

Jazz In The Church

A Lecture/Concert

By Lance Bryant, Saxophonist & Vocalist

PRELUDE

* Musical performances in bold print.

It Is Well With My Soul

Hello and welcome to our concert and lecture Jazz in the Church. My name is Lance Bryant and I'd like to thank the Fairmount Presbyterian Church and their music director, Robert Moncrief for having me and my band here. I'm also thankful for the support of the William Burket Williams Fund for their support of this lecture series.

I suggested this topic for a lecture because it's something near and dear to my heart. But then I wondered, how exactly would I approach this? In a way, on the surface, it seemed like there wouldn't be much to talk about, because one doesn't often find jazz in the church. But at the same time, looking beneath the surface, I believe that jazz comes from the church and can be a very spiritual music.

Some of you may already be familiar with sacred jazz, and some not. Some may be wondering, how often does one find jazz in church? When did people start performing jazz in church? Does jazz even belong in church? What is sacred jazz? We will deal with some of those questions as well as the nature of sacred music, and how we decide exactly what that is.

We will also look at the music of three pioneers of sacred jazz. In fact, these three artists happen to be very important figures to the art form in general. In the mid-sixties, they all came to a point in their lives where their spiritual music became very important to them, lasting up until their deaths.

I will close with a brief discussion of sacred jazz and jazz in the church today in America.

But first we're going to ease a little further into the program by doing what we do best. We're going to play a spiritual. This, by the way, is considered the first spiritual ever transcribed and published as sheet music! It was published by a missionary by the name of Lewis Lockwood in 1861. Exactly one hundred years before the birth of yours truly! Here is Go Down Moses:

(Band performs)

Go Down Moses

Precious Lord Take My Hand

Riverside Blues

Those last two pieces actually have something in common. The first one was a great hymn that I heard in church as a kid almost every Sunday. "Precious Lord Take My

Hand". Then you heard "Riverside Blues", as played by Joe "King" Oliver in 1923 while Louis Armstrong was still an apprentice under his wing. The two pieces were both written by Thomas A. Dorsey, who is known for being the father of gospel music and a prolific composer of gospel songs and hymns. It illustrates the interchange and relationship between the different genres, and the fact that many of the same musicians have always, and still do, regularly play in both worlds of the sacred *and* secular.

Down south in the Delta, before there was jazz, before the blues, and before gospel music, there were the spirituals and worship songs sung by the African descendents. Eventually, some of these same new Americans began doing secular music, but it always retained the spirit and character of a spiritual tradition carried over from the motherland.

I'm not going to talk much about slaves singing in the fields, African circle dances becoming ring shouts, or spirit possession, etc. Time doesn't permit. I want to focus on the relationship and interchange between jazz musicians and the church.

This interchange is still happening in subtle ways. I'll use my church as an example, where I serve as saxophonist and director of instrumental music. Our organist is a very talented young man named Kevin. He is strictly a gospel player but over the course of a year I've noticed his playing has changed. He's now playing these hip little single note lines and I'm realizing that he's playing off of what he hears me playing on the saxophone. Likewise, lately I find myself incorporating certain harmonic progressions in my original music that are characteristic of contemporary gospel music. It's the same kind of thing that was happening when Thomas A. Dorsey left the blues and jazz clubs and took his musical information into the churches of Chicago in the late 1920s.

Or, to take another example from a personal experience in a *jazz* setting. It was during a concert with the Lionel Hampton band in Europe. I remember sitting there in the sax section listening to Charles Stephens play his trombone solo. He had been in the band for a long time. I can remember it so well because I was new and soaking it all in. He was up front playing his solo and suddenly, *pow!* (demonstrates) He scooped into a loud high note and immediately glissed downward. Seemed like the whole band responded with an *Owww!* or *yeah!* Again on his trombone he shouted and the band reacted. Just like in church! You stand and testify, tell your story and the church says amen.

I watch my pastor deliver his sermon, and he gets into a rhythm and cadence pattern. As he reaches the high points, you hear Kevin on the organ playing big chords as accents in the open spaces, (demonstrates) and there is the congregation right there with them. I now realize that the church service is a structured format, designed for group participation, open enough for the spirit to come in and have its way. That's jazz! That's the African circle dance, that's the blues. It's that African spiritual tradition carried over that I spoke of. It has even become an integral part of our American culture.

Let's take this interchange between jazz musicians and the church and go back to New Orleans, the place considered to be the birthplace of jazz. We've already seen where pioneer New Orleans trumpeter Joe "King" Oliver recorded the music of the blues composer that would become the father of Gospel music. That connection happened in Chicago, but if we go back to Oliver's home we find a testimony by Creole trombonist, "Kid" Ory, who moved to New Orleans from a plantation around 1907. He said that when he got to New Orleans he witnessed a vibrant music scene where the religious music was especially potent. He would go to the "holy rollers" services in the evangelical churches where the parishioners would, in his words "get to swingin'". "Kid" Ory also tells us that trumpeter "Buddy" Bolden worshiped at St. John Baptist Church, known for having special exuberance in singing spirituals and jubilees. Buddy Bolden would go to church, but in Ory's words, "*not for religion. He went there to get ideas on music. He'd hear these songs and change them a little. That's where Buddy got it from and where it all started*". Buddy Bolden is celebrated by eyewitnesses, to be the first cat to start ragging or swingin' the melodies on his trumpet. He pre-dated Armstrong and had the most popular brass band from about 1900 to 1907. And, of course, we all know about the New Orleans funeral, where they would march the casket to the grave sight playing a hymn such as "Just A Closer Walk With Thee" as a dirge. Then, on the return trip they come back swingin' the music with pure joy and jubilation.

We can even look, briefly, at what happened in jazz thirty years later. In the 50s some jazz musicians felt that the music was starting to get a little too "cool" and esoteric. They felt a need to go back and tap the source for inspiration. Where did they go? They went back to church. Well, not literally, but in their music they brought in an obvious gospel influence. Pianist Horace Silver wrote songs like "Sister Sadie", and "The Preacher". There was Charles Mingus with "Better Get It in Your Soul", Jimmy Smith's "The Sermon", and Cannonball Adderley with "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" to name a few. Even in the 1990s, great veteran pianist Hank Jones recorded a CD of hymns and spirituals entitled "Steal Away" while the more contemporary jazz star, Cyrus Chestnut released his CD featuring mostly songs of the church. A man with whom I had the pleasure of working, pianist James Williams, rest his soul, was also dedicated to "gospel jazz". I think it's safe to say that many jazz musicians are never far from the church.

I just want speak on the topic of sacred music in general. Across cultures, sacred music has most always been the music of the people, derived folk music. From French and Italian monks in the fifteenth century to Martin Luther's Protestant hymn tunes to today's Twila Paris, Kirk Franklin and Jars of Clay, people praise God with their own music. To me it just says, as Duke Ellington put it, "Every man prays in his own language".

So now what is sacred music anyway? What is a sacred melody in musical terms? There is really no such thing because music has no literal meaning. It has its own meaning. It is its own language. But for us, it means what we say it means. Of course music suggests moods and feelings, even colors but that's interpreted differently by different people. But how can a melody or a harmonic progression be sacred? Let's take the melody da, da da da da ...(sings the melody of "Old 100th", *Praise God From...*) Us church folks know that means "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow". But if we all first heard that melody as (*sung*) "I'll take a cheeseburger and fries", that melody would then only mean lunch to us! Again, music means what we say it means.

Having said that, however, I believe certain qualities in music can really harmonize with certain aspects of our lives and dramatize our struggles here on earth. It can help us celebrate our victories and express our feelings *about* God and *to* God. What I feel about African American sacred music and jazz is beautifully expressed in this quote from Bernice Reagon:

The story of African American sacred music is much more than the story of how African American song and singing developed. It is the story of a people under stress, searching for a more fertile ground for survival in a strange land.

-Bernice J. Reagon
"We'll Understand It Better..."

She uses the word stress, but we can also say struggle, suffering, tribulation, tension, or a term used in music: dissonance. And we know you get plenty of that in jazz. I saw on the cover of a book where a new convert to jazz said that he used to not like jazz because it never seemed to resolve. He later saw the beauty of it while watching someone enjoy the music. Rev. David Jeremiah, in a sermon spoke on struggle. He said, "*Pain can be better than happiness. We don't learn deep things about life just through mirth, happiness and celebration. We learn through pain and struggle.*" That is certainly an important part of my faith, because without the suffering of Christ, there would be no salvation for me. The Apostle Paul talks about a thorn in his flesh, and that he dies daily for Christ. That's suffering. But then the Bible tells us to count it all joy. What better music to express that than jazz and blues, music that has both pain and joy, struggle and triumph.

This is why I love to listen to Russian music. By that I mean the classics of composers like Prokofiev, Tchaichovsky and Shostakovich. This music is also full of struggle and passion.

And so with that, we will now play, not Russian music but excerpts from the 1st and 2nd Sacred Concerts of Duke Ellington.

(Band performs)
**COME SUNDAY/HEAVEN
SOMETHING ABOUT BELIEVING
ALMIGHTY GOD**

In 1965 Duke Ellington was being considered for a Pulitzer Prize for composition that year. He was denied and it became news in the media. Many people were upset, including the composer himself who, according to his son Mercer, was more upset that it became so publicized. But when confronted about it by the press, Duke was his usual smooth and charming self, saying: *“I feel very lucky to have been mentioned at all for such an honor. Fate has been too kind to me. Fate doesn’t want me to be too famous, too young.”* In truth, he often felt that he was not taken seriously enough as a composer, even after all he had accomplished

It just so happened that in that same year, Duke was commissioned to perform a program of sacred music for the opening and new building consecration for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. He jumped on this as yet another opportunity to create a large composition. The piece premiered on September, 26 1965 and was a large dramatic religious spectacle along the lines of Handel’s Messiah. On stage, along with Duke and the band, was a large choir, several solo vocalists and a tap dancer for the finale to “dance like David before the Lord”. It was well received by Duke’s fans and liberal churches, and moderately well received by critics, who never quite know what to do with things that are out of the norm.

The following year Duke went to Washington D.C., his hometown, to perform his sacred concert for the Baptist Ministers’ Convention. The ministers and officials of the organization refused to endorse the concert, saying that it was too “worldly”. This is a clear example of the attitudes of some towards jazz in the church. It’s ironic that Duke had performed his sacred music at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC, the Cathedral at Coventry in England, and Temple Emmanuel in Beverly Hills California, but it was not supported in his home own town.

Duke went on to create two more sacred concerts, all pretty much like the first. They were collections of songs and movements, with a variety of jazz styles, mostly vocal. Some of the pieces were somber and impressionistic, some hard swingin’, some borrowing from the gospel style, and there was even one where the choir speaks in unison. Of the Second Sacred Concert, Duke said *“I regard this concert as the most important thing I’ve ever done”*.

By 1973 Duke was putting all his creative energies into his third sacred concert. It premiered at Westminster Abbey in London. He performed his sacred music whenever possible until his death on May 24, 1974. They played a recording of some of his Second Sacred Concert at his funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Mary Lou Williams

Mary Lou Williams is by no means a household name but her story is pretty remarkable. If you're interested, I strongly recommend the book "Soul On Soul" by Tammy Kernodle. During the 1930s Mary was the principle arranger and pianist for Andy Kirk and the Twelve Clouds of Joy. She was known for her compositions "Walkin' and Swingin'", "Mary's Idea", "Froggy Bottom" and "Cloudy". She gained fame with her blues entitled "Roll 'Em", which she wrote for Benny Goodman, and "What's Your Story, Morning Glory?", written for Fletcher Henderson. She even wrote a piece for Ellington called "Trumpets No End".

Mary's story is particularly good for this topic because even after many disappointments, it is apparent that her faith was large and her humanitarian efforts illustrated the message of Christ.

In 1952 Mary toured Europe in the hopes of recovering a once successful career. She became stranded for an extended period of time. With the help of friends, she finally returned to NYC, but the events in her life during the early 1950s led her into deep depression. Mary walked away from the music scene in 1954, entirely frustrated and disappointed. She joined the Catholic Church and spent days and months in prayer. She then devoted herself to humanitarian work among poor and drug and alcohol addicted musicians.

Mary's humanitarian spirit led her to start the Bel Canto Foundation. It was officially formed with the administrative and financial help of Ftr. Woods, Doris Duke and Barbara Hutton. Her vision was to have a facility away from the city that would provide a clean and healing environment for addicted musicians. It would be equipped with medical staff and sound proofed piano rooms. Such a cool idea! She never fully realized that dream but did continue to help people in what ever capacity she could.

In May of 1962, the Pope canonized Martin de Poress. This was a man of African descent who lived in Lima, Peru from 1579 to 1639. He was born of a Spanish nobleman and an ex-slave mother. He became a Catholic Christian and devoted himself to humanitarian work, caring for the sick and poor. His work became known far and wide. With the help of Ftr. Woods, Mary wrote her first composition for the church, commemorating the official sainthood of St. Martin de Poress. She initially called it Black Christ of the Andes, but it later became St. Martin de Poress. After this, she wrote a few other songs based on scripture and prayers. In 1966 she composed the first of three

masses. The second one, Mass for Lenten Season, was well received among some of the smaller churches in NY, but it was Mary's dream to perform it for the Pope in Rome. She returned to Europe to tour having faith that she would be able to perform at the Vatican. She actually got close but was never allowed to play her jazz music during an actual mass. Her other ambition was to perform a mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the principal Catholic Church in NYC.

In 1969 she composed her third mass entitled "Mass For Peace". It was choreographed by Alvin Ailey for his American Dance Theater in 1971. The title then became Mary Lou's Mass. In 1975 Mary finally received an invitation to perform her work at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Over three thousand people were in attendance and history was made as Mass for Peace became the first jazz liturgy at a major Catholic church.

Mary died of cancer on May 8, 1981.

(Band performs)
St. Martin De Poress
Anima Christi

John Coltrane

It is generally understood that in jazz there are three major figures who revolutionized the direction of jazz. They were:

Louis Armstrong
Charlie Parker
John Coltrane

There are many artists who made great strides on their instruments and who were great composers making innovative contributions, but only three actually changed the way the music was to be played by the generations that followed them.

As with Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington, I am forced to leave out much biographical and career information leading up to this crucial point in Coltrane's life. Only an entire lecture for each of these musical giants would truly suffice. So, for John Coltrane I'll just start here:

So finally, Miles Davis fired him in 1956. This, after a number of setbacks in his career, all because of his drug and alcohol addictions. In 1957 Coltrane ("Trane") had a turning point in his life. He later called it a life changing experience. He locked himself in a room and only drank water for two weeks. He said that he was touched by God. This is the spiritual awakening that he wrote about on the liner notes of his ground breaking recording, A Love Supreme. He says, "*During the year 1957, I experienced by the grace*

of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.” He clearly saw this as a rebirth. And it was true, because from that point good things started to happen for him and he had straightened up enough to be able to handle his good fortune. In fact, on his first recording as a leader he does an original tune entitled “Straight Street”. One might think that refers to him kicking his habits and going straight. But I can’t help but to think that there’s a deeper reference given his Christian background. You might recall from the book of Acts, there was a certain Jew that persecuted the followers of Christ but was knocked down and visited by Jesus himself. He was converted, and where was his destination? *Straight Street* in Damascus. Well, I don’t know if that’s what “Trane” was thinking, but maybe...

So now, it’s 1964 and John and Alice Coltrane are at home on Long Island. John comes downstairs, very excited. As Alice tells it, “He comes down like Moses coming down from the mountain”. He had just charted out the sketches for a suite. Something he had never done before. But this was also different because it was something that brought his deepest feelings about life together with his music. Coltrane was all about unity. He had been studying eastern religions as well as the Bible and had a conception that all is connected to God and there is only one purpose for everything. And now his music, his life and spirituality would be all connected as one.

In December 1964, about two years after Mary Lou Williams’ first, and less than a year before Duke Ellington’s first sacred music, John Coltrane records “A Love Supreme”. It’s a four movement continuous suite and the sections are:

Acknowledgement
Resolution
Pursuance
Psalm

I’m going to do a little musical analysis of the first and last segments of the work. Even though my wife and I tend to get a little annoyed when people analyze music to death, not really knowing what the composer was thinking about. Well, here I go. But bear with me because the closer I look at it the more I can see certain things going on above and beneath the surface. The first movement, Acknowledgement starts out with sort of a fanfare. It’s a simple three note phrase from “Trane” over a sustained chord on the piano, Bass on one note, and cymbals ringing. It’s a sound that suggests peace and tranquility. Then the bass starts by itself with a four note phrase that is the basis for the whole movement. Each instrument enters one at a time. Everything is purposefully ambiguous. You can’t tell if the tonality is major or minor, the polyrhythm is a combination of fast and slow meter, Latin and swing, and at the same time there is an unmistakable sway to it. This ambiguity gives you the feeling of expanse. Then “Trane” comes in with the second theme, only it’s a variation of the bass theme but it’s a three note phrase now. He gradually gets into his solo, now developing the four note bass phrase. But he’s telling a story with it. He places those four notes here, then there, fast, slow, up and down. He even plays them in different keys. This builds to a climax, maybe

a couple of times but about ninety percent of his solo is consists of variations of that same four note phrase.

To me this sounds like an act of worship and submission. Since the days of Charlie Parker in the forties, jazz musicians have gotten pretty far away from just playing variations of the melody. And certainly “Trane” himself stretched the boundaries perhaps the farthest. But here, he is in a sense bowing down to the One God, the one phrase, forsaking all the different scales and patterns he’s already introduced to us in his prior works. Then, through that discipline he finds freedom as he takes that one phrase and goes through all keys and rhythmic variations, even to the point of intense passion.

Eventually he brings the energy back down into a sort of chant with a regular repetition of this phrase. Now he places the phrase from key to key with a calm tranquility while the bass and piano stay in the same tonality. The writer Lewis Porter has an interesting interpretation of this key shifting that I kind of like. It’s as if Coltrane is illustrating the omnipresence of God, being “... in every register, every key”. (*Sing phrase...*)

After the whole band changes the key to E flat, all of a sudden Coltrane starts chant/singing *A Love Supreme*, over and over. This is really unusual! For a jazz musician, especially from Coltrane’s generation to sing, and it’s not for fun or comic relief or gimmickry. Often people in jazz think, either you are a singer or not. And if not, you have no business singing. “Trane” was *definitely not* a singer. But in singing “Trane” was, again doing an act of worship and certainly not thinking about what anyone else would think. I believe that he was also communicating on a level of common humanity. He was not at that point a bebop saxophonist but just a human being, stripped of everything worldly, praising God.

The fourth and finale movement, **Psalm**, is a prayer. In fact, literally a prayer. On the album cover “Trane” includes a long poem or prayer that he wrote. It pretty much resembles the Psalms found in the Bible. It praises God at times and other times, addresses the listener, speaking of the goodness of God. For instance:

*I will do all I can to be worthy of thee, oh LORD
Thank you God Peace
There is no other God is
God is so beautiful Thank you God
In you all things are possible
Keep your eye on God
No matter what, it is God, etc.*

“Trane” never told anyone this but some years later somebody figured out that the slow phrases Coltrane played throughout this entire solo actually corresponds with each word and phrase of this prayer. He literally plays this prayer. I had to go listen to it for myself, and it’s true!

The bass and piano just drone on a minor sounding tonality and there is no meter. Again, the idea of open space and no sense of time. For instance, if you think of counting each measure of music; 1 2 3 4. This locks you into structure. But by taking away that structure, you can, in a sense, get away from worldliness and be drawn nearer Heaven, where there is no space or time.

With this, the whole piece ends quietly and prayerfully. Actually, to look at the shape of the entire work you can see the cycle of salvation. It starts out with “Acknowledgement”, where you’re born, one with God. There’s that idea of unity, submission and being in the will of God. The 2nd movement is “Resolution”, a jagged melodic line with a lot of variety and tension. It’s like someone going through trials, pain and separation from the One. Then there’s the 3rd segment, “Pursuance”, which is fast and determined, but also having much tension and struggle. You’re pursuing the path back to the will of God and it’s not easy. Then the last movement, “Psalm”, brings redemption and peace again.

Although he rarely played this suite in its entirety live, he continued in this direction of Spirituality in all of his music until he died of liver cancer in 1967.

(Band performs)

Acknowledgement

Resolution

Why Did You Have To Die by Drene Ivy

Count It All Joy by Lance Bryant

I will conclude with a little discussion of what’s going on today with sacred jazz. In many cities you can find at least one or two churches that will program jazz regularly. Some will have a jazz concert once or twice a year, while others may present a regular evening Jazz Vespers service. For example, New York City’s St. Peter’s Church, possibly have the longest running jazz vespers service, initiated back in 1965 by Reverend John Gensel. They do them every Sunday evening, but most churches have their Vespers services less frequently. It’s rare but some churches even have jazz in their Sunday morning worship services.

A few mainstream jazz artists do projects from time to time featuring music of the church. There are, however, a growing number of musicians who dedicate most or all of their musical talents to sacred jazz. You can find evidence of this from the many artists featured on David Arivett’s *songsofdavid.com*, or “Christian Jazz Artists Network”. This is a web site that serves the Christian jazz musician and audience in a variety of ways. There are some “Jazz Pastors”, as I call them, who are very enthusiastic and supportive of

the music and work it into their churches as much as possible. Some of these pastors are musicians themselves, like Rev. Bill Carter in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. He is one of a growing number of Christian musicians working to encourage church congregations to incorporate jazz into the communal service. He says, "*Jazz has developed as a performance art that emphasizes the soloist. Jazz worship among Christians will always need to blend the personal expression of the soloist with the congregational participation of those in the pews. Neither group is present merely for themselves, but to bless and honor God.*"

It has been my experience to find many musicians in the church, no matter what denomination, to be curious or at least respectful of jazz music. As the many pop and rock Christian musical styles develop, I am anxious to see how some of these contemporary musicians might incorporate elements of jazz into their art.

For my final statements about Jazz in the Church I want to first quote the late Rev. John Gensel, whom Duke Ellington called, "the shepherd who watches over the night flock". He said "*Jazz is probably the best music for worship, because it speaks to the existential situation of a human being*". I read that the other night and thought "Wow! That's it! Pretty cool"! Then I ran to the dictionary to look up existential. I'm still tryin' to work that out, but in the mean time I'll quote a scripture to express how I feel and what my approach is to jazz and worship. In the book of Matthew, chapter 5:14-16, Jesus tells us that no one lights a lamp to put it under a bowl. He says, "*let your light shine that men may see your good works and praise your Father in Heaven*". Also, in I Corinthians, chapter 14, the apostle Paul talks about spiritual gifts. He says "*I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also. I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the understanding also*".

Thank you and God bless.

Lance Bryant 2005

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