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The Jazz Church

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Introduction: I like Jazz, I've learned from jazz

I like jazz. Not so much smooth jazz, or the modal jazz popular among many modern jazz artists, but the progressive jazz fusion of the 1970s and early 1980s. This jazz was inspired by Miles Davis' ground-breaking albums of the early 60s—*Bitches' Brew*, *Sketches of Spain*, and *In a Silent Way*—which spawned the great jazz artists I fell in love with.

These artists include some of the greatest jazz musicians alive today: Chick Corea (founder of the band, Return to Forever), Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter (founders of Weather Report), and John McLaughlin (a great guitarist who founded the Mahavishnu Orchestra). I also loved many of the musicians who played with these groundbreakers, such as bassist Stanley Clarke, guitarist Al Di Meola, and violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, who have now become great artists in their own right.

I also fell in love with many of the jazz musicians who were in the stable of producer Creed Taylor's CTI label—artists such as guitarist George Benson (before crossing over into pop music), bassist Ron Carter, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, and flautist Hubert Laws. They all played on each other's albums, meaning that while they were solo artists with their own albums, they basically were a jazz supergroup.

I not only loved jazz, but I've come to realize that I've learned life lessons from my countless hours of listening to jazz, lessons I've applied to leading a church. What I've learned is that we can learn a lot from jazz about how to revitalize our churches.

Churches Are Like Music:

Sixteen years ago I had a conversation with our church's music director, Bruce Smith (an extremely talented jazz pianist who is adept at playing every form of music, from classic traditional to folk, blues, R&B, and contemporary Christian), about the relationship between churches and the music they play in worship. We realized that churches are often structured much like the music they either tend to play, or their members tend to listen to. Each form of music has its own structural rules and principles that seem to transfer to the operation of their churches.

For instance, many mainline churches are "classical" churches who cherish traditional mainline, classical hymns and choir anthems. Typically these churches are structured like classical music itself. As with a symphony orchestra they have a conductor (the senior or solo pastor), first chairs (music director, education director, and board members), second chairs (teachers, property committee members, and trustees), and the rest of the orchestra (the congregation). In this kind of church, everything has its place and time, and like an orchestra the church pushes towards

uniformity and clarity of role. The conductor's role is to provide order, clarity, and discipline, while those in the orchestra perform their roles with competence and precision.

Many of the newer, evangelical churches are what I call "top-40" churches. They are structured much like popular, top-40 radio stations. Just as these stations are abandoned by listeners if its music doesn't stay up-to-date, these churches know that they need to crank out the hits, homiletically, musically, and programmatically, or they will be quickly abandoned. These are the most marketing sensitive churches, agonizing over how to reach a young audience between the ages of 18 and 34, a key demographic group.

There are also "folk music" churches. These are often smaller churches that love small-church relationships, and are called to serve the community in basic ways, offering food, a place to nest, and friendly faces. What I call "country music" churches can look similar, but their members may be very much like characters from a country song, struggling with divorce, joblessness, and other tribulations. The churches offer bits of wisdom and support to get each other through the week.

The "rhythm & blues" church struggles with many of the same issues as the country church, and tries to move people through their turmoils by offering uplifting, emotional music and sermons that encourage people to overcome the blues by moving to a new, God-inspired beat.

The newest form of church is the "alternative music" church, the emergent church. Much like alternative music, which interweaves newer musical themes with more traditional "classic" rock themes, these churches are willing to explore new ideas and methods, while recovering many more ancient church traditions. These churches cater to a much smaller, younger, urban crowd that are comfortable bringing together the old and the new.

But my interest is in jazz, and with understanding the nature of "jazz" churches.

Pastoring a Jazz Church

The church I pastor, Calvin Presbyterian Church, has become a jazz church, both to our great benefit and sometimes to our detriment and frustration. The benefit is that our church is very creative, while still maintaining traditional roots. Walking into our church and seeing our sanctuary, a visitor would probably think it was a traditional church, albeit with many artistic touches such as colorful banners, theatrical lighting, and a sophisticated array of instrumentation. Operationally, it would also look like a traditional church, with typical boards and committees. But as in jazz, it's beyond the apparent that you find the creativity and nuance. Our structure is traditional, but our operations within that structure are creative and innovative. We are not afraid to move in our own unique directions, or to explore new ideas. We're not afraid to improvise, which means we will take risks and experiment, without fear of failure. And to accomplish this, we give people the freedom to act on their own initiative.

The frustration is that we can prize creative initiative so much that those who are detail-focused can feel overwhelmed by the freedom we give them. We may not train people as well in using children's Sunday School or VBS curriculum. We might not be as detailed and particular in communicating how to accomplish something. We try to create room for originality, but for those who want clarity and order, it can feel to loosey-goosey.

Despite those limitations, we think that the possibility of being creative and innovative outweighs the frustrations that come with freedom.

Lessons from Jazz:

So what particular lessons gleaned from jazz relate directly to creating a healthy church? There are four that I want to share.

The first is that of *melody and improvisation*. The great creativity of jazz is a structured creativity. The best jazz songs are grounded in a clear melody that can open to great exploration of new possibilities. These jazz tunes, whether borrowed from popular music or original to jazz, have catchy melodies that can be further explored improvisationally beyond what's apparent. They lend themselves to sets where individual artists can spontaneously integrate textures, sounds, and counter-melodies that enhance the original melodies, all while remaining rooted in the original melody.

Great jazz artists are grounded in traditional music, and their technique is often as good or greater than any contemporary rock or classical artist. But they also know how to demonstrate something Pablo Picasso is said to have uttered: "Learn the rules like a pro so that you can break them like an artist."

How does this apply to a church? Our church is very much grounded in our tradition. We've worked hard on understanding and being grounded in our Reformed, Presbyterian heritage, but we don't let that constrain us so that we remain *merely* Presbyterian. Within our context we feel free to be spontaneous. For example, I've been trained in a typical Presbyterian preaching style, which can mean preaching educated sermons, thoughtfully worked out ahead of time in a written manuscript. But I also allow space for improvisation, much like a Pentecostal preacher who leaves lots of room for the Holy Spirit. I think things through ahead of time, but allow myself to explore spontaneous ideas and stories that my pop up as I preach. I don't stay behind a pulpit, but move around. I will use all sorts of tools, from presentation slides to object lessons to stories to movie and YouTube clips to teaching practices such as prayer techniques. I give myself room to improvise and explore, and if I preach a dud,... that's okay because something else may work the next week.

We are similar in how we might do communion. While the structure usually is the same, we change how we offer it. Sometimes people come forward. Most times they remain in their pews. Despite Presbyterians typically offering grape juice, we offer both grape juice and wine. Our words of institution change weekly, and are usually related to the sermon, weaving the homiletical theme into the invitation to communion.

We have a worship structure, but we are willing to explore new and different ways of doing the particulars so that the melody of worship remains the same, but the exploration changes. I'll say more about this in discussing lesson four. Programmatically we are willing to try new and different things, and even are willing to fail, because we know that the exploration of new ideas can also lead to great successes.

The second lesson I learned is that of *solo and support*. In jazz you can neither be a prima donna, nor a shrinking violet. There are times when you must step forward and shine, no matter how limited your skill might be, and others when you must step back and support, not matter how great your skill is. I mentioned before the jazz producer Creed Taylor. In the mid-1970s he created a stable of very talented musicians, all of whom played on each others' albums. What I enjoyed about all their albums was that their support playing—bass lines, rhythm guitars, melodic piano—was just as critical as their dynamic solos. The support had to be great to lift up the solo, and the solo had to be great to build on the support. Great jazz artists love the solos of others, and you can often see it in their smiles as they listen to each other.

A great example of this idea of solo and support comes from one of jazz's greatest contemporary bassists, Victor Wooten. Each summer he holds jazz camps for performers of all ages and proficiencies, amateurs and professional, at Wooten Woods Music and Nature Camp in Tennessee. A recent article in the *Long Island Pulse Magazine* describes Wooten's guidance to students: "As the jam proceeded, Wooten spoke into a microphone, 'Do you see how we're all listening to each other. No one is overplaying or stepping on someone else's part. This is musical courtesy. Respect what's around you.' The groove rolled on as the assembly of students gawked in awe. You could see the inspiration rising in their faces... 'Just lose yourself in the music. Forget about you,' Wooten said, as he bopped to the beat. 'Always listen to what's happening around you.' His voice rang out like a prophet."¹

Jazz churches understand this theme of not stepping on someone else's part, listening to each other, and forgetting about "you." So many churches (and pastors) act as though the only real soloist is the preacher, who must be involved and at the forefront of everything. I certainly was taught in this tradition, and my models were pastors who acted like the conductors of an orchestra. But I wanted to be jazz.

In a jazz church, the pastor and everyone else knows when it is their role to be front-and-center, and when it is their role to step back, support, and listen. When I am leading an activity, or preaching, or teaching, or doing something that requires my direct leadership, I take charge. But when we put on a play, or a concert, or an activity led by our associate pastor, drama director, associate pastor, or member, I take a backseat intentionally, telling them that it is their program and that they need to be seen as the leader, not me. So, for example, during our Vacation Bible School this past summer, one of my main roles was to sit in the

back and run the video and sound for the opening and closing songs. And I was gloriously happy. My role was simply to support, not to be seen.

Often, when we do plays, I'm not there intentionally the opening night (unless my kids are in it) so that drama and music director won't defer to me. I want our drama and music folks to be seen as the leaders and the voice of the church in welcoming everyone. When our associate pastor runs a retreat or a class, and I'm there, I take a backseat to her so that people look to her for guidance. I may speak up or offer my thoughts, but I make it clear that she is the one in charge. I know when to solo and when to support.

A third lesson is to *play on the mistakes*. I believe that one of the biggest problems in many of our churches is that we seek too much order. We want everything to go just right. And so we get frustrated when mistakes are made. We want our worship and programs to go on without a hitch. Jazz expects hitches.

A huge lesson I learned from our music director, Bruce Smith, is something he said is standard in jazz: if you hit the wrong note, hit it two more times intentionally and either build a theme off of the mistake, or explore the mistake, turning it into part of the song. In classical music, or even top-40 music, a mistake can detract from the music, and too many mistakes can degrade the song. In jazz, mistakes can be explored and turned into positives.

So, in jazz, risks can be taken because mistakes and failures aren't destructive. In a church it means that a failure isn't necessarily a failure, but an opportunity to modify the program to make it better. Mistakes in worship become opportunities to inject humor and humility.

An example: a number of years ago a church researcher attended one of our worship services to observe what we do. She told me afterwards that what impressed her most was how we responded to a problem in worship. Our seminary intern was doing the children's sermon, and wanted the kids to listen to a song. Unfortunately, the sanctuary CD player, which had been plugged into the sound system, wouldn't play the CD. So she asked our music director if he knew how to play it. He thought for a moment, and said, "I don't think I know it." This was the point at which things could have crumbled. But how we responded turned the mistake into a joy.

The intern looked at me and asked, "What do we do?" I shouted out, "Well, there has to be a CD player somewhere in the church. Does anyone know where one is?" Someone shouted out, "I saw one in the nursery." I said, "Someone go get it?" A person in the back ran out to get it. We looked at our music director and said, "Do you have any 'waiting for a CD player' songs you can play." I think that he played either a soft jazz version of Pink Floyd's *Time*, or maybe the theme from the game show *Jeopardy*.

When the person ran back into the sanctuary with the CD player, it took time to find the closest plug to the front. Eventually we got it plugged in, miked up, and ready to go. The intern then did her sermon, and included in her lesson how the problems in that sermon showed God at work. The mistakes became part of her

lesson to the kids. Adults and children were all laughing and smiling so much that it really added to the children's sermon, making it better than it ever would have been if all had worked out according to plan.

Playing on the mistakes has a wide-ranging application. It requires looking at ministry from a perspective other than the "success/failure" perspective so many in modern American life have. Playing on mistakes looks at ministry more from an "explore/learn" perspective, allowing us to discover new possibilities from mistakes that mistakenly work.

A final jazz lesson is that *jazz integrates*. Jazz musicians typically don't care what a person's ethnicity, age, background, or even instruments are. Jazz, as a musical form, looks to bring together differences because it knows that diversity breeds creativity. Most great jazz artists seek out those who are different so that they can explore and create new forms of music. For example in the late 1970s, the jazz guitar virtuoso John McLaughlin, formed a group called Shakti, which brought together his western-influenced acoustic guitar with Asian Indian artists as they tried to create a whole new genre of Eastern-tinged jazz. Or you have guitarist Al Di Meola, coming from an electric rock/jazz fusion background, creating acoustic music with world-renowned Spanish flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia. Jazz pursues differences because creative diversity spawns something unique.

A problem of modern church is that whatever form we gravitate towards, traditional or contemporary, it tends breed homogeneity. It's almost as though we are afraid to integrate anything new that could create something unique in our church and worship. As a result, our churches tend to be homogenous in terms of ethnicity, age, socioeconomic levels, and more. I certainly don't want to paint my own church as a melting pot of different ethnicities and the rest. We still reflect our surrounding suburban culture, which is predominantly white. Yet our congregation varies widely in age, political affiliations, theological perspectives, and other metrics.

We try to be integrational in everything we do, and this is especially true in worship. As I said above, we are Presbyterian in our heritage, but we have integrated elements from a wide variety of traditions. Our influences include Taizé, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Episcopalian, Orthodox, and Celtic traditions and elements. We incorporate different art forms and colors in our sanctuary. We will sing contemporary hymns with lyrics projected on a screen, and traditional hymns sung out of a hymnal. Our music ranges from traditional to contemporary to jazz to folk to anything else we think is appropriate for that particular service, in response to the scripture for the day. We have visited a variety of other churches from different traditions to see what they do, and have deliberately integrated elements from those churches to enhance ours.

We also take this same integrational approach to the rest of church. In decision-making, we really do try to integrate different perspectives. Our boards and committees don't start with proposed motions and argue them out. We start with recommendations and let the dialogue of elders and committee members form

the motion. We integrate different points of view, including prayerfully seeking God's voice. In our programs, we are willing to look at what other churches, or even non-church organizations, do, and seek how to bring them into what we do in our own unique ways. The whole point is that we look to integrate different ideas, perspectives, and approaches. Like jazz, we aren't looking to be church the way it's always been, but to be church the way we are uniquely called to be.

The point of all of this is that there is another way of exploring how we can be a church. To learn it, it might be worthwhile to listen to some jazz.

¹ Brian Kelly, "Keep Going, You're Not Lost..." *Long Island Pulse Magazine*, June 25, 2013 (internet version: <http://www.lipulse.com/art-music/article/keep-going-youre-not-lost/>).