

The Jazz Bandstand as Sacred Space

A look at the growth in jazz vespers

In 1971 I was home from college on semester break. After a long conversation with my pastor he agreed to let me lead a jazz quartet in Sunday morning worship – at both services. The band was only a short way into our prelude, Miles Davis’ “All Blues,” when the first person stood up to leave, followed by another and yet another. In all, at least thirty people left the first service. The second service wasn’t any better. The fallout in the church lasted for weeks. The pastor held his ground, explaining the need for new dimensions in worship. The damage was done, however, because it took 37 years until I again offered jazz in that congregation. The response in 2008? A standing ovation and countless accolades. So what changed? Had my saxophone playing gotten that much better, or had enough time passed for a congregation to become culturally “hip”? Perhaps a little of both, but the truth is far deeper.

(1 Rev. Clifford Aerie at Service at Middletown, CT Congregational Church with guest artist Jay Hoggard on vibraphone) 2) (Rev. Clifford Aerie performing with quartet)



Jazz and the church have been inexorably linked since the first slaves were allowed into their master's sanctuary and encouraged to embrace the religion of their oppressors. In the decades that followed, their work songs and rhythmic melodies became the musical sustenance for their own prayer meetings. Gospel music emerged and sang of a heavenly sanctuary, the sweet by-and-by, and the hope of spiritual freedom. Emancipation promised real freedom, yet in reality produced violent prejudice. Somehow, the music continued. The blues grew from the daily trials and heartaches of a people trying to survive bigotry. Over the years the music took many twists and turns and evolved into something commonly labeled jazz. To try to do historical justice to the evolution of jazz in this article would be impossible. However, assessing the relationship between jazz and the church is long overdue.

Today, the music is so broadly expansive that the very word *jazz*, is inadequate to define the genre. Dr. Billy Taylor has called jazz "America's classical music." HR-57 is named for the House Resolution passed in 1987 that designated jazz "a rare and valuable national American treasure." But just mention the word *jazz* and everyone has a different opinion. Louis Armstrong once said, "Man, if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know." The grand lady of jazz, Ella Fitzgerald said, "Forgive me if I don't have the words. Maybe I can sing it and you'll understand." Or in the words of our great American philosopher, Yogi Berra, "Anyone who understands jazz knows that you can't understand it. It's too complicated. That's what so simple about it."

Yogi's assessment is really, right on. Jazz is way beyond understanding. It's far too complicated. That is precisely what's so simple about it. It's like, trying to comprehend God. We can't begin to understand God because God is far too complicated...and yet there is a spiritual simplicity that dwells within the landscape of the human soul that connects us with the divine. John Coltrane, the most eloquent of all saxophonists said, "My music is the spiritual expression of what I am: my faith, my knowledge, my being."

What better place to experience jazz than in the church? That's the irony. Many of the great jazz musicians grew up in the church and had their first musical experience as part of a community of faith. The list is long: Coltrane, trumpeter Buddy Bolden; saxophonists Jimmy Heath, Gary Bartz; pianists Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Mary Lou Williams, Cyrus Chestnut, Amina Claudine Myers; vocalists Jimmy Rushing, Nina Simone, John Hendricks; vibraphonist Jay Hoggard; and, of course, the entire Marsalis clan: Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo, Jason and father Ellis, just to name a few.

These artists, and many like them, went on to amazing musical careers that rarely, if ever, brought their musical artistry into the church for worship. And yet, their music is deeply spiritual. Yes, Duke Ellington wrote dozens of sacred jazz compositions and Dave Brubeck composed more than fifty works of sacred music blending jazz and classical motifs. Yet, for the most part jazz and church have remained separate – particularly when it comes to the Sunday experience of worship, at least in the mainline denominations.

Clearly, African American churches have nurtured the musical and spiritual pilgrimage of many of our greatest jazz players. Even so there has often been a religious reluctance in many of these churches to let jazz improvisation and the Spirit mingle too closely. Early in my pastoral career I served as an Associate Pastor in an integrated congregation where Bach and gospel were heard

side-by-side. But jazz? “Well, you know those jazz musicians,” many would say regardless of color. “Their music is so hard to understand, and their lifestyle, well ...” I recall that the mass exodus from that worship service in 1971, according to some of the parishoners, was because we were playing the “devil’s music,” fit only for sinful venues.

Robert Glasper, one of today’s fine young pianists, shared his experience of the church as a place to, “develop being spiritual in music, being able to touch someone with a song. When you play in church... the congregation, the choir... the singers are reacting to you... and it’s all very spiritual. I think that’s another part of music that I take from church as well—not playing for the sake of playing but for the spiritual aspect, the emotion, the realness of it, the organic honesty of the whole thing.”

Does that mean Euro-American, mainline churches aren’t spiritual and can’t relate to the “organic honesty” of the improvising jazz musician? I hope not. For many years, St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, a multi-ethnic congregation in New York City, has long been considered the premier jazz ministry. Lesser known is First Congregational United Church of Christ in Binghamton, New York. In 1996 I started a monthly jazz vesper series, which continues to this day—ten years after I left as their pastor. Other churches around the country have also embraced jazz as a spiritual blessing in their worship. Rev. Bill Carter, pianist and pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, regularly leads jazz at his church and performs with his group, The Presbybop Quartet, at many other churches.

Four years ago I expanded the ministry of the Oïkos Ensemble, and have performed Sunday morning jazz services, evening vespers and spiritual concerts around the country. After almost two hundred performances something is amazingly clear—churches have become culturally “hip,” or at least open to having jazz in the sanctuary. More and more congregations are having jazz worship services, and musicians like pianist, Chuck Marohnic and saxophonist, Willie Sordillo are sharing their spirited artistry with worshippers.

People in the pew are experiencing an inspiring synergy of spirit and prayer through jazz performance. Performance? Oops, that’s a hot liturgical potato. I remember a professor in seminary making it quite clear that we must remove all ego from worship. The worst thing we could do, he told us, is “perform” in church. Jazz in worship is indeed, performance, and as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard stated so eloquently—worship is our performance before God.

It is my belief that when jazz musicians play, we perform a sacred rite; we are at prayer. We are never more deeply in communion with the Holy than when we’re improvising; fashioning spontaneous melodies, harmonies and rhythms as an act of giving—a holy offering to God and the listener. The evocative recording of *A Love Supreme*, by John Coltrane is an improvisational prayer lifting praises to the Creator. But the gospel of jazz also delves into the dark, painful side of life. Every time I hear Coltrane’s composition, “Alabama,” I’m hit in the gut with a musical soundscape lamenting the racist tragedy of the Birmingham bombing that killed innocent children.

Jazz musicians fashion spontaneous musical motifs, but more than that we paint portraits, tell stories, reveal hidden, and not so hidden, truths. When I play I often feel as if I'm preaching more effectively (and passionately!) than I ever did in the pulpit. Violinist Stephane Grappelli once said, "Improvisation, it is a mystery... When I improvise and I'm in good form, I'm like somebody half sleeping. I even forget there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests; they are thinking only of their God." Charlie Parker, the pioneering bebop saxophonist said it even more succinctly; "I am a devout musician."

Could it be that the jazz bandstand, the place where the ensemble of musicians connect their music and souls, is a sacred space, an altar? Perhaps the psalmist was really onto something when he (she?) sang – "Praise God with the trumpet sound, with string bass and stride piano; saxophone riffs, drums and cymbals; lots of loud crashing cymbals!" (Psalm 150, my humble interpretation). And let's not forget the human voice – "O come, let us sing to our Creator, let us joyfully scat our songs; even our blues, to the rock of our salvation! (Psalm 95 revisited). I like to think that our churches today could learn from Paul's letter encouraging folks at the Church in Ephesus to "pick up your horns and jam, prayerfully improvise your hymns and spiritual songs into new melodies with all your heart and soulfulness." (Ephesians 5: 20 anew). Now, that would be some "swinging" church service!

When a friend of mine, Rev. Eric Elnes decided to begin a weekly contemporary service he first thought that it needed to be Rock and Roll to be culturally relevant. Instead, he decided to turn to jazz and told me of his epiphany. "When Rock musicians want to increase their intensity, they increase their volume, sometimes even the tempo. Jazz musicians turn inward to create their spiritual intensity." Dr. Christopher Bakrigan, my colleague, friend, and pianist with the Oikos Ensemble, often refers to this inward paradox, as "Quiet Fire." Indeed, what better metaphor for the Spirit's presence in vibrantly alive worship? The church can learn a lot from jazz.

It's taken almost forty years during my lifetime for jazz to be welcomed, even embraced by the church. It's been a long, extremely difficult and frustrating journey, but it's been worth it. Recently, after a worship service in St. Louis, a young boy ran up to me and asked, "Can you play in our church every Sunday?" An elderly woman in a staid Connecticut congregation came up to the band after the postlude and announced, "I don't like jazz." Then she smiled, and continued, "But I liked what you played." After an evening vesper service in a suburban Los Angeles congregation a young man approached and said he was a jazz bassist who gigged every weekend. He paused and confessed that this was the first time that he was able to make a connection between *his music* and *his faith*. At a worship celebration of international partners in Cleveland, a gentleman from South Asia took me by the arm and sighed, "Ah, like rain during a dry time."

If our worship is, indeed, to be a performance for God, let's make it the most soulful, creative, inspiring performance possible. And who better to lead such a performance than the jazz ensemble. When it comes to worshipping God, we jazz musicians are, as Stephane Grappelli noted, like priests – priests following in the footsteps of one our greatest saints: Louis Armstrong, who proclaimed, "My whole life, my whole soul, my whole spirit is to blow that horn ... What we play is life."

Our jazz saints have shown the way – St. Satchmo, St. John, St. Duke, St. Ella and many others – exploring the adventurous terrain of the Spirit through their music, a music that offers new life to arid, withering congregations. “Ah, like rain during a dry time.” What we play is life. Life, indeed!

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