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Thriving **ON A RIFF**



Jazz
and the
Spiritual Life

(c) William G. Carter

BROADLEAF BOOKS
MINNEAPOLIS

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Introduction

Counting Off the Tempo

The door on the minivan opened, and Ron Vincent, our effervescent drummer, climbed in. Last to arrive after our evening concert, he was euphoric. “We were hitting it tonight,” he said, “and I feel good.”

Tony Marino, a bassist of few words, smiled and added, “It was a great gig.”

My jazz quartet was winding up a weeklong tour of concerts. I was feeling good myself, appreciative that I may be the only Presbyterian minister who takes vacation time to go on the road with his band. I thanked them for making the trip.

“You know,” said Ron, “there’s something profound about this music. Something deeply spiritual. Bill, you should write a book about it.”

Spiritual is a slippery word. I’ve never quite known how to define it. For many, *spiritual* points to emotional experience, evoking responses ranging from pathos to ecstasy. A soulful song resonates with the broken heart. A freewheeling improvisation evokes cheers. The skilled jazz musician can set the emotional thermostat of a room. Those who listen with available hearts can be deeply affected, even strangely warmed.

INTRODUCTION

And there's something intellectual about jazz too. Complex harmonies dance between tension and release. Melodies unfold over fascinating rhythms. Musicians in this groove embrace a long tradition of theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom.

Emotional and intellectual, jazz connects the head and heart, suggesting a more inclusive way to plumb the depths of heaven and earth. A creative imagination unites with tapping feet. It's both-and. If jazz is *spiritual*, it does not lift us off the ground, detaching us from the hard realities of life. The music's spiritual power is a holy animation in the thick of real life. Sloth is shaken awake. Honesty smashes through denial. Static situations are cracked open to new possibilities for the fullness of life. As one saxophonist slyly affirmed, "I have a ministry of raising the dead." Jazz becomes a highway for the Holy, the Mystery, the Spirit at the heart of all things. And it can provide healing for our hearts and integration for our souls.

Integration? I know it firsthand. I live between two statues in my pastoral study. One depicts Moses holding the Ten Commandments, affirming my ongoing work as a minister. Moses stands tall, presiding over a large bookshelf of Bible commentaries, a theological dictionary, and volumes written in Greek and Hebrew.

The other statue sits across the room on the windowsill. It portrays a clown playing the piano. When this one catches my eye, I remember the hundreds of nights I have spent as a jazz pianist in clubs and concert halls—and now churches.

Against the advice of some, I have never let go of either statue. They form a set of parentheses around my life. They provide balance for my soul.

When I began to study for the ministry, I was a professional musician, the only student in my seminary class who had the distinction of playing in most of the Elks Clubs of upstate New York. I assumed music would go on the shelf when I completed my studies and entered the ministry.

But then the moment came on the day when I was invited to take the pastoral job that I've had for over thirty years. Someone in the

back of the church stood up and said, “We have heard you preach, and that was pretty good. Play something for us on the piano!”

I froze, then muttered something like, “That’s not why I’m here.”

His response: “That’s what you think.”

It was an invitation to integration, a summons to weave together disparate strands of my experience. As I stomped out a rollicking version of “Amazing Grace,” I did not realize I was launching on the trajectory that led to this book. Neither did I know I was beginning a journey to weave my passion for jazz with the spiritual life.

And it is a spiritual life. Not merely *faith*, defined as an alignment of the heart. Neither is it *religion*, which suggests venerable altars with lots of behavioral rules. Faith and religion have shaped my identity and moral foundation, but music invites me to go deeper into the Mystery that we never quite capture in religious language. The dissonant tones offer a prophetic nudge toward justice. The harmonic resolutions offer healing. One friend summarizes it by declaring, “God is in the music.” Her soul is full. She’s committed to justice and human harmony. There is holiness in her eyes.

One size doesn’t fit all. Sometimes the spiritual life is as ecstatic as a Keith Jarrett piano concert, with back-bending gyrations and groans of delight. Other times, it is as quiet and still as Bill Evans improvising his well-known “Peace Piece” for seven minutes on two chords. In the thick of such moments, we may discern evidence of divine activity in a musical art form. Perhaps we will discover how jazz can inform, and connect to, the life of the Spirit.

This is my invitation to you. How might music awaken, enrich, and empower our lives and direct us toward acts of love, justice, and mercy? That’s what interests me, and we have an extraordinary jazz tradition to offer many clues and connections. It intersects with the wisdom of the ancient Saint Irenaeus, who famously quipped, “The glory of God is a human alive.”¹

Let’s see if jazz can bring us alive. Completely alive.