

I am a devout musician—Charlie Parker

I want to worship in a jazz church. I will boldly say that jazz is God's chosen music, because God is the greatest of all improvisers. Consider the Genesis creation story: God had an idea, a theme, a place to start and maybe a place to end, but the "getting there" is improvised. God is tinkering with creation throughout the scriptures and through the Holy Spirit to this day and beyond.

Our God is a God who frustrates the designs of the nations, defeats the plans of the peoples – creation is still being improvised. Like creation, the best jazz is often unfinished, open to co-creation, shot with contest and dialogue. We need to learn to improvise. I am not interested in a religious practice or experience that is the same every time – I want to be surprised, to not know where a spiritual path may lead, to have spiritual discipline and also to be open to what happens when two or more "players" go off on an improvisational journey to God knows where. That's where the "aha" moments in religion come from – not from a faith that is predictable, rigid, static and steeped in fear. Like jazz, healthy religion is not for those with high control needs – it unleashes sensibilities that cut against the grain of hierarchies and elites. It is about joy and energy and liberation.

All Saints is a church that swings. A church filled with joy and exuberance, a church that is unafraid to face the pain of the past and the sins of our nation. A jazz church. And eight times each year we are literally a jazz church, at Jazz Vespers. This past October we begin our 22nd year of Jazz Vespers at All Saints; we celebrate decades of amazing musicianship, of virtuoso performances, of holy inspiration and just plain hot music. It all began with the vision of a parishioner, Steve Rowe, who dreamed of bringing his experiences of jazz in church to All Saints, and continues today with our composer in residence, Bill Cunliffe, assisted by me and Melissa Hayes. Our sanctuary has been blessed by Kamasi Washington, Walter Smith III, Russel Ferrante and Bob Mintzer, Billy Childs, Alan Broadbent and Shelly Berg, Alan Pasqua, Barbara Morrison, Bill Cunliffe and Holly Hofmann, the amazing Claytons - John, Jeff and Gerald, and too many first-class musicians to list.

Why do so many great players honor us with their presence? They tell us that they love to play in our beautiful space; they love the passion and the attention of both serious jazz lovers and folks who are just discovering the music; they love the opportunity to play without the distraction of a talking and drinking crowd. No surprise there. But so many of them also tell us that they love playing in the context of a vespers service, with prayers and short meditations and the sense that this is a holy enterprise, and not just a jazz concert in a church.

So enough talk: Thelonious Monk is credited with saying that "talking about music is like dancing about architecture." Come to our next service on Sunday, March 17, and be part of the Great Improvisation. And swing in church.

2/11/2019 update