



SEEING GOD IN JAZZ

BY WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

I AM A GREAT LOVER OF JAZZ. IT ENTERED MY SOUL AROUND THE SAME TIME GOSPEL MUSIC AND SACRED HYMNS BEGAN TO GIVE SHAPE TO THE CONTOURS OF MY FEELINGS AND DREAMS. MY PARENTS, LIKE MOST OF THE CHURCH FOLKS WHO RAISED ME, UPHELD A STRICT SEPARATION BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR SOUNDS. I NEVER REALLY HEARD THE DIFFERENCE THE WAY THEY HEARD IT. ALL THE MUSIC OF MY YOUTH, BOTH IN AND OUT OF CHURCH, WAS BLUES-DRENCHED, JAZZ-LADEN, AND JAZZ-GESTURING—OR SHOULD I SAY GOSPEL-DRENCHED, GOSPEL-LADEN, AND GOSPEL-GESTURING.

LIKE SO MANY OTHER THEOLOGIANS BROUGHT UP IN THE CHURCH, I CANNOT IMAGINE THINGS THEOLOGICAL APART FROM THINGS ARTISTIC. IT WAS NOT ONLY LISTENING TO THE MUSIC BUT ALSO THE VISUAL EXPERIENCE OF WATCHING PEOPLE



playing, singing, and dancing that helped introduce me to God. If I listened carefully and looked intently I could catch glimpses of something not definable, certainly not quantifiable, but nonetheless actually present. It might be called the work of the Holy Spirit, the operations of grace on the human creature.

I prefer to think of it as being seen more than seeing, that is, being in the presence of a God who sees us and allows us to give voice through our bodies to the depths of the human life that God has created. The “gift of expression” is probably too small a phrase to capture what I see as musicians give flight to their art. The human creature is a profound mystery, especially in its visibility. Christian theology has always been plagued with the danger of a terrible one-sidedness in which we place mystery on the divine side of things and forget the mystery of creaturely life itself. The incarnate life of God shown to us in Jesus Christ challenges that one-sidedness.

In Jesus, God did not remove the complexity of the divine life but became a companion for us, inviting us to live freely in the absolute unfathomable depths of grace and divine love. The Son of God’s life introduced us to the awesome complexity of the human creature itself. We are much more than we can grasp, understand, or certainly control, each of us and all of us together. What I have learned by listening to and watching so many musicians, especially jazz



musicians, is what it means to give witness to that complexity.

Certainly jazz musicians are not the only musicians that might be singled out. I could add a whole host of other types of musicians from a wide variety of cultures and artistic traditions. But I think of jazz musicians because they have found their way to the front of the camera and the canvas of so many visual artists who have captured beautiful angles into their lives and art. But what they have also done in ways quite astounding has been to capture glimpses into the depths of human existence in the presence of God. I especially appreciate both photographs and paintings of musicians in artistic flight.

I love this picture of **BILLIE HOLIDAY**, which is part of the legendary collections of photos done by William P. Gottlieb. The expression on her face reminds me of so many other singers I have watched sing and make productive use of their anguish and pain. Holiday had the perfect voice for jazz, not overly powerful, not a pure sound, but one that was deeply human. Her life story was majestically complex, and her music expresses the density of a life composed of twists and turns. This photo conveys an imperial mournfulness focused by the demands placed on a body to find the right note. Her extended neck, closed eyes, and wide-open mouth all reflect the hard work of singing something right. This photo always reminds me of the many church



women I grew up hearing and watching as they contorted their faces reaching for the notes their minds could hear and expressing the emotions their hearts were determined to set free. There is something so biblical, indeed godly, about the face of a woman singing out of anguish, even if the anguish is a distant memory leaving only its imprint in the expressive work of singing. I always see that imprint when I look at this photo of Billie Holiday.

Another favorite of mine is the classic photo of a young **JOHN COLTRANE**. This face-on photo of Coltrane as he is in a meditative posture suggests the powerful future that will unfold for this young black man. The photographer captured Coltrane at that particular place of translation when his thoughts were posed to extend themselves through his instrument. This posture seems to be implicit in all of his music: thoughtful, penetrating, profound, reaching deep within himself, yet reaching out for more than he can quickly grasp. It echoes for me so much of the process of serious theological reflection. This photo of Coltrane with his horn is like unto a theologian at work or a preacher preparing to preach: soon thought must be given flight in voice, word, and action. The small space between his mouth and his horn mirrors the tight space between imagination and proclamation.

Along this same line is the beautiful photo of **LOUIS ARMSTRONG**. I love this



photo because it shows us Armstrong at work. The visual instruction here is breathtaking. This is an older Armstrong, his age marked by both his face and hands. Yet I cannot look at this photo without immediately seeing a host of preachers with white shirt and white handkerchief, royal sweat rolling down their faces as they preached long and hard, bringing a congregation to its feet. Armstrong preaches through his horn, his face alive and sure, seeing the near but looking beyond the present to new possibilities for life.

I also appreciate the way some visual artists are able to capture sound in sight through their renditions of jazz musicians at play. **ROMARE BEARDEN** was a master of the musical visual. When I began teaching, the first piece of art I hung on the wall of my office was the Bearden piece above on the left. Bearden's genius begins with his colors. When I look at the colors he uses, I hear the music. Beyond color, this master of collage perfectly depicts musicians. The guitar player, centrally positioned, is in musical flight as he leans toward the band, pressing to hear each player. He is no solo act. The sax and piano players lean toward each other, also gesturing the important work of listening. Behind them is the trumpeter reaching over all to be heard. The drummer and bass player look as though they are joined to their instruments and each other. This is indeed the truth of an effective rhythm

section. They are the time keepers, the foundation on which all others build. They must be as one. Bearden's work here (and other pieces) invites us to hear the music.

Churches could learn much from reflecting on a jazz band. Here are a group of people who work very hard at listening, yet give up nothing of themselves in that process, but in fact only gain a true sense of themselves in the common task of making music, producing sound that makes a central statement that exists only through the constitutive performances of each musician. The Bearden pieces I love all share this exquisite quality of showing the many driving toward the one—the one sound, and the one ecstasy of playing well. I love the way he places musicians in very tight spaces reflecting the real world of most jazz club stages with their small spaces fit for big sounds. Musicians live and play in tight quarters, which is not only a matter of the given but also a matter of choice. They need closeness to hear. Would that Christians could grasp this basic truth of our witness: We don't simply need each other, we need to be close together in order to truly hear the words we should be saying to the world and, equally important, to hear more clearly the voice of the world, in its pain, suffering, and longing.

Jazz musicians in the midst of playing often gesture toward new possibilities, making visible the reality of hope.

It is a moment of transfiguration. As we watch them play it is as though an in-breaking has occurred and who we thought they were and we were gives way to a new revealing. My dear wife had an uncle, **STANLEY PATRICK**, who was a school teacher and also a serious jazz pianist. Uncle Stanley grew up in the church at the time of the strict separation of music, gospel on the kingdom of light side and jazz belonging to another less honorable realm. Yet he defied that segregation and became one of Montreal's most well-known jazzmen.

I keep this photo of him in my office because of the sheer serenity he exudes. As I look at it I can hear the piano playing, and then what often draws my eyes is his reflection hovering above him as he plays. It is another self born of the joining of musician and instrument. Wherever he is at this moment of playing I want to join him there, at this place where peace abides and we are more than our histories suggest. Jazz musicians expose a messianic secret, that deliverance from one-dimensional visions of life have come to us in the elegant act of performing. What is inescapable to me is the ways in which such photos and paintings of them gesture toward the true moment of deliverance, the incarnation of God. ■