

INDS 785: Seminar Paper (Final Draft)
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Then Sings My *Soul*: Towards a Theology of Jazz in Christian Worship

*Music is the language of the soul made audible.*¹
Don Saliers

Introduction: A Personal Note—Jazz on the Journey

Like most people, I responded to music emotionally from a very young age. What child when she hears music *doesn't* feel a compulsive desire to shake and dance and bob up and down? But from my parents' point of view, music seemed to have a uniquely powerful impact on me. My mother tells me she remembers that my lips often began to quiver (signaling that I was about to cry) when exceptionally beautiful music was played on a record or in church. That music possesses an inherent power to touch the soul is no surprise. Wordless forms of music such as instrumental jazz, for example, can have a profound impact on our spirits.

My introduction to jazz came through playing in a high school big band. I remember being instantly captivated by the harmonic complexity, rhythmic energy and melodic beauty I heard in the music. Later I spent two years studying jazz piano at a college level. As my love for the style continued to grow, jazz became for me more than simply a type of music to be appreciated and enjoyed. Eventually I began to realize that

¹ In Leaver and Zimmerman, p. 384.

there was a significant connection between jazz and Christian spirituality that needed to be explored.

In my experience, this “connection” has to do with the integration of faith and art—the desire to worship God in all of life; to “take Jesus” to jam sessions, gigs, jazz clubs and concert halls. In private worship this made good, even biblical, sense (cf. Col. 3:17). But is jazz appropriate for public worship? Many people do not (or choose not to) understand it, musically speaking. Others associate jazz with anarchy, rebellion, sexual promiscuity, arrogance or “American wartime culture”², and therefore feel it has no place in the church.³ These ideas are still widely held—and not only by Christians. In spite of these barriers, however, it is my growing conviction that jazz and improvisation are entirely appropriate for Christian worship and should be utilized as part of the evangelical church’s musical diet.⁴

1. A Brief History of Jazz and the Church

While jazz has certainly *not* been the predominant musical idiom in 20th century Western evangelicalism, there exists a traceable (if sketchy or broad) history of what might be called “sacred jazz.”⁵ In fact, some of the most recognizable names in jazz history have written and performed sacred works.

² Des Cotes, interview.

³ Duke Ellington bassist Aaron Bell remembered an old Webster’s dictionary definition of jazz: “a low type of music that brings out the worst emotions of mankind”—and in parentheses, “jigaboo music.” (in Steed 137).

⁴ This paper will be chiefly concerned with *instrumental* jazz and improvisation and its application in the context of public worship. While verbal jazz styles are being utilized to a significant degree in some settings and will be addressed to a point, I am primarily interested in non-verbal expressions.

⁵ This term should be understood as any jazz music that carries a conscious or overt religious dimension. The “sacred jazz” examples listed were not necessarily designed for use in a liturgical setting. Also, “sacred jazz” here should be distinguished from other African American musical styles such as spirituals, gospel hymns and gospel blues. A helpful timeline of The Evolution of African American Music (both sacred and secular) can be found in Leaver and Zimmerman, p. 368.

Our history begins in the 1960s against the backdrop of significant changes not only within social and political spheres, but also in religion (Steed 115). As new English Bible translations appeared and the language of the Catholic mass underwent adaptation into the national language of a given congregation, “vernacular music was also introduced into Catholic worship” (ibid.). Steed elaborates: “Jazz masses and Protestant jazz services gained a degree of popularity in urban areas, although the practice was still seen as a radical departure from traditional worship.”

In New York City in 1961, the late Reverend John Garcia Gensel began an evening service at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church known as *Jazz vespers*.⁶ Designed for jazz musicians who were unable to get up for Sunday morning services after late Saturday gigs, Reverend Gensel invited them to perform “a worship service by and for jazz musicians . . . the public is invited.”⁷ The great Duke Ellington—arguably the most important jazz musician of all time—was among the many musicians for whom St. Peter’s became a church home. The prolific composer went on to write and perform three Sacred Concerts in places of worship throughout the world.⁸ After his band performed the first Sacred Concert in San Francisco, Ellington candidly revealed how he felt about this unique music: “I’m sure this is the most important statement we’ve ever made” (Steed 117). Other important “jazz pioneers” who have explored the sacred in their music include John Coltrane and Dave Brubeck (Kavanaugh 276-7). In 1984, Canadian jazz piano legend Oscar Peterson was commissioned by the BBC London to write and

⁶ Information on Jazz vespers taken from an online article called “Jazz Vespers Services” (See Bibliography).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A thorough and fascinating study of the spiritual life of Duke Ellington, including his Sacred Concerts, can be found in Janna Tull Steed, *Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography*.

perform an “Easter Suite.” On Good Friday of that year, he performed it with his trio on live television (Oscar Peterson Biography).

Today jazz vespers services are becoming increasingly popular, particularly in major urban centers across the United States and some cities in Canada.⁹ We turn now to the beginnings of a theology of jazz in Christian worship.¹⁰

2. Jazz, Holism and Integration

One of the highest biblical values held by worship planners is that of *holism*. Harold Best says “the integration of the mind and spirit makes for the best music (for worship)” (186). Citing 1 Cor. 14:15-16, Best highlights Paul’s suggestion that there are ways to pray and sing which engage both spirit and mind (ibid.). The ancient Hebrew Shema, found in Deut. 6, reminds the covenant people that “the LORD is *one*” and to “Love the LORD your God with all your *heart* and with all your *soul* and with all your *strength*” (italics mine). Jazz can contribute much to worship because it has a unique way of enabling the worshipper to love God with the whole person. Bill Carter elaborates:

Like the lyrics of biblical psalms and songs, jazz music can express an astonishing variety of human emotions. Within the song of Isaiah, we hear sounds of joy and cries for help, labor pains and peaceful silence, the thunder of praise and the screams of fury. All of these sounds are appropriately human, and appropriately offered to God. So it is with jazz. A jazz quartet can utter things in the presence of God that mere words cannot say. A saxophone can lament on behalf of the helpless. A piano may offer intercessions for the needy. A string bass can affirm the firm foundation of faith. Drums and cymbals may call pilgrims to break into joy. . . . Sometimes the music can speak for us in the fullness of human expression. (Faith in a New Key 3)

Rob Des Cotes agrees. He writes that “jazz is life felt deeply . . . (it) can be many things besides itself” (Jazz 28).

⁹ St. Andrew’s-Wesley Church in Vancouver holds a regular jazz vespers service on Sundays at 4:00pm.

A holistic praxis of worship will also engage the dimension of *imagination*.¹¹ Jazz can serve to engage the imagination differently—and, in some cases, more fully—than other musical styles. Duke Ellington knew the power of jazz to capture the Christian imagination. Consider the following description of the “image” Ellington had in mind when composing his first significant “spiritual theme,” *Come Sunday*:

(Ellington) was thinking of an African man named Boola, who is brought to the American continent as a slave. He painstakingly teaches himself to read from a Bible. And there he finds “something to live for,” even in his state of captivity; for he learns of a God of compassion and justice who knows his pain and will bring comfort and vindication. The picture that Ellington imagines is a secret outdoor gathering of slaves on Sunday morning, while their white masters are in church. Together they share the word of God “in whispers” and long for the freedom to openly express their profound love and joy. (Hasse in Steed 90)

3. Jazz, Form and Freedom

A commonly held misconception about jazz is that there are no rules governing the improvisation that takes place within it. Nothing could be further from the truth.¹² Every jazz standard has a distinct melody and a chord progression (or harmonic structure) that serves as the basis for that melody *as well as* all subsequent solos.¹³ It would not be an overstatement to say that, in jazz, the more one knows the rules, the freer one is to improvise. Rob Des Cotes sees a theological parallel between this important jazz principle and the ideas contained in Psalm 119. Verse 45 reads, “I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.” A similar idea is expressed by Paul in

¹⁰ Space does not permit a more fully-developed theology of jazz, which would include a much deeper discussion of both *cultural* and *aesthetic* considerations for its use in the postmodern evangelical worship setting.

¹¹ John Witvliet addressed this notion in his class lectures, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*. (Regent College, June 5-9, 2000).

¹² Even so-called “free jazz” has its own set of rules. Some songs will have a set key center. Other improvised works may have an indeterminate harmonic structure, but a general rhythmic idea will predominate. In still other cases, a specific “emotion” will govern the nature of what is improvised.

¹³ To this day, popular American tunes from the 1920s, 30s and 40s (known as “standards”) form a large part of the traditional jazz musician’s repertoire.

Romans 6. As Christians we are both free *and* bound: free from sin, bound to righteousness. We need both limitation and liberation, and we need to hold them in proper tension. Jazz can help us do that. Des Cotes explains: “there is in every human being a faculty that longs for conformity and order, just as there is something in each of us that responds to the urge for revolt against convention, for spontaneous expression . . . jazz ideally expresses this tension” (Free-Form 1). The use of jazz in public worship could serve as a continual reminder to the community of believers that Christian freedom comes from “looking intently into the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25).

4. Jazz, the Non-Verbal¹⁴ and Transcendence

Simply put, we need non-verbal expressions in worship. Culturally speaking, instrumental jazz in worship can serve as a counter to the barrage of words common in our everyday experience (not to mention most worship experiences). Biblically speaking, “the Psalms provide plenty of evidence” that musical sound itself can be an effective form of worship (Ryken 50). Leland Ryken notes that “the most prevalent interpretation of the notation “Selah” in some of the psalms is that it indicates places where instrumental music took over while the singing ceased temporarily” (ibid.). Des Cotes likens non-verbal jazz and improvisation to the “groaning of the Spirit” (Romans 8:26) and the gift of tongues. He says, “similar to the goals of contemplative prayer, jazz helps us explore the relationship of being to Being, as opposed to idea to Idea” (Des Cotes, interview). Professor of sacred music Melva Costen adds that “music and religion have the common task of expressing the inexpressible” (God, Jesus, forgiveness 1). These

¹⁴ Rob Des Cotes brought up George Steiner’s idea of a “*pre-verbal*” dimension, and wondered whether this might be a more appropriate designation for worship forms that do not include words. The term “*pre-verbal*” conveys the notion that even sounds, like the Spirit’s groaning in Romans 8, for example, *imply* words.

affirmations of non-verbal forms, however, do not explain how instrumental *jazz*, in particular, can make a unique contribution to worship. Neil Leonard's observations about "the possibilities for transcendence which can occur when people hear (improvised music)" are helpful here:

Jazz answered needs that traditional faiths did not address. While the music had different meanings for different followers—black or white, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, in various psychological states and social situations—for all devotees it provided some form of ecstasy or catharsis transcending the limitations, dreariness, and desperation of ordinary existence. (in Carter, Faith in a New Key 3)

What if "traditional faith" and jazz could co-operate in conveying the meaning of the transcendent—what Rudolf Otto called "the experience of the holy, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*"¹⁵—that is so essential to Christian worship? Let me be clear that I am not advocating a nullification of the verbal dimension of worship. Rather I am arguing for a creative balance of forms, in which jazz has yet to play a significant role.

5. Jazz, Improvisation and Christian Community

Jeremy Begbie and Rob Des Cotes see improvisation as a metaphor for Christian community. Begbie notes that in an improvisatory setting,

All the skills which . . . should characterize the Church as persons-in-communion . . . are present in a very heightened form: for example, giving 'space' to the other through alert attentiveness, listening in patient silence, contributing to the growth of others by 'making the best' of what is received from them such that they are encouraged to continue participating, sensitive decision-making, flexibility of response, initiating change, role-changing, generating and benefiting from conflict. (206)

Des Cotes captures something of what takes place during improvisation (and Christian community!) using the language of communication: "Jazz is conversation. The art of civility. It is knowing when you've said enough, and not talking when you've nothing to

say. It is being careful to not ignore other people’s opinions. It is practicing hospitality, making room for others” (Jazz is, 48). Carter agrees, noting that “jazz, like daily life, is an informed risk,” but within Christian community “there is always a safety net of grace” (in Aerie 1).¹⁶ He adds, “If a musician hits a sour note or flubs a rhythm, it cannot be replayed, only forgiven. There will be another opportunity to play better notes on another day. These basic characteristics of jazz make it particularly congenial to the life of Christian faith” and, I would add, Christian worship (ibid.).

Jazz also has a way of championing the individual, not in an exclusive sense, but in the proper context of community. Carter writes that

a jazz (group) gives an opportunity for each player to improvise and express some individual creativity. Yet group discipline will not permit one musician to remain the soloist to the exclusion of others. Everyone in the band is given a turn to contribute. When competition seeps in, it is always in the form of playful encouragement. “Come on,” a musician will say, “play some music!” (ibid. 5)

These parallel meanings have profound implications for worship, which is fundamentally an expression of the community we share with God. Worship is dialogic and, arguably, *improvisatory* by nature. In the worship setting, God speaks and we respond. Conversely, we speak and God responds. Jazz has much to teach us about how to “speak” and “respond” appropriately in a worship relationship with God.

Conclusion: On the “Hurdles” to Effective Praxis

The incorporation of jazz in the worship setting is a complex task, with significant hurdles to be overcome. Jazz takes an enormous degree of skill to master, let alone to utilize appropriately and without distraction in the worship setting. Des Cotes says that to

¹⁵ Lit. “the awesome and attractive mystery” (in Viladesau 39).

¹⁶ Des Cotes describes grace within group improvisation in a more colloquial fashion. Alluding to 1 Peter 4:8, he writes that “Sidemen (fellow jazz musicians; not necessarily only *men*) cover a multitude of sins” (Jazz is, 38).

use jazz effectively in worship, care must be taken to create a proper context; one in which improvised music truly contributes to the worship setting (interview). Part of creating this context is acknowledging, as we did in the introduction, that the terminology and negative connotations associated with jazz will be problematic for many within Christian circles. At minimum, the church will need sensitive, thoughtful education about the symbolic nature of the arts and their function in worship in general and the jazz genre in particular. May God grant us the faithfulness and creativity to work toward that end.

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