music made his Teutonic blood sing. Hank refers to Tristan and Isolde, the Gotterdammerung and the Siegfried Idyll, calling Wagner "wonderful." (Beerspit Night and Cursing, p. 63) There are some who believe that if Wagner wrote the music of the future, then Bukowski wrote the poetry of the future. And Hank may, indeed, have reinvented modern poetry.

Hank also adored Franz Schubert, dead at age 31, and wrote in a letter that Schubert's 9th Symphony, properly played, is "a mighty work." (Reach, p. 213) Perhaps this is why the symphony is called, "The Great."

Richard Strauss was another German much admired by Bukowski, who uses the title Death and Transfiguration for one of his own poems, (Sifting, p. 152) In "blue head of death" (What Matters, p. 164) Hank writes:

listening to Richard Strauss
reveals flashes of orange, grey and white
light
lemonade, and cats crouched in the shade
in polarized afternoons . . .
Richard Strauss
is a colorful rush of craft and feeling . . .

Strauss' music produces flashes of color, of "orange, grey and white/light" for Bukowski. Here, the poet is using the venerable technique, much prized by the Romantics, of synesthesia: the expression of one sense modality (sound, which is auditory) in terms of another (color, which is visual).

In the poem "Bruckner" (What Matters, p. 124) Bukowski says that he relates very closely to this composer and "aches for his dead guts." In fact, Hank devoted two poems to him. Yet, at the same time, he is critical of Bruckner, alleging that "he just misses/by so little." In a second poem, Hank writes:

Bruckner wasn't bad
even though he got down
on his knees
and proclaimed Wagner
the master.

("Bruckner (2)," Open All Night, p. 137)

For Bukowski, Bruckner is not an artist of the first order, but he does possess an undeniable value, for:

there are times when we should
remember
the strange courage
of the second-rate
who refuse to quit
when the nights
are black and long and sleepless
and the days are without
end.

Perhaps Bukowski, who once said that he wrote about the humble little subjects that other authors ignore, saw himself as a writer of the second magnitude.

At any rate, the young Bukowski absolutely adored Gustav Mahler, and later, in a poem from the volume What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Flames ("Mahler," p. 299) he describes the physically diminutive composer in heroic terms:

he must have looked like an
earthquake walking down the
street.
he was a gambler and he shot
the works.

Mahler's music could make the walls dance for Hank, although he occasionally detected a certain "wandering" or "formlessness" in Mahler's compositions. Nevertheless, Buk admits that there is great passion in Mahler's mighty symphonies.

As we have seen earlier, Bukowski did not admire all classical composers; in fact, he could be downright hostile towards some of them. In *Beerspit Night and Cursing* he calls Debussy's famous *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* the [Prelude to] *The Evening of a Shit*. In the poem "Life, Death, Life, Art" (*The Night*, p. 181) Hank contends that Debussy and Chopin do not interest him. Johann Strauss takes some abuse as well, for in the poem "1970 blues" (*The Flash*, p. 147) Hank writes: "what I need, what I really need is/to never ever hear the Blue Danube Waltz again." So much for *On the Beautiful Blue Danube*.

But if you want to ignite the truly savage side of Bukowski, just mention Vivaldi or Tchaikovsky. In a letter of 1960, Hanks exclaims "to hell with Vivaldi" and tells his correspondent, Sheri Martinelli, that she is wasting her time listening to the baroque Italian. (*Beerspit*, p. 89) In the poem "dinner for free" (*Sifting*, p. 376) Hanks spends a wretched evening with a most unpleasant woman who talks incessantly about Vivaldi.

Turning to Tchaikovsky, this composer's great 6th *Symphony*, the *Pathétique*, has a terrible effect on Bukowski. Its dark and melancholy tones – he is probably referring to the *adagio lamentoso* of the 4th movement -- remind him of the "billions of bones buried in the earth." ("troubles in the night," *Open*, p. 304) As Hank listens to this work, a spider crawls across his desk:

I name him Tchaikovsky
Peter Illich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
then I press my hand down and
kill him.
walk to the bedroom . . .
I fall on the bed
face-down
my body resting over the
millions and billions of bones
to follow,
son-of-bitch,
including mine.

Bukowski was hip, but he never accepted Tchaikovsky's sexual orientation, calling him a homo more than once, as well as a crybaby. Always interested in biography, Hank recounts in the poem "no wonder" (The Night, p.213) how Tchaikovsky married "a female opera singer," then stood "in a freezing/river hoping to catch pneumonia while she went mad."

In truth, Tchaikovsky was once slightly smitten (or thought he was) by a female opera singer, a Belgian soprano named Desiree Artot, who bruised his feelings by running off with a handsome Spanish baritone. But Tchaikovsky soon married a former piano student, Antonina Milyakova, which was disastrous, since Tchaikovsky was gay. He immediately sank into a deep depression and did, in fact, wade into the Moskva River, hoping to fall fatally ill; but he didn't even catch a cold, although he soon suffered a total nervous breakdown.

A psychiatrist ordered bed rest and a change of scenery, insisting that Tchaikovsky and his wife separate; and so the couple remained estranged for their lifetimes. Antonina, in point of musicological fact, did not go mad when Tchaikovsky went wading in the water; it was not until three years after his death that she lost her mind and was committed to a mental hospital for the remaining 20 years of her life.

Clearly, Bukowski was vitally interested in the details of the great composers' lives; their biographies deeply invaded his consciousness. And despite his criticism of certain figures, he was convinced that "music has attracted the greatest souls." (Reach, p. 284) Hank was extremely sympathetic those who:

starved
went mad or
suicided - [because]
their lives became the ultimate sacrifice to
their art . . .
and that
terrible final sacrifice
can be heard
in what they left
behind.

("a musical difference," The Flash, p. 284)

For Bukowski, the great composers are immortal. As he says of Haydn ("some notes on Bach and Haydn," *What Matters*, p. 73):

you listen to a dead man's music
at 4:30 in the morning
only he is not really dead
as the smoke from your cigarette curls up,
is not really dead,
and all is magic,
this good sound
in Los Angeles. . .

In his poem "observations on music" (*Sifting*, p. 94) Hank avows, "I am not a musicologist." But he is, in fact, a musicologist – an amateur musicologist. And let us note, parenthetically, that the amateur musicologist – indeed, the amateur scholar in any field – is a category that hardly exists any longer. It began disappearing in the 19th century with the expansion of the universities and by the mid-20th century had virtually succumbed to the intellectual domination of the university-trained "experts." Of course, as Nietzsche sagely told us, an expert is only someone playing the role of expert.

As an amateur musicologist, Bukowski uses the technical term, counterpoint, for the title of one poem. (*The Night*, p. 139) Elsewhere, he gives a workmanlike definition of counterpoint, writing: "Bach taught us how to lay one melody down on top of/another and another melody on top of/that. . ." ("Christmas poem to a man in jail," *What Matters*, p. 115) Moreover, Hank the musicologist informs us that Bach had 20 children and expects his readers to know that it was Moussourgsky who wrote *Pictures at an Exhibition*, that "The March to the Gallows" is a movement from Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* and that 1810-1856 were Robert Schumann's dates.

In his function as part-time musicologist, Hank discusses Rachmaninoff, writing: "he was very close to me in spirit and I heard him cursing the gods, the dogs, the cats . . . and I laughed inside because I knew what he meant. (*Beerspit*, p. 77)

But regarding the great Russian's demise, Bukowski adds to the spurious legend that Rachmaninoff lost his mind between two concertos and ended up in an insane asylum. (*Beerspit*, p. 76)

truthfully, Rachmaninoff -- or Rach, as Bukowski likes to call him -- died in the cancer ward of a Los Angeles hospital in 1943.

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to explore several aspects of Bukowski's love for classical music. On one level, he used music as an escape from the pressures of everyday life: etymologically, the word melody comes from the Greek, *melos*, meaning tranquilizer; and music did have the power to make the strung-out Hank feel a little more mellow.

But more importantly, music provided the great inspiration for his writing. In his poem entitled "Hungaria, Symphonia Poem #9 by Frantz Liszt" (The Flash, p. 234) -- and personally, I think this title is a misprint which should read "Hungaria, Symphonic Poem #9" -- Buk admits:

writing is all I know how to do and
I much prefer the music of the great classical
composers so
I always listen to them while I'm typing
(and when I finally write a good poem
I'm sure they have much to do with it).

There can always come a time when too much serious music is oppressive, when "even favorite classical music/has been heard too much." ("Manx," Open, p. 239) Hank describes this occurrence in the poem "it beats love." (The Night, p. 64)

I like symphony music but the first thing on waking
she turns on the radio and we have nonstop Brahms or Ives
or Stravinsky or Mahler or Beethoven or Mozart . . .
after breakfast it's the couch, we put our feet up on the same
table and listen to more classical music . . .
it's been two nights and two days like this . . .
Wagner plays.

We must remember that Bukowski was not a snob who thought he was better than other people because he appreciated serious music. Aside from the classics, he had a soft spot in his heart for the popular songs of the 1930s and 1940s, which he loved to sing -- to sing LOUD, to ROAR -- when he was drunk.

I want a girl
Just like the girl
Who married dear old Dad. . .

He uses “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree with Anybody Else But Me” as the title of one poem (Open, p. 360), while in the poem “melodies that echo” (The Night, p. 341) he lists --and Bukowski often uses lists throughout his writing -- a host of songs from his young manhood. There is:

I can’t give you anything but love, baby,
That’s the only thing I’ve plenty of, baby. . .

And Sarah Vaughan’s famous:

A tisket, a tasket, a little yellow basket,
I wrote a letter to my love and on the way
I lost it . . .

These are “melodies that echo/through the long halls of memory.” And there are many of them:

I fell in love with you
First time I looked into
Them there eyes . . .
They sparkle, they bubble,
They’re gonna get you in a
Whole lot of trouble,
I fell in love with you
First time I looked into
Them there eyes.

And there’s the old Cole Porter favorite, from the 1934 musical, Anything Goes:

It’s delicious, it’s delightful,
It’s delovely . . .

And finally that song that’s so marvelous to sing when you’re drinking outdoors on a summer night:

By the light
Of the silvery moon
We’ll sit and spoon

To my honey I'll croon a tune,
Honeymoon, keep a shining
In June,
Your silver beams
Will bring love's dreams,
We'll be cuddling soon,
By the silvery moon.

Although Hank never really took to later pop musicians like Country Joe and the Fish, Barry Manilow, or the country star, Johnny Cash (who "shot a man in Reno/Just to see him die"), he admonishes his readers never to close their ears, for "there has been . . . great music written that we ignore at our peril." ("observations on music," Sifting, p. 94) Frankly, jazz and rock never lifted Bukowski like classical music did, but he was never snobbish; on the contrary, he believed that we should always remain open to new musical trends, since music is a fundamental part of the human condition. As he writes in Beerspit Night and Cursing (p. 81): "I have heard inane music, I have heard silly music, I have heard discordant music . . . but music in itself, even the simplest modern tune, carries in it part of the human crying. . . ."

Given this accepting outlook, it is entirely appropriate that the group U2 recorded the song Dirty Word, based on Hank's poem, "The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills." It is equally appropriate that Howard Fredrics has set Bukowski's poetry to music and that a man from Holland named Willem van Ekeren established the Bach-Bukowski Project and put 13 works from The Last Night of the Earth Poems together with fugues and preludes from Bach's Well-Tempered Keyboard.

Music had tremendous power for Bukowski, and he considered it "the most passionate of art forms." ("observations on music, Sifting, p. 94) As he admits in Reach For the Sky (p. 284): "I will sometimes hear a piece and it's bold and marvelous and adventuresome, chilling, the chills run up my arms and down my back." In a letter from Beerspit Night and Cursing he writes: ". . . music claws and crawls like ants from the floor, up your arms, your chest, your ass, and sings in your head . . . and the walls are forests of burning music and you laugh drunk-weird . . ."

For Bukowski, music was more powerful than words, because music can generate words far more readily than words can generate music; and he solemnly declares: "I wish I had been a musician or a composer." ("observations on music," Sifting, p.94)

Throughout his writing, Bukowski mentions the philosopher Schopenhauer several times, and Hank's thoughts on music seem extremely Schopenhauerian, for he clearly sensed the undeniable force and magic of music. He realized that music is a universal language independent of the phenomenal world and that it can express the deepest recesses of human nature and reveal the innermost essence of reality. Music is direct and immediate, metaphysical rather than physical. It is not the imitation of the thing; it is the thing in itself.

To conclude: music inspired Bukowski's words; music sparked his literary creativity. Music helped make him a writer, and I doubt that Bukowski, once known as The Suicide Kid, could have endured as a man without being a writer; for writing, like the other art forms – like music, painting and sculpture – brings with it the great deliverance from suffering.

