

JAZZ IMPROVISATION IN AMOS
A Biblical thesis on jazz worship in the church

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*"You strum on your harps like David and improvise
on musical instruments." (Amos 6:5 NIV)*

"JAZZ IS THE DEVIL'S MUSIC!"

This was a common belief and expression that was prevalent in the church when I was a child. I can remember vividly being scolded by my mother for "banging on the piano" as I innocently tried to simulate the intricate polyrhythmic expressions I heard on late night jazz radio and at home. My mother was the church musician and my father was a former jazz nightclub singer.

**"GOSPEL MUSIC IS GOD'S MUSIC AND
ALL THAT OTHER STUFF IS WORLDLY!"**

My dilemma, growing up in the church as a uniquely gifted young Christian musician, was my God given appreciation and development as a jazz musician and "improvisationalist." I learned to respect jazz as African-American classical music. It was a beautiful gift from God which allowed one to express through music the emotions of life and the spirituality of the inner man, where God's spirit interacts with man's spirit to strengthen the inner man. (1)

In the church, jazz is a highly misunderstood musical art form, where it finds little acceptance in the context of religious worship and continues to be identified as secular music with no spiritual value in the Christian's life. This is especially true for the African-American church, where jazz has deep spiritual and aesthetic roots.

Noted black author W.E.B. DuBois had this to say about the music of African-Americans:

"Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God Himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk song, the rhythmic cry of the slave, stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human expression born this side of the seas. It has been and is half despised and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people." (2)

JAZZ IS CLASSICAL? YES.

Wynton Marsalis acclaimed for his performances of both European classical music and African-American classical music states:

Jazz is the nobility of the race put into sound; it is the sensuousness of romance in our dialect; it is the picture of the people in all glory in all their glory." (3)

In most black churches, European classical music receives wide acceptance as a vehicle of religious expression of one's faith during the Sunday morning worship service. I have witnessed on numerous occasions many a young college music student returning to their home church on Sunday delicately playing a piece by Mozart or Bach on the piano as an expression of religious worship. However, these same students would receive scorn if they played a spiritual written by Duke Ellington or an improvisational spiritual composition of their own.

DR. KING ADVOCATED JAZZ

Most black Christians are not aware of the deep appreciation that Rev., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had of jazz. This was demonstrated by his words during the opening address of the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival:

God has wrought many things out of oppression. He has endowed his creatures with the capacity to create, and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs of sorrow and joy that have allowed man to cope with his environment in many different situations.

Jazz speaks of life, the blues tell the stories of life's difficulties, and if you think about it for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is a triumphant music. Modern Jazz has continued in this tradition, singing the songs of a more complicated urban existence. When life itself offers no order and meaning from the sounds of the earth which flow through his instruments.

It is no wonder that so much of the search for identity among American Negroes was championed by jazz musicians. Long before the modern essayists and scholars wrote of 'racial identity' as a problem for a multi-racial world, musicians were returning in their roots to affirm that which was stirring within their souls.

Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from the music. It has strengthened us with its powerful rhythms when courage began to fall. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down.

And now, Jazz is exported to the world. For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America, there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved.

Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith. In music, especially this broad category called jazz, there is a stepping stone towards all of these."

(4)

DAVID - AN EARLY JAZZMAN!

The Prophet Amos makes reference to improvisation on musical instruments in Amos

6:5, where strumming of the harp is likened to David. David was the chief musician for King Saul's court and was known for the soothing effect his music had on the king. (5)

This passage of scripture implies that improvisation was a style of music used by David, a man after God's own heart, who was anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. (6) David, the author of many of the most cherished Psalms and one of the great spiritual leaders in the Old Testament was, as implied by Amos, an "improvisationalist." Improvisation is the musical style emulated by jazz. So David, through a broad sense of interpretation, was a jazz musician.

Josephus, the noted Jewish historian, states David "*composed song and hymns to God, of several sorts of meter; some of those which he made were tri-meters and some were pentameters.*" (7) The historians certainly implies the David's music had poly-rhythmic qualities, as does jazz.

Josephus also writes that David "*made instruments of music, and taught the Levites to sing hymns to God, both on the called the Sabbath-day, and on other festivals.*" (8) The historian confirms that David's improvisational music was played on the Sabbath-day, or in its modern cultural equivalent, Sunday.

Josephus describes the instruments of David at thus:

"The viol was an instrument of ten strings; it was played upon with a bow; the psaltery has twelve musical notes, and was played upon by fingers; the cymbals were broad and large instruments, and were made of brass. And so much shall suffice to be spoken by us about these instruments with their nature." (9)

JAZZ, A PART OF WORSHIP SERVICE

In conclusion, African-American classical music, or Jazz, is an improvisational art form that should be accepted, as is European classical music, as a means of religious expression in the worship service. Amos implies that improvisation was a musical expression demonstrated by David on the Sabbath-day. David, as an "improvisationalist", has provided us with a biblical model for acceptance of jazz in religious worship. Jazz should certainly not be condemned as a secular music only, but deserves acceptance as a vehicle for true Christian worship expression.

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