The Evolution of Sacred Jazz as Reflected in the Music of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane and Recognized Contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists

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THE EVOLUTION OF SACRED JAZZ AS REFLECTED IN THE MUSIC OF MARY LOU WILLIAMS, DUKE ELLINGTON, JOHN COLTRANE AND RECOGNIZED CONTEMPORARY SACRED JAZZ ARTISTS

By

Angelo Versace

A DOCTORAL ESSAY

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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THE EVOLUTION OF SACRED JAZZ AS REFLECTED IN THE MUSIC OF MARY LOU WILLIAMS, DUKE ELLINGTON, JOHN COLTRANE AND RECOGNIZED CONTEMPORARY SACRED JAZZ ARTISTS

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The Evolution of Sacred Jazz as Reflected in the
Music of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John
Coltrane and Recognized Contemporary Sacred Jazz
Artists

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Since the mid 1950s, musicians have mixed religious text and music with the tradition of jazz. The result, called Sacred Jazz, is inextricably linked to the historical context around which it was produced. This paper aims to specifically define Sacred Jazz as well as discuss the lives and efforts of many Sacred Jazz pioneers, including Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane. It will also cover contemporary Sacred Jazz artists (Deanna Witkowski and Ike Sturm among others) and current trends which have inevitably resulted.

To achieve this, several chapters will be included. First, an in-depth look at the term ‘Sacred Jazz’ arriving at the musical and social characteristics that define it. Second, historical and biographical sections which detail the lives and music of the plethora of Sacred Jazz artists whose efforts have resulted in the movement. The project will conclude with an analysis of an original Sacred Jazz suite written by the author, entitled “God’s Character: A Sacred Jazz Homage.” This project is intended to provide a scholarly survey of the idiom with the objective of acknowledging the historical and musical contributions in the field of Sacred Jazz.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

The progression of jazz styles from Early Jazz through Bebop provided the soundtrack to American life from the early 1900s up until the late 1940s Rock Movement. In the mid 1950s a new development called Sacred Jazz appeared which combined America’s important ties to religion and hymnody with musical elements observed in jazz (i.e. swing, improvisation, blues, etc.).

There is no question that the genre of jazz owes much to the rise and development of Black Gospel music. When the Virginia Assembly of 1664 decreed that it was possible for black slaves to be Christians, theological and musical instruction from the white church to the newly developed black church began. However, the music as seen in the African American Church was significantly different from its Anglo-American counterpart. Africans in the new world did not completely forget their cultural and/or musical past. Rhythmic patterns from early African church music have been traced back to West African cultures. In fact, early jazz musicians were directly influenced from the rhythmic and blues elements seen in Gospel churches.¹

There are many similarities between gospel and jazz. Musically, the influence of blues and swing rhythms are pervasive in both genres. Also, since its conception, jazz

and gospel music have shared many harmonic similarities. Furthermore, in the 1950s, some musicians decided to take jazz back to its blues-oriented, gospel roots, including Horace Silver (“The Preacher”), Jimmy Smith (*The Sermon!*), Charles Mingus (“Better Get it in Your Soul”), Cannonball Adderly (*Mercy, Mercy, Mercy*). Conversely, several gospel musicians stepped into the secular jazz world. Two excellent examples of this include Gospel artists Rosetta Tharp and Mahalia Jackson. Finally, the spiritual intent that drives Gospel music is the same intent that inspires true Sacred Jazz artists. It could be argued that the extra-musical qualities of albums like *A Love Supreme* and *Second Sacred Concert* evokes a spiritual quality that transcends the notes themselves.

A distinction needs to be made, however, between Sacred Jazz and Gospel. As Gospel has developed, several elements have emerged which distinguished it from other styles of music. Unlike Sacred Jazz, almost all Traditional Gospel music has some sort of political component to it. Secondly, several basic musical elements differ between Gospel and Sacred Jazz. Gospel music does not include a focus on regular, instrumental improvisations, while Sacred Jazz does. Also, the swing rhythm inherent in both gospel and jazz is interpreted differently by their respective drummers. When a swing feel is present in gospel, it is common for the triplet feel to be supported by a repetitive backbeat created by the kick and the snare. Whereas in jazz, the fluid nature of swing does not

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3. See Discography.


5. Ibid.
require such a heavy use of the bass drum.\(^6\) Finally, Contemporary Gospel music has reached a level of mainstream popularity that Sacred Jazz has not. Contemporary Gospel artists like Donny McClurkin, Kirk Franklin, Yolanda Adams, and Fred Hammond have each had platinum selling albums.\(^7\) Sacred Jazz Artists have achieved anything close to this level of success. This lack of popularity of Sacred Jazz, as compared to Contemporary Gospel, is most likely the reason very little scholarly work is available on the topic.

\textit{Need For Study}

In the early 1950s, several jazz musicians began to mix religion and jazz. Ed Summerlin was the first to compose an extended jazz piece intended for worship. His album \textit{Liturgical Jazz} (1959) featured “Requiem for Mary Jo,” as well as many other Sacred Jazz originals.\(^8\) Other prominent jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, John Coltrane, Dave Brubeck, and Vince Guaraldi began to follow suit by composing, performing, or recording their own Sacred Jazz works. It was inevitable that the prominence of these aforementioned artists would generate several separate and artist-specific resources that characterize their venture into sacred music. However, to my knowledge, there appears to be a clear gap in research, as no single scholarly

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\(^6\) Mick Berry and Jason Gianni, \textit{The Drummer’s Bible: How to Play Every Drum Style from Afro-Cuban to Zydeco} (Tucson, Arizona: See Sharp Press, 2004), 99, 115-118.


publication clearly and thoroughly outlines the contributions to Sacred Jazz during this
time period in America – mid 1950s to early 1970s.

In light of this it is not surprising that current contributors to the genre of Sacred
Jazz also appear to escape notice or are not being sufficiently acknowledged. One
element of an emerging artist in Sacred Jazz is Ike Sturm, a young bass player/composer
living in New York. In 2007, Sturm released his album *Jazz Mass*, which garnered
virtually unanimous positive reviews in such publications as *All About Jazz*, *Downbeat*,
*JazzTimes*, and *Jazz.com*. Unfortunately, Sturm has had very little written about him
from any source other than those album review sites just mentioned. Deanna Witkowski,
another Sacred Jazz artist who seems to be spearheading the movement, released her
album *From This Place* in 2008 which featured jazz giants John Pattituci and Peter
Eldridge. The majority of written sources concerning Witkowski are informal online
articles often written in an interview style.

This essay is intended to provide a focused study of Sacred Jazz and outlines the
work of Sacred Jazz artists who gave rise to the movement. Included are many
recordings which have not previously been mentioned in academic sources. An extensive
definition of the term ‘Sacred Jazz’ will be developed by separating the phrase ‘sacred
jazz’ to recognize what makes music ‘sacred and what defines music as ‘jazz.’ It also
seems appropriate to observe the long history that jazz and gospel music have shared in
order to analyze the qualities which distinguish Sacred Jazz and Black Gospel music.
Newer additions to the Sacred Jazz movement are showcased by bringing attention to
several recent recordings and performances, and by including quotes from interviews
conducted with Ike Sturm, Deanna Witkowski, and Lance Bryant. There were many
trends which became obvious throughout the course of my research. They are presented in both the historic and contemporary Sacred Jazz chapters. Moreover, the last chapter of this doctoral essay will be devoted to my original Sacred Jazz suite, entitled “God’s Character: A Sacred Jazz Homage”.

To this author’s knowledge, no other single publication or material offers the focus which is presented in this project. Certainly, individual publications exist which detail the sacred efforts of the aforementioned musicians (Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, etc.), but no one scholastic resource attempts to describe the collective influence of so many artists with regards to Sacred Jazz. Also, since very few publications deal in depth with the newer Sacred Jazz artists (Ike Sturm, Deanna Witkowski, Lance Bryant, Bill Carter, etc.), it is this author’s hope that this project will constitute pioneering research to fill that void.

**Methodology**

The limitations, resources, methodology and organizational plan for my doctoral essay follow. Essentially, the resources have been broken down into a few manageable categories: 1) books/online articles which detail the history of the Sacred Jazz tradition and defend its practice; 2) informal online articles and recordings that deal with Sacred Jazz musicians living today; and 3) interviews of the Sacred Jazz musicians that I consider to be pioneers of the genre.

The books and online articles describing the history of Sacred Jazz and defending its practice have certainly been chosen with care. For example, Tirro’s *Jazz, a History* covers jazz’s development in depth and is one of the best historical sources available. In regards to Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane, the sources I have
chosen are generally those that are most often quoted and/or cited by other books and articles. Furthermore, very few articles exist which clearly define Sacred Jazz or discuss its lengthy history in depth. Those which have been referenced, although not taken from scholarly journals, pull from a variety of other sources, and provide helpful insights from well-known musicians.

In order to incorporate the use of recordings into this project, it is essential to describe the process chosen to select the Sacred Jazz artists which were included. There were three criteria that I chose: 1) prominence; 2) artistry; and 3) body of work. Quite simply, prominent artists are often mentioned in various forms of media – i.e. books, articles, video documentaries, interviews, reviews, liner notes, etc. For the most part, the artists which have been included in this project are notable for this reason. The second criteria, artistry, is very important because not all performers and composers who have made contributions to the Sacred Jazz world are on the same musical level as their peers. Surface searches for ‘religious jazz’ or ‘Christian jazz’ yield some expected results – like any trend in music, there are many musicians who have contributed to the Sacred Jazz field who are not of the highest caliber artistically. Hence there are several examples of Sacred Jazz that have not earned a place in a project like this one. The musicians whom I devoted the most time to (Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, John Coltrane, Ike Sturm, Cyrus Chestnut, Lance Bryant, Deanna Witkowski, Eric Reed, etc.) are all recognized performers who exhibit a high level of artistry. The third criteria, the body of work of an individual, was also taken into consideration in order to determine if he/she should be included in the scope of this project. Composers like Dave Brubeck, Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, Chuck Marohnic, and Bill Carter have all written
dozens of Sacred Jazz pieces and/or published books or arrangements. The efforts of such individuals have made a significant impact on the Sacred Jazz movement, and thus can hardly be ignored.

It is worth mentioning that most musicians included in this project meet at least two of the above criteria. For instance, Oscar Peterson’s “Easter Suite” is briefly mentioned because Peterson is an influential jazz pianist at the top of his art, regardless of the fact that Peterson did not compose a large amount of sacred material. At the other end of the spectrum, a pianist like Bill Carter, who is nowhere near the caliber of a pianist like Oscar Peterson, is included because he is mentioned by his peers (i.e. Deanna Witkowski and Chuck Marohnic) and has produced a remarkable body of Sacred Jazz work. The above criteria also helped me to curb the amount of musicians and recordings I would mention in this essay. Suffice it to say, this project is not intended to be an exhaustive list of Sacred Jazz efforts throughout history, but is a thorough sampling of work from notable, accomplished musicians, some of whom have made multiple significant attributions to the Sacred Jazz movement.

As a jazz musician, I am aware that jazz recordings often incorporate a hymn or two into a broader selection of musical repertoire. But jazz albums such as these do not qualify for this type of research; rather, the albums selected are purposefully geared towards religion on the whole set themselves apart from recordings that merely include a single selection from the world of church music. It is the religious intent in an entire Sacred Jazz recording which sets it apart from a jazz album with only a single reference
to the Gospel idiom. Deanna Witkowski puts it succinctly: “If my intent in playing and singing is to glorify God, it’s going to be worshipful for me.”

In order to achieve the wide scope of information needed for a topic such as this, interviews with Witkowski, Sturm and Bryant were included as source material along with recordings, and informal articles extant. With regard to publications, my objectives were to read and/or listen to each resource and cull from them appropriately as I presented the material. While I was not certain how each artist would respond to the interview questions, I chose to host the interviews via email. In this way, the artists could craft their answers as they wished them to be printed and recorded for later use.

Upon receipt of each individual’s responses, I occasionally asked the interviewee to expound on a specific answer. No further questions were posed, and the original list of questions, as seen below, was presented to each interviewee in the same manner for each of them. The list of questions I asked included:

1) “If you were to define Sacred Jazz how would you do so? If you can, include in your answer what element(s) you think separate Sacred Jazz from the rest of jazz.”

This question was an essential part of this project. The first chapter deals with defining what Sacred Jazz is, and several quotes from the interviews are used.

2) “Describe your musical upbringings, and at what point did you decide to play/record Sacred Jazz?”

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There is still a lack of biographical information on Witkowski, Bryant, and Sturm. The interviews were intended to fill that gap.

3) “Do you consider Sacred Jazz necessarily Christian, and if so, why or why not?”

The vast majority of Sacred Jazz is Christian, and every artist I interviewed was a Christian Sacred Jazz artist. There are however, several examples of non-Christian Sacred Jazz, and I was curious to see the interviewees’ answers. As was expected, all of them answered that Sacred Jazz was not necessarily Christian.

4) “How did you approach making your album(s), both musically and spiritually?”

The answers I received for this question supplied information which generally tied directly into the biographical sections on each Sacred Jazz artist. As was intended, each artist divulged more personal information than what was represented in the liner notes for their recordings.

5) “Who are your major musical influences, and if applicable, what would you think their impact is on contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists?”

The purpose of this interview question was to connect Sacred Jazz musicians of the past to those of the present. I had hoped that the interviewees would pay homage to musicians that came before them, whether musically or non-musically. I initially anticipated that each artist would mention at least one of the three major pioneers (Williams, Ellington, or Coltrane), and I was correct in all of the cases but Ike Sturm’s. But given that Sturm is currently employed at St. Peter’s in New York, also known as “The Jazz Church” and coincidentally the same place where Reverend John Gensel worked for almost thirty years, it is probably not a stretch to assume that he has been influenced by Williams, Ellington, or Coltrane in some
small way. (Gensel presided over the funeral services for both Coltrane and Ellington)

6) “How would you describe the current trends in writing, performing and recording Sacred Jazz music?”

Given the limited available resources, I wanted to make sure I didn’t overlook an individual with important ties to Sacred Jazz. All three artists are certainly prolific in this field, and I hoped would be able to provide a coherent overview of the current Sacred Jazz genre.

7) “What is your overall sense of how the Sacred Jazz movement is developing?”

This question has a twofold purpose: a) to reveal each artist’s impression of development in the Sacred Jazz genre as a whole; and b) to provide information for any significant upcoming project that each artist might have.

(Note: a “catch-all” question was also included which asked each interviewee if he/she had anything to add. This final question was meant to extract some valuable and interesting information.)

Through the course of my research and interviews, it was my intention to give an accurate representation of the history of Sacred Jazz, as well as the current state and future of Sacred Jazz. No single source, to the author’s knowledge, has emerged that is intended as a thorough review of the field. The author has included an original Sacred Jazz composition as a representation of the genre. It is hoped that this document will contribute new insight into the Sacred Jazz movement.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The following literature review is organized and categorized in the same way that the chapters of the essay will be. The first few resources deal with the explanation of the term ‘Sacred Jazz.’ The next resources are dedicated solely to history of Sacred Jazz music which was recorded in the late 1950s through the early 1970s. The main resources for Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington and John Coltrane will follow. Following these are the resources that cover the current musicians and trends of Sacred Jazz. There are secondary sources, which, although useful for the purposes of an occasional quote, are of little further use in this section, hence, I will detail the primary sources only (for further reference see the Bibliography list).

There are several useful resources which relate to defining the term Sacred Jazz. Stephen Marini’s *Sacred Song in America: religion, Music, and Public Culture* not only details the plethora of religions in the United states, but eloquently explains what makes music sacred, and the roles of sacred music in the major religious practices in the United States. Marini’s book provides a well rounded look at emotionalism and meaning in music from several musicological and philosophical perspectives, as well as simple explanations of Black Church experiences and how they relate to the history of sacred music in America.¹⁰

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There are many sources which could be cited when defining the term ‘jazz.’ For the purposes of this project, several fairly recent articles and opinions sufficed. Wynton Marsalis’ article “What Jazz Is – and Isn’t,” 11 Greg Thomas’ article “Keyboardist Mike LeDonne: For jazz to mean a thing, it’s got to have blues and swing,” 12 and Stanley Crouch’s article “The Negro Aesthetic of Jazz” 13 represent the traditionalist viewpoint of jazz – namely, music must have blues and swing in order for it to be labeled as jazz; grouping other musics into the jazz genre disrespects the history of African struggle which produced jazz music.

Greg Thomas’ article “BAM or JAZZ: Why it Matters”14 and Dom Minasi’s “What is Jazz Now”15 reflect the opposing viewpoint on what jazz music is. Their articles respond to the traditionalist viewpoint, and the recent suggestion that jazz died in 1959.16 Minasi’s article is particularly of note because it provides interviews with several


prominent jazz musicians which reveal their beliefs as to what jazz is. These include trombonist Steve Swell, Pianist Hal Galper, guitarist Joe Giglio and guitarist Ed Cherry.

The best source showing the connection of the history of jazz to musical elements common in sacred settings is Frank Tirro’s *Jazz: a History*. As the title implies, the book covers the entire history of jazz beginning with the slave trade routes from the West African Ivory, Gold and Slave coasts and ending with jazz in the 1980s. From the beginning, Tirro voices his findings: Jazz is a music which “evolve[d] from the marriage of African-American sacred and secular music with American band traditions and instruments as well as with European harmonies and forms.” 17

Tirro’s thorough explanation provides insight into the gradual way sacred musical elements contributed to the formation of the genre of jazz. Starting with the slave trade, Tirro traces the origins of blues, swing feel, and improvisation from West African ground rhythms and Northern Islamic melodies, to field hollers, ring shouts, spirituals, Black Gospel Music, and finally, to Buddy Bolden and New Orleans Jazz. His explanation of how jazz became a secular music is the perfect segue into the careers of Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, and John Coltrane, artists who will be looked at in this essay, and who also happen to be covered extensively in Tirro’s book.

Eric Reed offers very insightful views on what Sacred Jazz is in his article “Eric Reed: Sacred Jazz.” Throughout jazz history, musicians have borrowed the musical elements present in gospel music. Musicians like Horace Silver and Bobby Timmons’ have written music which represents the blues-influenced genre of popular gospel music. Reed rightfully argues that the efforts of musicians like Silver and Timmons are very

different from the efforts of Sacred Jazz artists which represent the faith they live day to day. His point is that many jazz musicians make “impressions of gospel music…much like listening to dyed-in-the-wool jazz musicians play Latin or funk – without full immersion in the experience.” Reed’s argument helps make the distinction between those artists who perform and/or record complete sacred works and those who include a sacred hymn or spiritual album because the elements of the song fit the record line-up.

Sacred Jazz is not a genre, but a frame of mind or intent while the artist performs/records. Gospel music is also performed with sacred intent, and so, a separation must be made between jazz and gospel. Two primary sources were used to define the traits of gospel music in order to show its similarities and differences from jazz. The first was a documentary entitled “The Story of Gospel Music: The Power in the Voice.” This documentary traces the history of black gospel music from the beginning in West Africa throughout the United States until the late 1960s. Several important composers are discussed such as Charles Tinly, Charles Jones, Thomas Dorsey, and Lucy Cambell. Several important musicians are also discussed – i.e. Mahalia Jackson, Rosetta Tharp, Aretha Franklin, and James Cleveland. The musical traits of gospel music are thoroughly covered and are shown to be a result of the social and political climate that existed in the early 20th century. The second source is another documentary entitled “Higher Ground: Voices of Contemporary Gospel Music.” In this source, gospel music after 1969 is covered in detail. The characteristics of the music including its integration

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of R&B, rap, and hip hop, and its lyrical styles are discussed. These details provide an examination of current gospel music and a reason for its international success.  

There are three main sources which overview the history of Sacred Jazz. To this author’s knowledge, no other resource covers the span of Sacred Jazz and the history of gospel music as it relates to jazz as extensively as these three do.

The first is Lance Bryant’s article called “Jazz in the Church,” which details the importance that sacred music had on the development of jazz. Bryant specifically focuses on the efforts of Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, and John Coltrane. The article is actually a transcription of a speech that Bryant gave in 2005 to fellow church members in which he draws parallels from past American composers like Thomas Dorsey, a pioneer of early Gospel music and hymns, to Gospel musicians of today, showing how both have taken elements of jazz and blues and put them into religious contexts. Jazz elements in sacred music are more prevalent than people realize.

Recalling jazz’s history, Bryant speaks of Buddy Bolden, the aforementioned cornetist who lived in New Orleans at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a musician who applied swing rhythms to marches, hymns, and other songs. Bryant amasses many interesting quotes in his article, including one from Edward “Kid” Ory, a prominent trombonist of the time, who states that Bolden went to church “…to get ideas on music. He’d hear these songs and change them a little. That’s where Buddy got it from and that’s where it [jazz] all started from.”


Bryant moves on to explain Sacred Jazz by examining the exploits of Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, and John Coltrane. For Ellington and Williams, Bryant’s fairly thorough descriptions focus on the historical context around which the artists composed sacred music. Both artists found religion towards the end of their lives, and made it a priority to record and perform music that reflected their beliefs.

However, most of the emphasis in Bryant’s article is placed on the life and efforts of John Coltrane. Bryant focuses not only on historical context, but on musical analysis of Coltrane’s first suite, *A Love Supreme*. After overcoming a drug addiction, Coltrane locked himself in a room for two weeks and fasted, during which he had a spiritual awakening that caused him to solely commit his musical efforts to God. In 1964, Trane wrote *A Love Supreme*, which was influenced by eastern religions as well as the Bible. Bryant analyzes the first and last movements of Coltrane’s work by pointing out the worshipful elements: playing one phrase over and over, taking the phrase through all keys and rhythmic variations, singing, phrasing the melody around an original religious poem, etc. 22

The second Sacred Jazz historical source is a transcription of a speech given by Deanna Witkowski and Dr. Tammy Kernodle at the 2008 IAJE Conference called “Moving with the Spirit: The Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams.” This work reflects the sacred efforts of Mary Lou Williams, John Coltrane and Duke Ellington, but it also represents the efforts of several other prominent jazz musicians in history that have made significant contributions to the field of Sacred Jazz including Ed Summerlin, Vince Guaraldi and Dave Brubeck. For each artist, brief biographical sections are presented as well as specific Sacred Jazz compositions, performances and recordings. Furthermore, 22. Bryant, “Jazz In The Church: A Lecture/Concert.”
several contemporary musicians in Sacred Jazz are listed as well. These musicians, who are all discussed in the current trends section of this project, are Lance Bryant, Bill Carter, Chuck Marohnic, Ike Sturm, and Deanna Witkowski.23

The third and final source outlining the history of Sacred Jazz is the article “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes to Church in the 1960s” by David Brent Johnson which delves into the Sacred Jazz movement and the coinciding political and social climate in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Unlike the previous two sources, this article gives mention to some more obscure Sacred Jazz works such as George Lewis’ album *Jazz At Vespers* (1958), Lalo Schifrin and Paul Horn’s collaboration on *Jazz Suite on the Mass Texts* (1965) and Joe Master’s *Jazz Mass* (1967). Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane’s efforts are mentioned alongside Dave Brubeck’s and Vince Guaraldi’s. As will be discussed later, it points out that Brubeck’s work was just as politically charged as his African American contemporaries. This resource shows that the cultural divide and struggle in America during the 1960s was equally evident in the church. The direct role that many members of the clergy took in supporting, and rejecting, jazz in church settings is therefore discussed at length. Moreover, the article provides several links to other articles dealing with religion and jazz, even including a link to a Sacred Jazz discography of many recent recordings.24

Although these three resources are the most thorough documents relating to the history of Sacred Jazz, it is important to take a more intimate look at other sources which


detail the efforts of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. The following books go in depth with these artists, and provide a more detailed analysis of their involvement with Sacred Jazz.

Mary Lou Williams is a unique figure in the history of jazz, and there are two definitive sources on her life and music. The first is Tammy Kernodle’s *Soul on Soul* and the second is Linda Dahl’s *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams*. Both books outline the story of Williams’ life and career showing her failures and disappointments as well as achievements and successes. Due to William’s musical flexibility and willingness to embrace newer genres, she never quite gained the fame that her peers attained. Her musical achievements allowed her some level of success, yet there was no single style of music that Williams’ playing would fit cleanly into. However, this seemingly negative attribute ultimately led to her “act[ing] as friend, mentor, and teacher to Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Kenny “Klook” Clarke, Bud Powell, and Dizzy Gillespie.” 25 Her musical influence most likely encouraged the forward momentum of the jazz movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, Williams declining popularity prompted a move to Europe, her eventual acceptance of faith, and inspired the Sacred Jazz performances, compositions, and recordings that marked her subsequent career. 26

Kernodle’s book is a reliable and helpful source full of interesting quotes and eyewitness accounts from many people close to Williams, as well as several from Williams herself. The complexity of Williams’ struggles and how they led to her

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becoming a Sacred Jazz artist are articulately recounted. The musical diversity which apparently strained Williams’ career at the beginning of her life allowed her to push forward and focus on her role as a Sacred Jazz composer and performer.\footnote{27 Kernodle, \textit{Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams}.}

Anthony Brown describes John Coltrane’s Sacred Jazz in his essay entitled “John Coltrane as the Personification of Spirituality in Black Music.” This essay presents Coltrane as an icon who “dedicated the last years of his life to creating an increasingly intense and complex music celebrating spirituality.”\footnote{28 Anthony Brown, “John Coltrane as the Personification of Spirituality in Black Music,” in \textit{John Coltrane and Black America’s Quest for Freedom: Spirituality and Music}, ed. Leonard L. Brown, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55.} His performances and recordings subsequent to \textit{A Love Supreme} are noted for showcasing an increased religious and cultural inclusivity. It is no surprise then that Coltrane began to draw from spirituals-- a West African music rooted in embracing the collective-- as a main source of inspiration.

Coltrane is a unique figure in Sacred Jazz because he was decidedly non-Christian. In fact, there seemed to be no one religion that he favored. As Brown puts it, “he was dispensing with boundaries in his music and in his spirituality, both of which incorporated multiple cultural and religious influences.”\footnote{29 Ibid., 57.} His musical evolution reflects this as the last few album releases under Coltrane’s own name, namely \textit{A Love Supreme}, \textit{Ascension}, and \textit{Meditation}, are noted for an increased rhythmic freedom and a willingness to explore group improvisation. Coltrane’s own playing is repeatedly described as being “temporal,” a term Brown uses to describe the ethereal or spiritual side of Coltrane’s music. Brown’s description of Coltrane’s music ties in his personal struggles with drugs, as well as social struggles with civil rights. The article is an
excellent resource which provides an in depth look at how Coltrane changed as both a person and a musician the last few years of his life.

The biographical portion of this essay regarding John Coltrane is largely drawn from Lewis Porter’s book *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*. Porter’s thorough work traces Coltrane’s entire life, and through many eyewitness stories as well as personal accounts by Coltrane himself, crafts a chronological look at Coltrane’s career. This book is essential for this project because it includes the struggles Coltrane endured as a result of his drug use and his intimate involvement with the civil rights movement later in his life. It also provides a strong narrative of the period right around the time *A Love Supreme* was conceived and recorded.30 Furthermore, the book *Coltrane on Coltrane* – a collection of every known Coltrane interview and several articles and liner notes which have been compiled and edited by Chris DeVito – provides several important quotes in regards to his musical choices throughout his career.31

*Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography* by Janna Tull Steed is the ‘go-to’ source for many on the topic of Duke Ellington and his plunge into the world of Sacred Jazz. Steed crafts a remarkable timeline of Ellington’s spiritual and musical development from the beginning of his career as a composer (ten years old) to the end of his life. The historical context that surrounded Ellington’s Sacred concerts, namely the popularity of Black Gospel Music, civil-rights issues with African Americans, and changes in Church Liturgy policies, are all taken into account.


The last few chapters of Steed’s book, much like Kernodle’s, are written as a chronological narrative that detail Ellington’s life after he was approached by representatives of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco in 1962. These chapters explain two important things: 1) Ellington’s willingness and excitement to write the Sacred Concerts and 2) the public response to Ellington’s move into the sacred world. Unlike Williams and Coltrane, Ellington did not find religion later in life due to some traumatic event. Rather his life was marked by quasi-Christian beliefs and musical efforts which promoted forgiveness, freedom, love and unity. Perhaps most iconic was what he said after the performance of his First Sacred Concert: “Now I can say openly…what I have been saying to myself on my knees.”

It is also important for this essay to show how Sacred Jazz garnered national recognition. Steed’s book supplies that information in regard to Ellington. All Ellington had to do was accept Grace Cathedral’s proposal, and within weeks Time magazine had published a story about the upcoming concert.

Duke Ellington’s book *Music Is My Mistress* was also a helpful resource for several reasons. In his memoirs, Ellington provides a rationale for his sacred work, and explains his position on what makes music sacred for himself and the members of his band. He also articulates the popularity of his sacred concerts by recounting several important reviews and critiques. The approval that many members of the clergy had for his work is excitedly recounted. Furthermore, Ellington writes a short section on Mary

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Lou Williams, and provides a glowing description of her playing and compositions. At the end of her section, Ellington says simply, “she is like soul on soul.”  

The sacred music of John Coltrane, Mary Lou Williams, and Duke Ellington garnered significant attention, and the sacred musicians of today are indebted to their efforts. Thus, the following chapters outline the efforts of Sacred Jazz musicians from the mid 1970s to the current day. Several of these musicians are not as renowned as the Sacred Jazz pioneers are, and so, there are no books written about their lives and music. The primary way to ascertain biographical information is to examine online biographies, articles, interviews, and album reviews. 

In the initial chapter on current Sacred Jazz, I have chosen several prominent musicians to expound upon. Short biographies explaining their careers and sacred work are provided. For each musician, perhaps only one or two sources were used to find biographical work and explanations of their sacred endeavors. Cyrus Chestnut’s website, cyruschestnut.net, provided several helpful quotes and background information about the pianist. Cyrus’s allmusic.com biography also provided a thorough overview of the artists’ significant performances and recordings. Lance Bryant provided a thorough explanation of his musical upbringing and venture into the sacred world in a personal interview I conducted with him over an email correspondence. Further information regarding his success in the secular jazz world was provided by his allaboutjazz.com


Finally, Eric Reed’s Sacred Jazz is detailed in his article “Eric Reed: Sacred Jazz” (which is mentioned earlier) and in a review of a live performance by Josslyn Jeanine Luckett at jazzhallelujah.wordpress.com. Luckett’s article also includes an interesting interview in which Reed divulges his gospel roots and the importance that has had in his career. Furthermore, Bill Carter’s and Chuck Marohnic’s sacred efforts are almost exclusively available through their personal websites.

Obviously, for a project like this, an extensive discography is needed. The only compiled list of Sacred Jazz recordings is a Sacred Jazz discography available on Reverend Norm Freeman’s church website. This resource simply names 45 Sacred Jazz recordings, some of which are very well known while others are so obscure they are not mentioned at all outside of this list. Other than Reverend Freeman’s list, there is no other directory like it. The albums mentioned and discussed in this project were discovered and cited after surveying hundreds of different articles, interviews, reviews, liner notes, and books.

The following two artists are, in my opinion, the most prominent musicians actively composing and performing Sacred Jazz for use in churches: pianist/composer Deanna Witkowski and bassist/composer Ike Sturm. There is a lack of sources on any


current jazz artist as compared to musicians like Duke Ellington or John Coltrane, and so
I needed to rely on email interviews with them in order to obtain more information on
both of them.

Deanna Witkowski, the most likely spear-head of the Sacred Jazz movement as it
exists today, is the subject of Renna Blaney’s article “A Catholic jazz artist explores
sacred music.” Witkowski’s career, as described in this article, is unique in that since
the 1990s she has held jobs which require her to write weekly music for church liturgy.
The songs “Kyrie,” “Gloria,” “Sanctus” and “Agnus Dei” on her latest album, From This
Place, are all arrangements of hers which were written while she was the music director
at All Angels’ Church in Manhattan.43

Blaney makes an effort to illustrate Witkowski’s incredibly diverse career. She is
fluent in Portuguese, and has toured twice in Brazil, most recently at the Recife Jazz
Festival. In 2009 Witkowski, who converted to Catholicism, was offered another music
director job at St. Paul’s in Manhattan. This position, like her last, has allowed her to
compose church music in multiple styles: Jazz, Classical, Latin, Reggae, Salsa, etc.44

In a 2010 article entitled “Mary Lou’s Sacred Jazz” by Deanna Witkowski
herself, Witkowski admits to finding inspiration from Mary Lou Williams.45 Obviously,

43. Deanna Witkowski, From This Place, dir. by Deanna Witkowski, Tilapia, CD, 2008.

44. Retta Blaney, “A Catholic jazz artist explores sacred music,” National Catholic Reporter
(accessed September 21, 2011).

45. Deanna Witkowski, “Mary Lou’s Sacred Jazz,” Urban Faith (April 2010),
her “genre-defying” musical habits are a testament to this. But perhaps a more subtle similarity would be Witkowski’s attempts at integrating a life of faith with a life of jazz. By their frequent travels to different churches to present Sacred Jazz, Witkowski and Williams share a similarity. Witkowski points out that Williams did this exact same thing towards the end of her life (most notably in her performance at St. Patrick’s Cathedral). Witkowski strongly believes that jazz has much to offer the church, and finds inspiration in how Williams’ led her life.

Ike Sturm, a New York-based bassist and composer, is the other contemporary Sacred Jazz artist that will be considered here. His allaboutjazz.com comprehensively discusses his life as a composer’s son and how that affected his career path. Besides describing his work as a clinician, composer, and bassist, this resource briefly discusses Sturm’s main employment as Assistant Director of Music for the Jazz Ministry at Saint Peter’s Church in Manhattan.

Lee Mergner’s article “The Double Life of Jazz Bassist Ike Sturm” further details Sturm’s sacred pursuits. Mergner describes Sturm’s unique position of composing and performing original music for weekly jazz services, and gives recognition to Saint Peter’s Church, widely regarded as the “Jazz Church,” whose leadership commissioned Sturm to write and release his latest album, Jazz Mass. This album is the topic of the majority of articles available on Sturm.


Mergner delves deeper than most in that he probes Sturm on the reasoning behind the album. Sturm’s discussion of his influences, his father and Reverend John Gensel, reveals several important things about Sturm’s work. Like Reverend Gensel, Sturm’s goal was to minister to any and all. Additionally, he focused on making good music first and foremost. Sturm freely admits that he would like his work to bring the worlds of secular and sacred together, feeling that the most effective way to do so was to record an album of jazz.
CHAPTER THREE
DEFINITION OF SACRED JAZZ

The term “Sacred Jazz” is difficult to define as distinct from other idioms, because the term ‘Sacred Jazz’ does not demarcate a specific stylist genre or specific inherent musical elements in the way that Latin-Jazz or Hard Bop does. Duke Ellington’s Sacred Concerts incorporated swing, big band, and spoken word. Mary Lou Williams’ masses highlighted blues-influenced choir pieces as well as Rock grooves. John Coltrane composed his Sacred Jazz work for instrumental small ensemble in a modal jazz setting. Deanna Witkowski and Ike Sturm composed straight-eighth music with modern jazz harmony. Lance Bryant wrote several gospel-oriented arrangements of hymns as well as blues and swing driven pieces of his own. The scope of musical milieus here is vast yet, all of these performers and composers are Sacred Jazz artists. In an attempt to articulate what exactly Sacred Jazz is, one must start with separation of the term to look at what makes music ‘Sacred’ and what makes music ‘Jazz.’

While sacred music of the world is quite an extensive topic, sacred music in America will be the focus here because the large majority of Sacred Jazz music takes place in America. Author Stephen Marini commented on the plethora of religions in the United States.

The array of religious traditions in our public culture is also remarkable, embracing at least five hundred denominational varieties of Protestantism, another five hundred Native American tribal religions, most forms of Judaism and Eastern Orthodoxy, significant enclaves of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists, one of the world’s largest and most heterogeneous Catholic communities, and an ever-growing number of New World faiths.
from Mormons to Scientology to Santeria to New Age goddesses. While nations like India, Russia, and Brazil also harbor hundreds of religious groups, the sheer range of America’s global religious diversity is unparalleled.49

The role that music plays in each of these religious contexts is unique and helps to reflect the culture surrounding each specific belief system. For some, sacred music provides a ritual function whereby practitioners have come to expect specific placement of music in their religious services. Songs are placed at certain points within religious services on purpose and reflect a temporary order that each religious practitioner can experience. Religious song has also become performance music, being performed in concert halls, theaters, and secular venues around the country. In this way, both sacred and secular audiences, as well, have become familiar with sacred music. With advancements in technology, many listeners are able to enjoy sacred music in public and in private. Ultimately, sacred music’s role is to help transition the listener from their everyday life into an emotional state wherein they are actively engaged in thinking about and/or expressing their own theological beliefs.50

The definition of sacred music can, and probably should, include emotionalism. Without it, one could argue that religious music would be ineffective, or at least less effective. Particularly with Gospel music, it is impossible to separate emotion and extra-musical meaning from the music as played in the church. As one church leader has recently remarked, “Gospel music is a feeling as well as a conviction.” 51

50. Ibid., 321-323.
The debate that music in and of itself can communicate emotional meaning has sparked intense discourse in the last century. In the 1950s, musicologists like Deryck Cooke and Leonard Meyer adhered to the notion that music can directly reflect an emotion or feeling. However, Philosopher Suzanne Langer and ethnomusicologist Kurt Sachs have refuted this direct connection between music and emotion, saying that any aesthetic experienced by the music listener is purely symbolic and is a result of conditioning. More recent theorists have taken a deconstructionalist point of view, saying that “the non-musical associations we bring to music—say, a response of religious emotion to a hymn-like passage in a Brahms or Mahler symphony—while certainly understandable, have nothing to do with the music itself.” 52 One counter to this way of thinking was put forth by Robert Jourdain in his 1997 book *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*, where he argues that music allows humans to transcend their everyday lives, bringing them to a state of being that is “larger than [they] really are.” 53 This temporary transformation is a deeply emotional experience, and has resulted in music therapy studies, which conclude that music can help alleviate symptoms of Parkinson’s disease as well as help explain the “Mozart Effect.” Obviously, this debate regarding emotionalism and feeling in music will probably continue for some time.

Emotion, however, is not the only criteria used in defining music as sacred. If a song evokes joy or pain, makes a person laugh or cry, or pushes a listener to remember a moment in their life outside of their current one (much like nostalgia), it does not


necessarily prove that the song is religious in nature. Nonetheless, there appears to be some consensus that what makes music sacred is religious intent.

In an interview with the author, Ike Sturm stated:

What is sacred can only be perceived through the artist's intention or the listener's ear. By opening our hearts and minds to God's voice, almost anything could be viewed and heard as sacred...I have always considered my compositions as sacred jazz due to their source of inspiration.54

Duke Ellington related the following in his memoirs:

I believe that no matter how highly skilled a drummer or saxophonist might be, if this is the thing he does best, and he offers it sincerely from the heart in—or as accompaniment to—his worship, he will not be unacceptable because of lack of skill or of the instrument upon which he makes his demonstration, be it pipe or tomtom.55

Deanna Witkowski spoke about sacred music in a recent interview:

...it's the intent behind the action. If my intent in playing and singing is to glorify God, it's going to be worshipful for me.56

Lance Bryant spoke of what makes jazz sacred in an interview with the author:

I believe Sacred Jazz is music that is dedicated to the glory and the service of God in the mind of the artist when he or she performs or creates the music.57

Sacred music is sacred because of the artist’s purpose while he/she performs and/or composes. This means that sacred music can be sacred with or without words. In

54. Ike Sturm, Interview with author, Email correspondence, Nov 17, 2012.
55. Ellington, Music is My Mistress, 262.
57. Bryant, interviewed by author.
Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, the vast majority of the work (aside from the chanting of “*A Love Supreme*” in the intro) is lyric-less.\(^{58}\) Mary Lou Williams album *Black Christ of the Andes* features ten songs without vocalists.\(^{59}\) Many of Duke Ellington’s sacred themes are presented wordlessly. In his memoirs he relates this experience of performing his sacred concert:

In such a program, you may hear a wide variety of statements without words, and I think you should know that if it is a phrase with six tones, it symbolizes the six syllables in the first four words of the bible, “In the beginning God,” which is our theme. We say it many times…many ways.\(^{60}\)

Obviously, once text is added, the vision of the leader or artist is made more apparent. If the text is intended to be sacred, then that will also apply to the music. Deanna Witkowski and Ike Sturm wrote settings of a Mass Ordinary, including the traditional text that accompanies each movement. Witkowski and Sturm, along with Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington incorporated choir as a main element of their music.

In a sense, personal, sacred intent can make anything worshipful. This Christian principle is clear in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”\(^{61}\) Many jazz musicians operate on this basis, relating improvisation and the mindset associated with soloing, to exploring the spiritual. Stephan Grappelli once said, “Improvisation, it is a mystery…When I


\(^{60}\) Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 262-263.

\(^{61}\) 1 Cor 10:31 (WEB).
improvise and I’m in good form, I’m like somebody half sleeping. I even forgot there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests; they are thinking only of their God.” 62 Charlie Parker famously said “I am a devout musician.” 63

It is important to differentiate Sacred Jazz artists from the array of religious jazz musicians in that Sacred Jazz artists make their intentions clear to the audience as well as perform and record works that exclusively deal with religious beliefs or texts. There are many religious jazz artists who use their gifts to act out their faith. These artists may perform and compose music which is not necessarily sacred, but inwardly reflects their core, religious beliefs. An artist like Deanna Witkwoski is certainly separated from musicians like these in that her worshipful intent is known from the start, and her lyrical content comes from sacred texts.

‘Jazz’ is even more difficult, if not impossible, to define. It has evolved from a music which incorporated ragtime rhythms, blues melodies, swing feel, European harmonies and improvisation to a music that has embraced several genres and styles of world music, including Rock, Punk, Latin, Caribbean, and Afro-Cuban.

But there is discourse as to the specific meaning of the word jazz. To some, it is a word that describes a very specific kind of music. Wynton Marsalis’ influence in the 1980s marked a resurgence in embracing traditional jazz. His article, “What Jazz Is – and Isn’t,” outlined his viewpoint quite clearly.

To many people, any kind of popular music now can be lumped with jazz. As a result, audiences too often come to jazz with generalized misconceptions about what it is and what it is supposed to be. Too often,


what is represented as jazz isn't jazz at all. Despite attempts by writers and record companies and promoters and educators and even musicians to blur the lines for commercial purposes, rock isn't jazz and new age isn't jazz, and neither are pop or third stream. There may be much that is good in all of them, but they aren't jazz.  

Mike LeDonne, a New-York based pianist and educator, and Stanley Crouch, acclaimed author, share a similar perspective. They believe that “jazz should have the same African-American roots, the rhythms that come out of the blues and church.” They believe that jazz music is “now under assault by those who would love to make jazz no more than an ‘improvised music’ free of definition.” Their viewpoint is quite clear: jazz must be defined, and if it does not meet the standard set by their predecessors, it should not be called jazz.

There are certainly others who have adopted a much more open viewpoint. Author Greg Thomas from *All About Jazz* has written on the topic:

To me, personally and professionally, I associate jazz with improvisation and syncopation, with resilience and flow, with tradition and innovation, with earthy elegance, with strength and nuance, with the integrity of individual expression within a collaborative group context, with true democracy in action, with spontaneity and empathy, with the eternal moment and the power of now. I think jazz is exemplary of the best produced by my ethnic and cultural group, and by the United States as well.

In an article entitled “What is Jazz Now?” several jazz musicians and educators were interviewed to get their opinion on the matter. Trombonist Steve Swell said:

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64. Marsalis, “MUSIC; What Jazz is – and Isn’t.”

65. Thomas, “Keyboardist Mike Ledonne: For jazz to mean a thing, it’s got to have blues and swing.”


67. Thomas, “BAM or JAZZ: Why It Matters.”
There's lots of talk today about "what jazz is supposed to be." There are "illusives" who believe jazz is supposed to be one thing only because they want to control it; financially, culturally. That is not what jazz ever was. If jazz is supposed to be only one thing, then it probably was only supposed to be what the music of Louis Armstrong was and stopped there. Jazz is extremely flexible. It has changed many times over the years and now we are in an era with no real style to be named. I strongly believe that we've moved beyond what used to be defined as eras into an era of highly individualized jazz. Certain sectors of our community wish for jazz to be only one thing. They've set up their museums for what jazz is supposed to be and it's important to have that, but there are recordings of the originals.\(^6\)

Pianist an educator Hal Galper said:

> Jazz is a music that is open to all influences electronic or whatever, the jazz part being in the ear of the beholder.\(^6\)

Author Dom Minasi said succinctly:

> What is jazz now? It's whatever we want it to be and that can be a personal issue for each and every one of us.\(^7\)

There is little use in trying to favor one side of the argument over the other in this project. Suffice it to say, the term ‘jazz’ evolved to reference referred to a specific genre of music that encompassed African blues and swing, but that now encompasses a much more eclectic, improvisational music. Therefore, the term ‘Sacred Jazz’ only refers to jazz music performed with religious intent, not a specific genre. Coincidentally, the chronology and development of jazz has deep roots in sacred music.

The slave trade and its resulting atrocities was a stain upon the fabric of our nation. Its far reaching cultural effects were not just sociological—music was also affected. Among the results from the transportation of the African people to the

\(^6\) Minasi, “What Is Jazz Now?.”

\(^7\) Ibid.
American colonies was their development of spirituals (a religious song sung by the African slave) and other African musical practices (many of which can be observed in the context of the Black Gospel Church) that influenced the creation and use of 1) the blues, 2) swing feel, and 3) improvisation. Without an established note-system in place, African Americans grew accustomed to learning and performing exclusively by ear (or ‘by-rote’).  

The Blues was born from the musical lamentations of the slaves expressing their daily plight, and their longing for freedom and better times. In the work fields, slaves sang amongst themselves. Although not melodically-focused, a hallmark of African music is its consistent use of pentatonic melodies. Through a kind of oral osmosis, the slaves combined pentatonic scales with the practice of pitch bending and created what is now known as the blues scale, a minor pentatonic scale with a half step in between the third and fourth degrees (blue note). Slaves borrowed Christian lyrics from their white captors and put them into the context of their newfound blues melodies. These songs, now known as spirituals, transcended the confines of the slave quarters to reappear in weekly church services.

Other African musical concepts that survived in the black church were swing feel and improvisation. African musical tradition is rhythmically dominated. Many popular ground rhythms that survived the Trans-Atlantic slave trade were triplet oriented. While in America, Africans sang (or played) eighth notes over these triplet-centered ground

71. Tirro, *Jazz, a History*, 4-18.
72. Ibid., 13-17.
rhythms, resulting in swung eighth notes, the defining rhythmic quality of jazz.

Improvisation is also a large part of African musical culture. It was initially practiced by Master Drummers who soloed while other musicians played traditional parts. After the slave trade ended, improvisation remained a part of the Afro-American Christian Church. Gospel pianists (or organists) regularly soloed during the sermon to reflect the energy and mood of the sermon. Lead singers utilized blues scales in order to ornament existing melodies. They also developed a call and response format by improvising a line for the congregation to echo. Jazz music incorporates call-and-response with “trading fours” (a way of improvising where the drummer and horn players alternate taking four bar solo sections).75

The history of sacred music in our country, especially as it pertains to the Black Gospel Church, is an important ingredient in the foundations of jazz music. It is interesting that although the elements of jazz (blues, swing feel, and improvisation) initially existed in the Church, jazz itself was not codified into an art form until Buddy Bolden, a trumpet player raised in the Black Church, placed Gospel influences (as just discussed) into secular contexts (parades, concerts, parties, et cetera).76 His adaptation of popular military marches and/or ragtime pieces (both being straight eighth, non-blues influenced, non improvisatory music) into his newly created jazz style formed a swinging, bluesy music that included improvisation of all band members.77

75. Ibid., 101-109, 127.
76. Bryant, “Jazz In The Church: A Lecture/Concert.”
77. Tirro, Jazz, a History, 116-117.
As jazz began to gain momentum, its musical aspects were no longer exclusively associated with the church. Beginning with Buddy Bolden’s musical ideas in the early 1900s, jazz moved on to flourish in secular environments. Jazz expanded from the brothels and gambling houses of New Orleans to the Speakeasies and “hipster” jazz clubs in New York City. For a time, jazz served no religious purposes; in fact, the word jazz came to be synonymous with sex, gambling, and crime, but the art form was young and constantly developing. In 1967, “the Vatican officially banned the use of jazz masses, calling them ‘distortions of liturgy’ and ‘music of a totally profane and worldly character.’” 78 Furthermore, as Duke Ellington began preparing for a concert featuring some of his sacred work in Washington D.C. What he faced was described as an:

…intense opposition to it from the city’s Baptist Ministers Conference, which represented 150 area churches. Reverend John D. Bussey declared that Ellington lived in ways opposite from what the church stood for, denounced his performing in nightclubs, and called his music “worldly.” 79

Nevertheless, musical influences from outside of the church began to work their way into the music. Artists influenced by European Classical music integrated more complex harmonies while the roles of rhythm section instruments became more standardized. Artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Randy Weston, Stan Getz, Yusef Lateef, and Antonio Carlos Jobim began to expand jazz beyond a music solely focused on swing to one that fit several genres (Latin, African, Indian, Brazilian, et cetera). 80

78. Johnson, “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s.”

79. Ibid.

In the 1950s when Cool Jazz was at its height, some jazz musicians and composers felt jazz was becoming too intellectual and decided to take it back to its gospel roots – i.e. Horace Silver (“The Preacher”), Jimmy Smith (The Sermon!), Charles Mingus (“Better Get it in Your Soul”), Cannonball Adderly (Mercy, Mercy, Mercy).\(^\text{81}\) However, these musicians were not necessarily doing this based on personal faith. Some were merely mimicking the power and force that Gospel music has to offer. Prominent pianist, Eric Reed, has commented on this very issue.

Of a somewhat less “faith-based” intent, is what has been referred to as “funky jazz” or “soul-jazz.” This would be jazz that parrots the sound of Black church music and is more contrived than reverent. Popular jazz hits like Horace Silver's “The Preacher,” Billy Page's “The In Crowd” (as performed by Ramsey Lewis) or Bobby Timmons' “This Here” were mostly funneled through artists' impressions of gospel music. It's much like listening to dyed-in-the-wool jazz musicians play Latin or funk—without a full immersion in the experience. Perhaps, this is where the divide begins with regard to sacred versus secular; whereas one implies an honoring and worshiping, the other has a slightly exploitive dynamic that, over the years, has continued to nosedive into poor imitations, the end result being some minstrel-type exhibition by individuals who have no real clue of the value and essence of a spiritual experience.\(^\text{82}\)

For the scope of this project, it is important to note the difference between the efforts of the aforementioned musicians, and the music featured in recent albums like Hank Jones’ Steal Away, Cyrus Chestnut’s Spirit, or Dave Douglas’ Be Still. All of these albums feature jazz artists who are immersed in the conviction and spirit that is at the heart of the hymns that they play and are speaking to. They are not playing this music

\(^{81}\) Lance Bryant, "Jazz In The Church: A Lecture/Concert."

\(^{82}\) Reed, "Eric Reed: Sacred Jazz."
from the perspective of an individual who has “no real clue of the value and essence of a spiritual experience.”

It is worth mentioning that the cross-pollination of jazz and gospel music worked both ways. Gospel singer and pianist Arizona Dranes was an important figure in this regard. She was the first artist to “play the piano on a gospel recording and introduce a syncopated, ragtime-influenced accompaniment to gospel music.” Her musical performances and recordings in the 1940s influenced scores of gospel artists. Thomas Dorsey, known initially as a blues singer, experienced a personal epiphany in the early 1930s and began focusing his considerable songwriting talents on Gospel music. Through his influence, both the call and response technique and the jazz cadences and rhythms of popular music found their way into the Gospel idiom.

Jazz and gospel music began to share several harmonic traits. Artists from both genres used chordal tone clusters to highlight tension and release in solos and melodies. Polytonality in church and jazz harmony was also present. This effect is achieved when “blue notes [are] superimposed on chords containing the natural degrees of these blue notes.” Polytonality creates a gritty, dirty sound, that is common practice when playing blues influenced jazz or gospel. Another harmonic technique used in both gospel and jazz music is the pedal point, whereby changing harmony resolves over a stagnant bass note. This technique is another method used in creating tension and release. Finally, one

83. Ibid.


of the most prevalent harmonic crossovers between jazz and gospel music is the use of I, IV, and V chords in the common blues form. These chords can be clearly heard in gospel songs like “Heaven” by Mahalia Jackson, and in jazz, these harmonies form the basis on which all blues songs are derived.\(^\text{87}\)

Several gospel artists have made significant contributions to the secular jazz world. Two excellent examples of this are Mahalia Jackson and Rosetta Tharp. Mahalia Jackson traveled with Thomas Dorsey early in her career, performing his early gospel songs. She would eventually go on to record and perform with Duke Ellington. Rosetta Tharp, who is recognized as the first mega-star in gospel, started playing jazz and blues guitar at an early age. She consistently incorporated these styles into her gospel music, and even sang at the Cotton Club in New York.\(^\text{88}\) There has been a relatively recent resurgence whereby many Gospel Artists have infused elements of jazz into their music. Notable examples of this include Yolanda Adams, Daryl Coley, The Clark Sisters, Thomas Whitfield, and Aretha Franklin.\(^\text{89}\)

The scope of music written and performed by Sacred Jazz artists includes works small and large ensemble, use of choir and solo voice, spoken word, blues as a form and melodic influence, straight eighth and odd time music, and world music. However, since jazz and gospel are so closely intertwined, a distinction needs to be made between Sacred Jazz and Gospel music. Obviously, the term ‘Sacred Jazz’ is a generic one referring to a worshipful intent of a jazz artist rather than a particular sub-genre of jazz music. Both

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\(^\text{87}\). Ibid.  
are performed with the religious intent, but there are several recognizable elements that can delineate them.

The first element is a political component. Unlike Sacred Jazz, almost all Traditional Gospel music has some sort of political component to it. In the 1940s, the Golden Gate Quartet had a hit called “No Restricted Signs (Up in Heaven).” Celebrated Gospel composer W. Herbert Brewster, often wrote songs with political undertones such as “Move On Up a Little Higher” and “Surely God is Able.” Mahalia Jackson, who was friends with Martin Luther King, sang at the great march on Washington in 1963.90 Certainly, Sacred Jazz artists like Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, Dave Brubeck and John Coltrane were all impacted socially and musically by the civil rights movement in the middle of the 20th century, and they reflected their struggle in their music. But, current Sacred Jazz artists have had no reported dealings with those kinds of racial issues. Their music is primarily driven by their personal belief systems and a desire to worship.

Secondly, several basic musical elements differ between Gospel and Sacred Jazz. Gospel music does not regularly include a focus on extended, wordless, instrumental improvisations. Improvisation in the gospel music occurs synonymously with the mood and context of the worship.91 Furthermore, Contemporary Gospel instrumentation relies heavily on electric instruments, such as the electric bass and organ. In Sacred Jazz, acoustic instruments (piano and bass) seem to be preferred. Moreover, Gospel music is often written in a strophic manner (verse, chorus, interlude, etc) as seen in hymns, which are all prevalent in Gospel Church services, as well as so many gospel ‘hits’ including


Fred Hammond’s “Let the Praise Begin,” Kirk Franklin’s “Hosanna,” and Micah Stampley’s “Speak Into my Life.” The formal schemes of Sacred Jazz, much like jazz music, include everything from four-bar vamps to extended, through-composed, large works.

Finally, ‘stardom’ in Gospel music almost always refers to a solo singer or choir of some kind. Although Sacred Jazz is often vocally oriented, many examples it are wordless. Sacred Jazz band leaders are often not singers, as is the case with Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and Ike Sturm. Perhaps this is the reason why Contemporary Gospel music has reached a level of mainstream popularity that Sacred Jazz has not. Gospel artists like Donnie McClurkin, Kirk Franklin, Yolanda Adams, and Fred Hammond are all bandleaders, vocalists, and have each sold millions of albums. Artists in Sacred Jazz have yet to achieve this level of success. Moreover, Contemporary Gospel music has incorporated popular styles, such as hip-hop and rap, which has resulted in its wide acceptance, as seen with secular audiences in club and dance environments. It also is worth mentioning that Contemporary Gospel music lyrics deal with every-day struggles (financial troubles, drug issues, sex problems, family problems, etc.) whereas most Sacred Jazz does not attempt to identify with social issues in this way.92

CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORY OF SACRED JAZZ

The tradition of delving into the sacred realm has a long lineage in jazz. In the 1960s, amongst the cultural turmoil of the civil rights movement, several jazz artists wrote and performed works which reflected their spiritual beliefs. Upon reflection, one can clearly recognize the leaders of this movement as Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane, but there were however, many other musicians whose contributions should not be overlooked.

In the 1950s, musical mixes of religion and jazz began to occur. In perhaps the earliest known Sacred Jazz recording, George Lewis, a New Orleans clarinetist, released Jazz at Vespers in 1954, an album featuring a collection of traditional hymns as played by his ragtime band.93 In 1957, Jack Teagarden was beckoned into the studio by Capitol Records to record an album of spirituals. Swing Low Sweet Spiritual was the result, and featured Teagarden alongside a singing group, the Five Keys.94 A year later, Louis Armstrong recorded one of his more obscure albums, Louis and the Good Book, a collection of spirituals, gospel songs and show tunes.95 This album and would be the only sacred album Louis would record in his entire career.96

93. George Lewis, Jazz at Vespers, George Lewis and His Ragtime Band, Riverside Records RLP 12-230, 1954.


There were other examples of jazz being mixed with sacred music. Prominent saxophonist, Gerry Mulligan, played a “hip, saxophone-playing priest in the movie The Subterraneans.” Furthermore, in 1958, Mahalia Jackson began her collaboration with Duke Ellington. After singing “Come Sunday” and “The 23rd Psalm” on his Black, Brown and Beige album, she performed with his orchestra at the Newport Jazz Festival.

It was not until 1959 that the first extended, jazz liturgy was written. Ed Summerlin, a clarinetist and tenor saxophonist teaching at the University of Texas State College, was grieving after discovering his daughter was dying of a congenital heart defect. His pastor encouraged him to compose, and the result was “Requiem for Mary Jo,” a piece written for the liturgy of a Methodist Church. After the death of his daughter, Summerlin began to focus on writing jazz for use in churches. He gave several performances of his new music, and recorded it on his first Sacred Jazz album Liturgical Jazz, which included “Requiem for Mary Jo” and a setting of an order of Morning Prayer.

Summerlin was a somewhat notable musician. He had played with artists like Steve Kuhn, Eric Dolphy, Pete LaRoca, and David Baker. He had also arranged for and played with Freddie Hubbard, Dave Liebman, Toshiko Akiyoshi and Lee Konitz. Not surprisingly, his entrance into the sacred world did not go unnoticed. Downbeat magazine gave Liturgical Jazz four and a half stars, and in March of 1960 the work was

97. Johnson, “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s.”


featured on NBC’s Saturday night program, *World Wide 60*. Summerlin would go on to write many more Sacred Jazz pieces, including “Evensong – A Jazz liturgy and Liturgy of the Holy Spirit” and *Ring Out Joy* (another sacred album), as well as serve as the music director for the CBS religious show *Look Up and Live.*

The 1960s were a time of change within sacred institutions. Joanna Steed, author of *Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography*, has elaborated on this topic.

The decade of the 1960s was a time of major change not only in social and political life, but also in religion… The language of the Catholic mass was changed from Latin into the national language of the parishioners in a given congregation. Vernacular music was also introduced into Catholic worship. Jazz masses and Protestant jazz services gained a degree of popularity in urban areas, although the practice was still seen as a departure from traditional worship… Reinhold Neibuhrn and Paul Tillich were well known to the public. Tillich’s “theology of culture” identified artistic activity as crucial to the “radical spiritual task of disclosing the authentic nature of God in creation.” His influence led to renewed support and study of the arts within churches and seminaries.

In 1962, Martin De Porre was given sainthood, the first person of color to be given such an honor. Mary Lou Williams, who had been on a temporary hiatus from music, had converted to Catholicism and was convinced by a priest friend to write sacred music. She wrote a hymn for De Porre entitled “St. Martin de Porres,” which would eventually be the title track to her 1964 album, *Black Christ of the Andes.*

The year after *Black Christ of the Andes* was released, several major events occurred within the world of Sacred Jazz. The first was when John Coltrane released his

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101. Johnson, “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s.”


103. Williams, *Black Christ of the Andes.*
landmark album, *A Love Supreme.*\(^{104}\) Secondly, Lalo Schifrin (Argentinean composer) and Paul Horn (West Coast, jazz, woodwind player) combined efforts to create their take on Sacred Jazz, *Jazz Suite on the Mass Texts.*\(^{105}\) The album won two Grammys – one for “Best Original Jazz Composition”\(^{106}\) in 1965 and “Best Album Cover, Photography”\(^{107}\) in 1966. Thirdly, Vince Guaraldi, the pianist known for writing the music to Charlie Brown, premiered his Sacred Jazz music at San Francisco Grace Cathedral. The reverend there wanted a “modern setting for the choral eucharist”\(^{108}\) and the result was *Vince Guaraldi: the Grace Cathedral Concert*, which featured his trio accompanying a 68-member choir.\(^{109}\)

A few months after Vince Guaraldi’s performance, Duke Ellington premiered the first of three sacred concerts at the same Cathedral. Because of his prominence in the jazz world, reviews of his sacred work began to appear in mainstream magazines and television broadcasts. Ebony Magazine said that Ellington’s concert was an “historic moment. A type of music once disdained as being fit only for bars and bordellos was being performed in a sacred concert by a man who had helped earn for it the greatest

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108. Johnson, “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s.”

Duke’s national influence helped make the concept of sacred jazz acceptable, and for the rest of his life, Ellington would compose and perform sacred work.

Another jazz star to delve into Sacred Jazz was Dave Brubeck. Brubeck was a legendary jazz pianist, best known for his recording of Paul Desmond’s “Take Five” and his own composition, “Blue Rondo a la Turk.” His album *Time Out*, which featured the aforementioned songs, was the first jazz album to go platinum. Other popular standards composed by Brubeck included “In Your Own Sweet Way” and “The Duke.” In 1999, he was named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 2009 he “received a Kennedy Center Honor for his contribution to American culture.”

Another crowning achievement in Brubeck’s long career was his continued work in the sacred world. After Brubeck’s service in World War II, he experienced a strong urge to compose sacred music, a personal conviction that would carry on throughout his life. In fact, he stopped touring/performing at the height of his popularity in order to devote time to composing. He wrote “Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled” in 1965 for his brother whose son had died of a brain tumor at age 16. In 1968 he wrote his first large-scale sacred composition, *The Light in the Wilderness* – “an oratorio which focused on the temptations and teachings of Christ.”

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113. Witkowski and Kernodle, “Moving With the Spirit: the Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams.”
A year later, Brubeck composed *Gates of Justice*, a cantata that dealt with issues of race, equality and politics, topics that Brubeck was openly passionate about. In the 1950s, Brubeck intentionally played in the South in order to openly oppose their segregation-based viewpoints (they objected to his racially diverse band). He repeatedly stood up to college deans who disapproved of his black bass player, Gene Wright, and he refused to tour South Africa when tour organizers demanded that he use an all white band.\(^{114}\) Furthermore, his lyrics were often influenced by the words of Martin Luther King Jr. “Gates,” a piece written in reaction to violence between Blacks and Jews across the country, offered a “meditation on biblical justice, drawing his text from the book of Isaiah and the works of Martin Luther King, Jr.”\(^{115}\) In 1970, when student protesters were killed at the infamous Kent State University shooting, Brubeck composed “Truth is Fallen” a cantata written in homage to the slain. Brubeck even wrote the entrance music for Pope John Paul II when he visited San Francisco in 1987.

Dave Brubeck’s sacred music has recently garnered some national attention – *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* reviewed his sacred work in 2009, and there was a piece in *American Catholic* covering his religious work, but other journalists have noticed a particular lack of coverage on the sacred side to Brubeck’s career. Russell Gloyd, Brubeck’s longtime manager and orchestra conductor noted that Brubeck’s sacred work “often gets overlooked, which is sad because this music means so much to him.”\(^{116}\) Even

\(^{114}\) Ratliff, “Dave Brubeck, Whose Distinctive Sound Gave Jazz New Pop, Dies at 91.”

\(^{115}\) Witkowski and Kernodle, "Moving With the Spirit: the Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams.”

after his death, when eulogies and tributes were written about Brubeck, the reports of the life he lived rarely mention his oratorios and other sacred music

There are several reasons as to why this could be. Brubeck, did not often speak openly of his faith or conversion to Catholicism. He had been raised Protestant, but became a Roman Catholic after writing *To Hope*, a Mass which was commissioned by *Our Sunday Visitor*, a Catholic Periodical.\(^{117}\) Although Brubeck recorded four sacred albums (*The Light in the Wilderness: An Oratorio for Today* [1968], *The Gates of Justice* [1969], *To Hope! A Celebration* [1996], and *Dave Brubeck: Sacred Choral Works: Songs of Praise* [2010])\(^ {118}\) the thirty year gap of no commercial Sacred Jazz recordings, which when interspersed with his very successful secular jazz career may have lowered the public appeal for his sacred work. Moreover, Brubeck began his sacred work as a young man. John Coltrane, Mary Lou Williams, and Duke Ellington began their sacred work late in life after significant personal and spiritual realizations, and continued it until their deaths. Whatever the reasons are for the lack of media coverage, Brubeck’s sacred music consistently conveyed a positive message. “Ultimately, for Brubeck, the heart of his sacred music is the profound biblical message to love your enemies.”\(^ {119}\)

In the late 1960s, members of the parish took a direct role in supporting jazz in the church. Pastor John Gensel worked on behalf of St. Peter’s Church and served the jazz community, mentoring and supporting many musicians in their time of need. He started a Sunday evening Jazz Vespers at St. Peter’s so that musicians “who arrive home

\(^{117}\) Ibid.

\(^{118}\) See Discography.

\(^{119}\) Anderson, “Dave Brubeck’s Sacred Music: ‘Composition As A Prayer.’”
late from Saturday gigs don’t have to wake up too early to get to Sunday mass.”  

Father Tom Vaughn, an Episcopalian priest and jazz pianist, recorded *Jazz in Concert at the Village Gate* with Elvin Jones and Art Davis. He later appeared on “The Tonight Show” with that trio. The “Jazz priest,” or Father Norman O’Connor, took an active role in the jazz world and held a number of influential jobs and positions. He served on the board at the Newport Jazz festival, hosted jazz radio and television shows in Boston and New York, MC’d concerts and sat in on panel discussions, wrote liner notes for various musicians (notably Joe Masters’ 1967 *Jazz Mass* album where took a shot at both atheists and church establishments), and wrote a weekly jazz column for the Boston Globe.

The culture surrounding the efforts of the individuals mentioned above resulted in many similar projects. Several other prominent jazz artists that made contributions to the Sacred Jazz world included pianist Hampton Hawes album *The Sermon* (recorded in 1958 but not released until 1987), vocalist Nat King Cole’s *Every Time I Fell the Spirit* (1960), guitarist Grant Green’s *Feelin’ the Spirit* (1962), saxophonist Albert Ayler’s *Goin’ Home* (1964) and *Swing Low Sweet Spiritual* (recorded in 1964 but released in 1971), vocalist Ella Fitzgerald’s *Brighten the Corner* (1967) [10 of the 14 tracks were

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121. *Ebony*, Jazz Goes to Church, April, 1966, 80.

122. Johnson, “Sacred Blue: Jazz Goes To Church In the 1960s.”


re-released as *Spirituals* in 1991], trumpeter Joe Newman’s *O Sing to The Lord a New Song* (1968), and drummer Max Roach’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1971). Not counting Newman’s recording, all of these projects are comprised of a collection of various hymns. Other projects from this time period which are particularly of note are pianist Herbie Hancock’s *Hear, O Israel, A Prayer Ceremony in Jazz* (1968) and saxophonist Pharoah Sanders’ *Karma* (1969). *Hear, O Israel* is an incredibly obscure album in the Hancock discography. Apparently, Hancock completely forgot that he even recorded this album telling his discographer “that he had no recollection” of it. But nonetheless, it is an important achievement because unlike the vast majority of Christian Sacred Jazz, *Hear, O Israel* is comprised of sacred material from a Jewish prayer service. Accompanying Hancock are several giants in the jazz world: Ron Carter (the two were members of Miles Davis’ band at the time), Grady Tate, Thad Jones, Jerome Richardson and Jonathan Klein (arranger, singer, and French horn player). *Karma*, one of the more memorable albums from saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, reflects the influence of his musical predecessor, John Coltrane, as well as his Muslim faith. The track “The Creator has a Master Plan” lasts 32 minutes, and shows that Sander’s music “bore the soul of Coltrane’s musical and spiritual possession.”

125. See Discography.


One last musician worth mentioning is pianist/harpist/organist Alice Coltrane, the wife of John Coltrane. After John’s death, Alice began to follow the teachings of East Indian guru, Sathya Sai Baba. She steeped herself in mysticism and eastern philosophies, took on the name Swami Turiyasangitananda (means “transcendental Lord’s highest song of bliss”) and in 1975 opened The Vedantic Center, a spiritual center for those of similar beliefs. During her spiritual transformation in the late 60s to the early 70s and indeed throughout her life, Coltrane released albums in the free jazz genre which reflected her Hindu faith – Huntington Ashram Monastery (1969) Journey in Satchidananda (1970), Ptah, the El Daoud (1970), Universal Consciousness (1971), Lord of Lords (1972), and World Galaxy (1972). Her “ever evolving brand of spiritual jazz” certainly set a trend as virtually every one of her albums bore a sacred mark of some kind.

Bassist Cecil McBee spoke about his time with the late pianist.

So Alice Coltrane, when she arrived, was more subtle in her statements, from a very spiritual point of view. She was very quiet, expressing the various sound and waves of spirits and essences of the Gods and Earth…

Alice herself spoke about her involvement with the sacred.


132. See Discography.


Everything I do is an offering to God – that’s the truth. The work I am trying to do is a sort of sharing with my sisters and brothers of the world; my all; the results I leave to God. I am really not concerted with results; my only concern is the work—the effort put forth.  

Indeed, Alice Coltrane is “nothing less than a trailblazer in free and spiritual jazz.”

Sacred Jazz owes its existence to the faith of these aforementioned musicians, but its longevity to other pioneering artists. In fact, any public acclaim garnered by the Sacred Jazz movement is most likely due to the efforts of Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington. The following chapters will outline the work of these three pioneers of Sacred Jazz.

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CHAPTER FIVE
MARY LOU WILLIAMS

This strong, talented, sensitive, passionate woman has laid the groundwork for me and many others who follow in her wake. How could we not be emboldened by her remarkable example?

-Deanna Witkowski

Mary Lou Williams is one of the most celebrated women in jazz. Her career as a performing pianist spanned five decades. She worked extensively as a composer, writing for the bands of Andy Kirk’s Twelve Clouds of Joy, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Fletcher Henderson, and Duke Ellington. She recorded over a hundred records, and inspired the modern jazz of her era from the 1920s into the 1960s. Her musical accomplishments seem to be counterbalanced by the high degree of suffering she endured throughout her life. Nevertheless, Mary Lou Williams’ determination and drive always lead her back to the piano, and in her later years, to her faith. As one commenter put it, “gaining meaning through suffering was, indeed, a major motif for Mary.”

Born in Atlanta in 1910, Mary Elfrieda Scruggs, as she was named at birth, was the second child of Virginia Riser and Joseph Scruggs. She was born out of wedlock, and rarely saw her father. Her mother, an alcoholic, was always out working in order to earn enough money to scrape by. Mary’s family was extremely poor and she recalled having to live shoeless until the age of three. Coincidentally, it was at this young age that Mary was discovered to be a musical prodigy. One day, her mother was playing the family

137. Witkowski, “Mary Lou’s Sacred Jazz.”

Harmonium, a type of pump organ, when Mary, who was propped on her mother’s lap, leaned over, and without prompt, played the same melodies her mother had just finished. As the story goes, her shocked mother dropped her.

Not much is known about Mary Lou Williams’ childhood. She was an intensely private person as an adult, reluctant to recount stories of her youth in order to gain pity from the listener. It is not that difficult, however, to imagine the difficulties of being a black female during the 1910s in America. Racism and sexism were facts of life. She remembered children calling her names, white people throwing bricks at her, white families driving by in cars and trying to kick her from their cars while she played in the street. In one memorable incident, a white local mother actually chased her away with a butcher knife. Even light skinned black children mocked Mary because of her darker complexion.  

When her family moved to Pittsburgh in the late 1910s, Mary’s problems didn’t seem to get any better. White families lived all around her, and the racism she endured in the south continued in the north. Her mother, who had to take a demanding job as a maid in order to make ends meet, had to hire a nanny to take care of Mary, who was still six or seven. The nanny was a cruel woman who would starve Mary, and when Mary complained of hunger, the nanny would make her chew tobacco and swallow the juice. To make matters worse, the nanny would also tickle Mary to the point of spasms.

Music was Mary’s escape. She found out early that she could play almost anything by ear. Complete strangers would stop off the street to listen to her practice. Eventually she began to play for the neighbors, making 50 to 75 cents a day. She heard


140. Ibid., 18.
the ragtime of pianists like Jelly Roll Morton, James P Johnson, and Fats Waller on piano rolls. When she was 10, she learned that she could slow down the rolls and transcribe her musical heroes. It was in this way that Mary learned to use a heavy left hand, copying the broken-tenths method employed by James P Johnson.

It did not take long for Mary’s talent to open up opportunities for her. For several years in Pittsburgh she was known as “the little piano girl.” 141 She played for literally any function that was available, i.e. parties, church services, restaurants soirees, benefits, etc. Eventually a local vaudeville circuit picked her up, and she began to travel with them. When the band went to Chicago she met Earl Hines, Louis Armstrong, and Fred “Buck” Washington (Armstrong’s pianist). In 1926, the band went to New York, and she got a chance to meet her idols - James P. Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Fats Waller. 142 In fact, the day she met Waller, she was at a club watching him, when the conductor called her up after the show. Williams, who was just over 12 years old, went to the piano and actually played a few of the songs from the previous set by hear. Waller was overjoyed. 143

Mary Lou Williams would describe the traveling musicians’ life during the 1920s as “an animal life.” 144 Men constantly came on to her with little or no reservation. It was a time where men dominated women. In traveling bands, it was accepted that women would get beaten as part of their ‘training.’ Mary Lou struggled to fit in.

Photographers encouraged her to dress like a man in band photos, though she always


144. Ibid., 39.
declined. Her first and second husbands, as well as boyfriends Don Byas and Ben Webster, were later reported to have been physically abusive. Furthermore, the little money she made needed to be sent home; her mother and stepfather were unable to find work and were destitute. Also, as part of a vaudeville act, she occasionally had to perform in circus shows, employment that no white band would ever accept due to the terrible working conditions. The pay was terrible, and the food was even worse, and Mary recalled going without food for days.

However, music was, as it always would be, her escape. In 1927, she met Duke Ellington after playing with some of the members of his Washingtonians, Sonny Greer, Bubber Miley and Tricky Sam Nanton. Two years later she started a part-time stint in Andy Kirk’s Clouds of Joy, which would later become a full-time gig. Her ability to visualize music while hearing it naturally lead her into the role of composer, which she took on in full force with Andy Kirk’s band. Mary had a knack for advanced harmony and rhythm, so Kirk initially had her dictate chords and rhythmic hits to him, which he would furiously transcribe. Later, when she became more familiar with horn ranges and limitations, he let her arrange and compose by herself. Her songs “Mary’s Idea,” “Walkin’ and Swingin’,” “Froggy Bottom” and “Cloudy” would gain her credibility not only within the band, but within the jazz writing community at large.145

There is little doubt that Mary Lou’s compositional vision and pianistic ability singlehandedly created the sound of the Clouds of Joy, and her talents were in demand. Benny Goodman used her arrangements on “The Count,” “Sweet Georgia Brown, and “Messa Stomp,” and her compositions “Camel Hop” and the popular “Roll ‘Em.” Jimmy Lunceford played an arrangement of her song “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?”

145. Ibid., 74-75.
which was originally written for Andy Kirk’s band. Later in her career, she would even write for Duke Ellington, “Trumpets No End.” 146

Composing introduced a new set of struggles for Mary. It was almost always difficult for her to obtain any royalty payments on her compositions or arrangements. Record labels and others generally viewed Mary’s efforts as works for hire. In those days, smaller labels rarely gave out royalty payments, and larger companies often robbed their writers as well.

However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that jazz composition in the 20s and 30s was a collaborative effort. Bands would rehearse and work out arrangements together, yet only the leader would get the credit in the end. Musicians felt that even their repeated solos and riffs earned them arranging rights. Bandleaders, however, took all the credit. This was a common complaint, even against bandleaders as affluent as Duke Ellington. Mary’s hit song “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?” was blatantly ripped off in a song called “Black Coffee” which allegedly stole the entire blues section of “What’s Your Story, Morning Glory?” with a bridge added to make a new song. Although “Black Coffee” was later recorded by many other famous vocalists including Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, and Anita O’Day among others, Mary Lou never saw a dime of the royalties. Instead, she had to settle for the crumbs, a measly $300 as a lump, one-time payment.147

Leaving the Clouds of Joy was not a difficult decision for Mary Lou. The band at its height was traveling five to six thousand miles a week, a strenuous schedule even for an experienced musician. Furthermore, her relationship with the band leader was

146. Bryant, “Jazz In The Church: A Lecture/Concert.”
strained. Mary Lou kept up little pretense in hiding her various affairs with members of
the band, and Kirk had come to resent her for that. In addition, Mary was getting bored
with the monotonous routine, as everyone was expected to play the same solos in the
same order for every single performance. By the early 1940s the big band was losing its
prominence, and in its place, the newer bop small group was gaining popularity. 148

Moreover, with Kirk’s band, Mary had made a name for herself in the jazz world.

No woman other than the vocalists Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald had so dominated the swing scene or earned the genuine respect of bandleaders and musicians alike. Mary had seemingly broken through the “glass ceiling” that had prevented many talented jazzwomen from pursuing their professional goals. 149

New York City became Mary’s new home, as she quickly gained a strong reputation, playing with such musicians as Art Blakey, Illinois Jacquet, and Oscar Pettiford. She also traveled with Duke Ellington’s band as an on-staff writer. From the 1940s throughout the 1960 she would arrange and compose forty-seven known works for Duke.

In the mid 1940s Mary bought a small apartment on Hamilton Terrace in New York City. She accepted a regular gig at the Café Society, a fully integrated night club for jazz music which featured the stars of jazz. Her apartment, which was in Harlem, turned into a late night hang spot for many of these top musicians. Among them were

148. Ibid., 117-124.

149. Kernodle, Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams, 81.
Jack Teagarden, Sarah Vaughan, Tadd Dameron, Benny Goodman, Art Tatum, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Mel Torme, Hank Jones, and Dizzy Gillespie.  

Piano players in particular gained the most from the regular jazz congregations at Mary’s apartment. They would usually gather around the small upright piano she kept in her living room, trading musical ideas and sharing each other’s new compositions. In fact, Mary would serve as a mentor to a few of them, such as Errol Garner, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. Jazz Pianist Billy Taylor has since stated that both Powell and Monk’s sound on the piano changed significantly once they began their association with Mary Lou Williams. “She made them [Powell and Monk] both more aware of touch.” 

The many of the pianists, she claimed, took different licks of hers and incorporated them into their own songs. Of course, all of these musicians made an influence on her playing and composing as well, but nevertheless, it is certain that Mary had a major hand in shaping some of the most creative geniuses at the forefront of modern jazz music in the 1940s.

The mid 1940s was a particularly prolific as well as suddenly tragic time in Mary’s life. In 1945 she got her own weekly radio show named “Mary Lou Williams’ Piano Workshop.” Writing constantly for it, she composed her first multi-movement, full length piece, “The Zodiac Suite” which garnered mixed reviews from critics. For a brief time she joined Benny Goodman’s band while continuing to serve the role of arranger/composer for the famed bandleader. In spite of all of her efforts, Mary Lou still


struggled to find success in her compositional endeavors. Goodman consistently underpaid her for her work, and he never paid out royalties. Also, a new song she had spent months writing and arranging for piano and choir (“Elijah and the Juniper Tree”) had proven too difficult for any group and was never performed. Frustrated and dealing with stress, Mary had a mini crisis – she received a private abortion in her small apartment in 1949, a decision that would cause her guilt for the rest of her life.153

Mary Lou struggled to officially make it in New York. Bebop, a music which she had whole-heartedly embraced, had separated the ranks of jazz musicians. Musical experimentation had become the new norm, and modern music quickly shifted focus to West Coast Jazz, which Mary was not a part of. To make matters worse, many of the musicians she had previously helped in their time of need (Monk and Powell) simply abandoned her when she was under financial duress. The male hierarchy, which was so oppressive in her early days traveling with vaudeville bands, had reared its ugly head again. Around this same time, Mary was sued by a musician who claimed he was one of the original writers to her song “Satchel Mouth Baby” – a song which had done well and was one of the few to produce any sort of royalties for Mary. In order to avoid a long, legal battle, she was forced to settle. “It was a major blow to Mary professionally, personally, and monetarily.”154 Reluctantly, Mary would accept an offer to play in Europe in order to make some money and perhaps gain some exposure.

Europe was a haven of sorts for black jazz musicians during the early 1950s. Parisians, in particular, loved jazz. They lamented the African-American plight, and were fascinated by the resulting Afro-American culture. Many musicians flocked there

153. Dahl, Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams, 204-205.
154. Kernodle, Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams, 150.
after World War II, including Sidney Bechet, Bill Coleman, Kenny “Klook” Clarke, and Don Byas. Moreover, the mass migration of musicians also included several female musicians. Both Lil Harden Armstrong and Hazel Scott, for example, moved to Paris and had much success there.

Mary did what she felt needed to be done to advance her career, and she saw Europe as an opportunity to make money. However, she wanted to return to America as soon as she could, as the decision to move overseas made her uneasy. Never before had she made a career choice based solely on finances. For example, she had once even turned down joining Louis Armstrong’s band because she had no desire to be a sideman.155

However, Mary’s manager mislead her and stranded her in Europe, contractually obligating her to stay there and perform longer than she had originally planned. Nonetheless, Mary was initially met with some level of success. Her concerts at most venues were well attended, and she felt at home among the crowds who adored black performers. But eventually the hectic nature of Mary’s traveling schedule wore on her. She needed to rest in order to maintain the same level of stamina she was capable of in her younger years. Mary also had developed an unhealthy spending habit as a form of stress relief. While her debt grew, she experienced a personal loss when friend, Garland Wilson, an American Pianist who had moved to Paris around the same time Mary had, died. Mary became unraveled. She was in a country she did not want be in, under a mountain of debt, and was mourning the passing of Wilson. She commented on this time in her life:

155. Ibid., 162.
I was in my hotel room alone and all of a sudden it seemed as though everything I had done up to then meant absolutely nothing. I was despondent because everything seemed so meaningless and useless. Even my beloved music, the piano I played, all seemed to have lost their appeal. So had my former associates in show business, the musicians, the nightclub owners and the wealthy men and women who were my patrons and who had been dining and wining me—none of them seemed important any more. There was no feeling for me to end it all. It was just despondency based on the fact that I felt everything I had been doing was no good.\footnote{Dahl, \textit{Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams}, 239-240.}

As a result, in the middle of a set one night in, she simply stopped playing and walked out. That night in 1954 marked the beginning of a three year hiatus from regular performance and a time of deep, personal and spiritual evaluation.\footnote{Kernodle, \textit{Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams}, 147-169.}

Mary Lou Williams drew back from public performing, and devoted herself to reading the Psalms, prayer, and a life of relative solitude. For the first time in her life, she did not turn to music as a mode of escape. She, instead, chose to face her demons head on, trying to find a new direction in her life. She was able to get a ticket home to New York, but holed up in her apartment when she got there, shutting the jazz world out completely. She stopped playing piano, and did not listen to any radio or jazz recordings. Her financial situation became so dire however, that she was eventually forced to accept the occasional gig in order to support herself.

Mary eventually decided to seek out a church, and after months of searching, found Our Lady of Lourdes, a Catholic Church located on 142\textsuperscript{nd} street. She attended her new church daily, sometimes spending hours fasting and praying. She quit her excessive spending habits and began to help others. She gave away money, clothes and food. She bought groceries and cared for musician friends of hers that had drug problems. Even her
speech changed, no longer focused on music, but on God, prayer, and the problems of this world. Her entire life was different.\textsuperscript{158}

Mary’s big return to music happened at the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival with the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra. It was a long time coming. Dizzy, among others, had been a friend to Mary throughout her three year pause from music. He had always tried to get her back into music, but had never succeeded. A Jesuit Priest named Anthony Crowley who had befriended Mary, was able to convince her to return. “‘You’re an artist,’ he told her. ‘You belong at the piano and writing music. It’s my business to help people through the Church and your business to help people through music.’” \textsuperscript{159}

After Newport, Mary continued to accept playing opportunities. Although she preferred to avoid night clubs, she needed money, and many new clubs and restaurants were calling her to headline. Something had changed for Mary, however. She no longer sought out work to advance her name, compositions, or career. She did so to save money that would be used to start what would later become the Bel Canto Foundation, an organization that existed to provide emotional and medical aid to drug addicted musicians. This was an incredibly personal issue for Mary, after watching a great number of her friends from New York die as a result from drug abuse, including saxophonist Charlie Parker (1955) and pianist Tadd Dameron (1965). Wardell Grey, a saxophonist who had recorded a number of times with Mary, was beaten to death by gangsters for not paying a debt that had mounted because of drug addiction. Acclaimed

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 180.

vocalist Billie Holiday succumbed to cirrhosis of the liver due to years of alcohol and
drug abuse. Mary took initiative and founded the Bel Canto Foundation.\textsuperscript{160}

During this time, Mary was also able to find a renewed level of peace while she
was playing.

Before, I was almost wasted…now I can express myself better without
“hoggin’ up”—making mistakes. My thinking is much better. I can really
play from my mind through my heart to my fingertips, and that’s what jazz
really is.\textsuperscript{161}

The early 1960s were a time of political change in America. The black
community had shown resistance to the racist policies from the earlier part of the century
and had seen positive change. Desegregation was beginning to take place, and freedom
marches as well as nationally organized boycotts were regularly scheduled. Jazz music
reflected this wave of change. ‘Free Jazz’ musicians musically represented their feelings
of political and social unrest. Many jazz musicians felt free to experiment. Mary
disliked such movements as she felt that they ignored the African roots of jazz and the
overall African-American experience which gave the music unity and originality.

The 1960s was also a time of change in the Catholic Church. The church had
observed the changes in popular music, and in an effort to reflect this, they passed a few
ordinances which allowed for a more modern representation of music in their worship
services. This reformation within church policy opened the door for Mary to write jazz
liturgical music. She quickly got to work, writing a hymn for Martin De Porres, an Afro-
Peruvian priest who had been recently canonized (the first non-Caucasian man to be
given the distinction).

\textsuperscript{160} Kernodle, Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams, 190-194.

\textsuperscript{161} Dahl, Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams, 270.
De Porres’s life as a servant to others spoke directly to Mary’s aspirations to better the lot of mankind through unselfish service; it also invigorated Mary, who sought affirmation of her place within the Church as an African American.\textsuperscript{162}

The piece was premiered in November of 1963 at St. Francis Xavier Church, and a month later was performed for the mainstream public at Philharmonic Hall with Dizzy Gillespie. Although it garnered mixed reviews, Mary continued to write Sacred Jazz music and eventually had enough to material to record her first Sacred Jazz Album, \textit{Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes}.

\textit{Black Christ of the Andes} was diverse. A few tracks included a mix of choir and piano, other tracks had various small ensembles, and one was solo piano. Mary’s playing is controlled, soulful, blues driven, and at some points impressionistic.\textsuperscript{163} And although Mary went to great lengths to promote the album, it received mixed reviews from critics and did not prove to be a financial success. However discouraged she was, she continued to perform publicly in various festivals and clubs, playing selections from her recent album whenever she could.\textsuperscript{164}

After a particularly successful Sacred Jazz concert in New York, a local Catholic School hired Mary to teach music classes. While there, she was urged by many priests to write a sacred mass. This mass, the first of the three, was entitled \textit{Mass} and was premiered in Pittsburgh’s St. Paul’s Cathedral. This mass set the standard for many other Catholic Churches. Churches that were on the fence about the inclusion of non-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[162.] Kernodle, \textit{Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams}, 200.
\item[163.] Williams, \textit{Black Christ of the Andes}.
\item[164.] Kernodle, \textit{Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams}, 202-206.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
traditional Church instruments, now felt free to include them. Secondly, Mary’s mass validated Black Liturgy within the church, a huge accomplishment for the late 1960s.

Mary’s second mass was entitled *Mass for Lenten Season*, and was commissioned by the local Catholic Churches. By now Mary’s purpose in writing her masses, was to increase the appeal of Sacred Jazz music. It was performed throughout the Lenten season in 1968. Mary included the hymn “We Shall Overcome” in tribute to the recently assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. The concert series was extremely popular, and invigorated Mary in continuing her efforts to spread the appeal of Sacred Jazz.

In August of 1968 Mary left for a performance tour of Europe. She hoped that she would be given an audience with the Pope and be able to give a concert for him. In January of 1969 Mary went to Rome. She soon learned that she would not be able to perform in the Vatican, but instead performed in another chapel located in the heart of Rome to huge crowds that had anticipated her coming. Soon after, Mary was commissioned by a member of the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace to write a mass for peace and justice.

After returning to the United States, Mary continued work on her third mass. She “wanted this mass, more than her previous religious works, to address the contemporary social problems of racism, war, and lack of compassion.” 165 She also wanted to be able to perform it during a Mass service, something which she had been denied while in Rome. She set her sights on St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, but realized that it would be unlikely for her to ever perform there.

165. Ibid., 229-230.
Her third mass, *Mass for Peace*, originally debuted at the Holy Family Church in New York in 1969. It served as a memorial for the assassination of Kenyan leader Tom Mboya, and focused on the making the world a better place. Whereas Mary’s previous vocal compositions were ambitious and employed complex harmonies, her *Mass for Peace* was much simpler in focus, reflecting the message of the lyrics. Although the concert attendees loved the music, it had no affect on Church officials at St. Patrick’s. Mary acted accordingly and rearranged the music of this third mass to fit in a jazz-rock vein. She had hoped that finding a younger audience would encourage Church officials to let her perform the work at St. Patrick’s. Mary chose to record this reorganized mass and the result was a 1970 album called *Music for Peace*. The album, like many of her previous albums, was not a commercial success initially, but after a well attended performance at Columbia University and many positive reviews by critics, Mary’s record sales significantly increased.

For a time, Mary went back to performing secular jazz regularly in New York. She began a regular gig at the Cookery, playing five nights a week from 8:00 pm to 1:00 am. To her surprise, she was met with a relative amount of success as leader that seemed to elude her earlier in her career. In 1971 she recorded a solo piano album called *From the Heart*, which was wildly applauded among the critics of the time. One downbeat reviewer said that “after a two month of hearing ‘From the Heart’ regularly, my momentary enthusiasm has become permanent admiration. This indispensable recording is a FIVE STAR album.” 166 She received the Guggenheim Fellowship for Music Composition which would provide her with a significant amount of money to fund her arranging/composing. She also began getting offers to tour and perform extensively. In

the mid 1970s, she recorded the album Zoning, a mixture of sacred and secular tracks. It was met with wide acclaim, even being nominated for a Grammy in 1975. Her jazz career after fifty years was still booming. Clearly, the secular side to Mary’s career seemed reinvigorated by her work in the sacred field.

The struggle continued to get her mass performed in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Church leaders were still hesitant to incorporate secular musical styles into a sacred Mass setting. In the meantime, Mary’s mass had been renamed Mary Lou’s Mass and performed with the addition of a dancing company at the New York City center in 1971. Mary’s new manager, a Jesuit priest, made a point of booking performances of Mary Lou’s Mass wherever Mary was (schools, churches, recreation centers, etc.). Enthusiasm for Mary’s sacred music was ever escalating. People adored the masses everywhere they were played.

Finally, in 1975, Mary was given permission to perform Mary Lou’s Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. This performance of jazz liturgy was truly an historic event. Over three thousand people packed into the church. Regular Mass customs were followed; first the readings from Psalms and Isaiah (chosen for the Tuesday on the first week of Lent) were read, followed by a homily by Mary’s manager. Mary then conducted her group from the piano to an amazing performance. John W. Donohue, S.J. who wrote for America commented that Mary Lou’s drew “waves of applause and a general air of exhilaration that animates a crowd when people know they’ve shared a momentous and uplifting experience.” 167 Another commenter said that

the performance was “an inspiring, lovely religious experience.” Mary herself spoke after the performance saying “American’s don’t realize how important jazz is. It’s healing for the soul. It should be played everywhere—in churches, nightclubs, everywhere. We have to use every place we can.” Mary would record *Mary Lou’s Mass* that same year.

The significance of what Mary had accomplished was and still is astounding. Obviously it was the culmination of years of work and the achievement of obtaining a personal goal, but it can be considered much more than that. The church had finally integrated black culture into its normal routine. St Patrick’s was not a minor church either—it was a major Catholic establishment in the heart of one of the biggest cities in the country.

…the success of the performance at St. Patrick’s was not simply a question of the acceptability of jazz. It represented the culmination of Mary’s efforts to alter the traditional attitudes of the Catholic Church toward its black parishioners. Although the history of black Catholics in American can be traced back to before the Civil War, the church leadership had not sought to fully integrate black parishioners into the priesthood and church leadership. Mary knew that getting this work performed in the stronghold of New York Catholicism meant not only the acceptance of jazz as a viable art form but the acknowledgement of the cultural and spiritual contributions of black Catholics such as herself.

Shortly after her St. Patrick’s performance, Mary became one the recognized figures of jazz in the public eye. Radio and television talk programs begin inviting her on to speak about her life and music. CBS ran a show in 1976 which featured Mary talking about her faith as well as selections from her latest mass. The poverty and misfortune


that had pervaded so much of her life were now things of the past. She was earning more money than she ever had and was able to live frugally, avoiding debt.

Mary lived the remainder of her life in Durham, North Carolina. She had been approached by Frank Tirro, jazz historian and saxophonist, with the hopes that she would accept a professorship at Durham University. After some deliberation, Mary agreed (no doubt persuaded by a $100,000 a year salary). She taught jazz history, jazz improvisation and a jazz ensemble. Her jazz history course was so popular that at one point over seven hundred students signed up for the class. Mary was amazed. She herself had never graduated from high school, had constantly been denied royalties and payments, had been victimized because of the color of her skin and gender, and now she had a secure, salary-based job which allowed her to travel and perform as she wished.

In 1979, Mary found out that she had bladder cancer.171 She continued to teach, travel and perform, but her physical condition worsened. She experienced daily, excruciating pain which stemmed from the spreading cancer into her spine. Mary knew that her death was imminent, so she started the Mary Lou Williams Foundation, an organization that provided scholarships to children that wanted jazz instruction from established musicians. Eventually, she was no longer able to teach, and she stayed at home, writing and playing. She died on May 28th, 1981.172


172. Ibid., 358-379.
CHAPTER SIX

DUKE ELLINGTON

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was a premier jazz composer in the 1930s and 40s. His unique career spanned over six decades (from Woodrow Wilson being elected president to the end of the Vietnam War). He composed over 2,000 pieces, won 13 Grammy awards, received the Pulitzer Prize, and was given the President’s Gold Medal (by Lyndon Johnson) and the Medal of Freedom (by Richard Nixon). He wrote several international hits which brought him worldwide fame including “It Don’t Mean a Thing if it Ain’t Got that Swing,” “In a Mellotone,” “Satin Doll,” and “Mood Indigo.” Yet, towards the end of his life Duke would repeatedly say that his Sacred Concerts were the most important thing he had ever done.

Duke was born in 1899 and brought up by Daisy Kennedy and James Edward Ellington. Being a black citizen of the United States during this time period usually meant a life of hardship, but Washington D.C. (where Duke grew up) was among the upper echelon of black neighborhoods in the country. Black workers there were not doomed to a life of hard labor, instead, there was opportunity for the elite to obtain reputable jobs which paid an honest living. Daisy, Duke’s mother, was a high school graduate, a rare thing for black women at the time, and his father was a fairly successful butler, working jobs at various embassies and eventually the White House. Duke also

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174. Ellington, Music is My Mistress, 269.
had a large extended family who would all supply a loving support net for him through the years. 175

Consequently, Duke was brought up with a sense of dignity and class. His parents taught him to dress and speak a certain way. As an adult, Duke was a well-spoken, eloquent man who knew what he wanted, and who usually got it. His upbringing was certainly privileged compared to other black children in different parts of the country. Both of his parents were musicians, and he was brought up at a time when ragtime was very popular. He, like his father, was a charmer of women. When Duke realized that he could make money and attract female attention by playing piano, he was hooked. Furthermore, Duke was constantly surrounded by family and friends, and the music he would begin to write seemed always to represent “hospitality, community, and celebration of life.” 176 He found beauty in places no one else seemed to look, as evidenced later by his songs “Apes and Peacocks,” “Lightning Bugs and Frogs,” “Harlem Air Shaft,” and “Eerie Moan.” 177

Duke learned about religion and spirituality as a young boy. His mother told him that his skin color didn’t matter, as God had made him. Every Sunday she brought him to two churches, her family’s church and his father’s family church. The two were not of the same denomination, but the differences were never stressed to Duke, who didn’t seem to care. He heard bible stories in Sunday School and spirituals and hymns in worship services. There is no question that Duke was engrained with messages of heaven, God,


177. Ibid., 23.
and Jesus Christ that gave him a “wonderful feeling of security” 178 Later in life, Duke told people that because of his early church lessons, he would read the bible every day. It was a source of help to him that would last throughout his life.

There were many sides to Duke’s personality however, and his faith was generally not in the forefront on display for the world to see. He was notably private about that aspect of his life. In fact, Duke was more known as a womanizer and a drunkard, than a man of faith. His son Mercer recalled that Duke and Edna (Duke’s wife) fought all the time about Duke’s various affairs, and eventually, the two separated. Their marriage had been strained for some time, starting with the loss of their second child and the constant time they spent apart while Duke was working at nights. However, Duke’s ability to separate his work life from his personal life was uncanny. He never had problems finishing a composition or arrangement, and he always met his deadlines. On stage, Duke loved to smile and act the part of the entertainer. But, as one-commenter pointed out, “in a moment sometimes caught by the camera, his face would reveal a somber mood, a poignant sadness” 179 most likely due to the stress in his life that he was able to bottle away deep inside his interior.

Duke did not regularly attend church, and he certainly never prescribed to one sect over another. Moreover, he was very superstitious. He avoided open windows, refused to ride boats or trains, avoided wearing the color brown (the color of his suit on the day his mother died), and favored the number thirteen. If anything, his claims of

178. Ellington, Music is My Mistress, 15.
having read the bible several times over seem somewhat contradictory. In one infamous example, Duke was late for a performance at a major hotel. When he finally arrived, the first thing he said to the angered crowd was, “Forgive me, ladies and gentleman—but believe me, if you had seen her, you would understand.”

It is because of this that there are varying views as to why Duke decided to write his three sacred suites. Firstly, some believe that he simply wanted to join the ranks of Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven: composers who wrote masses, arias, and chorales. A second opinion would be that he wrote sacred music to make recompense for past sins. A third is that his reasons were actually genuine; that he did what he did with pure and honest motives. Regardless of the truth, as the real reason most likely involves some combination of the above three, the very nature of the confusion highlights the difficulty in pinpointing the exact type of person Duke was. Barry Ulanov, a biographer who traveled with Duke’s band, has commented that “there are whole encyclopedias to be written about the many sides of Ellington. It’s just endless.”

Ellington was a collaborative writer. From 1938 until 1967, Billy Strayhorn’s influence as an arranger/composer would help redefine Duke’s band. His harmonic, melodic, and orchestrational concepts were ahead of his time, and eventually, their partnership would result in a relationship akin to a father-son bond. Barry Ulanov, a famous biographer, commented on their relationship.

I think that to some extent the relationship with Strayhorn was the second child of his life…Strayhorn had a difficult life as a homosexual in a world that wasn’t open to that…As a father of four myself I could just feel it,

180. Ibid., 36.

181. Ibid., 20.

physically, in the way Duke responded to Strayhorn, and the way Strayhorn responded to Duke, when he presented his work to him. It was a son’s offering, and very, very moving.  

Musically, the two were virtually hive minded. Duke recounts a story:

Our rapport was the closest. When I was writing my first sacred concert, I was in California and he was in a New York hospital. On the telephone, I told him about the concert and that I wanted him to write something. “Introduction, ending, quick transitions,” I said. “The title is the first four words of the Bible—‘In the Beginning God.’” He had not heard my theme, but what he sent to California started on the same note as mine (F natural) and ended on the same note as mine (A flat a tenth higher). Out of six notes representing the six syllables of the four words, only two notes were different.

Strayhorn would write several hits for Duke’s Orchestra such as “Take the A Train,” “Passion Flower,” Daydream,” “Chelsea Bridge,” “Blood Count,” and “U.M.M.G.” (Upper Manhattan Medical Group).

Furthermore, Duke regularly hired arrangers/lyricists to write for his orchestra. Strayhorn would be an obvious example, but the practice of co-writing also extended to Duke’s partnership with Irving Mills, his business manager for several years. Many of Duke’s compositions were labeled as having been co-written with Mills, but in reality, this had much more to do with splitting up royalties than it did Mills writing any music. Duke’s son Mercer wrote several hits for Duke’s band including “Things Ain’t the Way They Used to Be” and “Blue Serge.” Mary Lou Williams wrote several arrangements and compositions for Duke Ellington, the most notable being “Trumpets No End.” Furthermore, Mary claimed that Duke decided to write sacred music only after she had given him a copy of *Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes* in 1963. She

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183. Ulanov, interview by Steed.
said her music “gave him...a new insight to do the same—he was not doing too good with his orchestra.”  Perhaps most telling is Duke’s list of 25 arrangers and lyricists that wrote for him—he would include this list towards the end of his memoir, *Music is My Mistress*.  

Duke showed early signs of delving into the sacred music of the Black Church for compositional inspiration—he was delving into the sacred music of the Black Church for compositional inspiration—his influence coming from the African American tradition and culture. His song “Shout ‘Em, Aunt Tillie” was an obvious nod to Pentecostal revival meetings. But it was “Black and Tan Fantasy” in particular that showed a much more spiritual side of Duke.

In “Black and Tan Fantasy” Ellington gathered the diverse elements of sacred music, the blues, plunger-muted tones of early jazz players, and a phrase from a European Romantic composer and organized them in a unique way. The piece is also an early example of Ellington’s penchant for blurring distinctions between (or reversing definitions of) the sacred and the secular. The term “black and tan” was coined to describe black nightclubs that welcomed whites along with their regular clientele. The title of this composition, consequently, suggest the flouting of convention, but the music, echoing the dark tones of hymns and mournful dirges, evokes the atmosphere of an old wayside chapel. One can almost smell the dusty plank floor and plain cushioned pews.

America’s Great Depression brought on difficult times for many musicians. Harlem was not the musical oasis as it had once been, and Duke would eventually leave the Cotton Club in 1931. Nevertheless, he was an excellent business man, and was able to provide consistent work for his band throughout. Duke soon found a cheap way to travel with his band by train and so the band was able to tour and perform, selling out to

188. Ibid., 53.
crowds around the country. Two successful recordings from this time period included “East St. Louis Toodle-O” and “Mood Indigo” (recorded in 1930).  

However, there were some racial barriers Duke had to deal with. He routinely avoided traveling anywhere near the South, as that part of the country still held no reservations about being openly racist. Also, his band could not stay at the same hotels as white people, couldn’t eat with white people, couldn’t associate with white women (which they had a noted proclivity for) and were frequently targets for music union fines. To make matters worse, compositions Duke considered to be sub-par sometimes became hits, and Duke was pressured by publishers to keep writing in those ways. He was no longer able to experiment as he was used to. The entire situation made him depressed and considered quitting music altogether.  

In 1933, Duke’s business manager arranged a tour of England, Holland and France. Although the band still faced racism from hotels and hotel managers, they received great reviews of their music. People loved his tonal palate. Established composers such as Percy Grainger, Igor Stravinsky, and Darius Milhaud raved after seeing Duke’s band. Knowledgeable fans would approach members of the band and ask questions about the music, something that the musicians were not accustomed to, even in America. They were even getting respect from white fans. This European trip lifted Duke out of his depression, and gave him the energy and drive to carry on. When he

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returned to the US, he even toured the South briefly and was very successful, breaking attendance records and garnering rave reviews everywhere his orchestra went. 191

Duke was dealt with several tragedies early on in his life. His mother, Daisy, died in 1935 from cancer. Duke loved his mother, and had moved her into his apartment in New York shortly after he had moved there. Duke was beside himself, and with no one to turn to, dove into composition, writing “Reminiscing in Tempo,” the longest piece he had yet written. Duke habitually turned to composing during difficult times. 192 His father passed away shortly after his mother, and a few members of his original band had to leave the group due to illnesses. In a 1935 Duke’s music was featured extensively in a film entitled Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life. The film is a tragedy, ending with a child’s funeral. In this final scene, Duke’s grief is also poignantly represented. His songs “Hymn of Sorrow” and “Saddest Tale” form the backdrop for the moment, and display his despair through the melancholic trumpet melody line. 193

In the mid 1930s, the Swing Era began and the big band sound was all the rage. While Duke certainly catered to the changing public tastes, he continued to experiment and write to suit his own tastes. Other bandleaders such as Benny Goodman, the Dorsey Brothers, Bob Crosby, Count Basie, Chick Webb, and Glenn Miller were gaining far more prominence. Duke’s composition “It Don’t Mean a thing (If it Ain’t Got That Swing)” captured the essence of the time period and popularized the word “swing.” The syncopation and forward driving rhythms inherent in jazz music was made popular by

191. Ibid.


193. Lawrence, Duke Ellington and His World, 237-239.
Louis Armstrong, and eventually became the rhythmic model for virtually every big band in the country. Furthermore, with the addition of Jimmy Blanton and his walking bass style, Duke’s band revolutionized the role of the rhythm section which influenced all of jazz from that point on.  

With Blanton on board, Duke’s band saw a few years of unprecedented success. Ben Webster also joined the band in 1939, and significant recordings were made including “Cottontail,” “Ko-Ko,” “Concerto for Cootie” (“Do Nothin’ Till You Hear From Me”), “What Am I Here For?” and “Jack the Bear.” The combination of Blanton and Webster was short lived though, as Blanton would die in 1942 and Webster would take a five-year leave-of-absence in 1943.  

During World War II, Duke’s band went through some more difficult times. Some members were drafted, gasoline prices were skyrocketing making traveling much more difficult, and the material needed to make records was in low supply due to the war material needs. Nevertheless, Duke’s band provided entertainment to the troops and those that had loved ones serving in the armed forces. It was an incredible period of composition for Duke as songs like “Sophisticated Lady,” “In a sentimental Mood,” “Solitude,” “In a Mellotone,” “Caravan,” “I let a song go out of my heart,” and “C-Jam Blues” proved to be hits for him and his band.  

One aspect of Duke’s career was an ongoing musical involvement in Civil Rights. He wrote the music for a film called *Jump For Joy*, a musical comedy which satirized the
Black, American experience. Duke was proud of his American roots and of the
“American Negro” (as he called his brothers and sisters). He viewed the African
American’s struggle as a triumph. Despite being denied rights and being forced to fight
and die for a country that mistreated them, they were still able to retain their freedom of
culture and spirit. His Liberian Suite (album) represented his pride and celebrated their
struggle. He wrote “New World A-Comin,’” a piano concerto based on the concept that
there was indeed a bright future and hope for black Americans. When a group of
Chicagoans organized a celebration of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation,
Duke wrote a large work called My People and performed it there. Furthermore, Duke
wrote another extended suite, Black, Brown and Beige, which was intended to musically
represent the African American experience. At its premier at Carnegie Hall in 1943, the
suite included pieces such as “Work Song,” “spiritual theme,” “Light,” “West Indian
Dance,” “Emancipation Celebration,” and “The Blues.” “Spiritual theme” evolved, and
through Johnny Hodges coloristic interpretations would later be re-titled “Come Sunday”
– a song written about the hope of a slave as he realizes that God is not ignorant of his
strife and will someday bring him comfort and joy.198

In the 1950s, several things changed in Duke’s band and in his personal life. He
carved to Europe once again in 1950, and after a short tour, returned to the United
States. Instrumental jazz music was being headlined by the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and
Charlie Parker. Jazz music was being split into creative camps which specialized in
artist-specific genres. The big bands of the 30s and 40s were no longer as popular as they
once were, and singers such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, and Jo Stafford
were gaining prominence in the musical world. Many concert halls and hotels which had

198. Ibid., 88-89.
employed Duke’s Orchestra in the past were simply not open anymore. There were several years where the band was survived on Duke’s composition and recording royalties. Furthermore, Johnny Hodges, Sonny Greer, and Lawrence Brown (all hallmarks of Duke’s orchestra) left the band in 1951 (Hodges would return in 1955). Duke would drastically alter his band’s repertoire as well and hire many new members (Clark Terry, Harry Carney, Jimmy Hamilton and Paul Gonsalves).\(^{199}\)

Through his struggles, Duke had become a leader of sorts on issues such as civil rights and racism. His orchestra played at several benefits for the cause of social justice. He spoke out publicly against segregation, even getting an invitation to speak with the President, Harry Truman. Southern Democrats at the time vehemently opposed racial integration, making any significant change in national policy very difficult. Thus, Duke was resigned to represent his feelings musically in a piece he called “Harlem” – Duke would not only give this composition to President Truman, but also perform it at an NAACP benefit concert.\(^{200}\) Later, Duke would even get an opportunity to meet and play for Martin Luther King Jr.\(^{201}\)

The 1956 Newport Jazz Festival marked a turning point in Duke’s career, as well as a rare moment in recorded live jazz history. The out-door festival was a relatively new concept that provided new performance opportunities for many musicians. On the last day of the festival that year, Duke’s band took the stage. Duke had decided to play “Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue,” a piece he hadn’t played with his orchestra since

\(^{199}\) Ibid., 92-95.

\(^{200}\) Ibid.

the 1930s. The solo section, a Db blues, was assigned to Paul Gonsalves. Gonsalves’
driving rhythms and lyrical blues riffs were powerful, and at about his seventh chorus, a
blonde woman towards the front began to dance the jitterbug. The energy was infectious,
and soon the entire crowd (about 7,000 in total) were out of their seats and dancing with
the band. Gonsalves would ride the energy and take 27 choruses in total.202 The concert
was a tremendous success for Duke. *Time* magazine shortly thereafter published a
feature-length article about him including remarks about their Newport Jazz Festival
performance.203 Two years later marked another momentous occasion at the Newport
Jazz Festival, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson would sing with Duke’s Orchestra.

To be certain, Mahalia Jackson was an heiress of Thomas A. Dorsey.204 But even
though Jackson, as well as many of her peers, had embraced their changing church music,
there were certain lines that gospel musicians generally did not cross, like performing
with jazz musicians. Jackson changed the mold, and decided to sing with Duke. After
all, she considered his orchestra to be a “sacred institution”205 Jackson met Duke at
Columbia studios in 1958 and recorded “Come Sunday” (the “spiritual theme” from
*Black, Brown and Beige*). After the initial take, Duke asked Jackson to sing the 23rd
Psalm with sparse orchestral accompaniment. “23rd Psalm” along with “Come Sunday”


Guardian* (April 2010), http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog/2010/apr/06/duke-ellington-newport-
concert (accessed March 14, 2013).


are the highlights of the album, and would set the stage for Jackson to sing with Duke’s orchestra at the Newport Jazz Festival.\textsuperscript{206}

As the new decade came, major changes came in Church life. Catholic and Protestant Churches were now allowing jazz into their services, largely due to the efforts of Mary Lou Williams and others like her. During a 1962 tour in the Western United States, Duke Ellington was approached by Reverend John S. Yaryan and asked to write a sacred composition for the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Duke agreed, but did not immediately start work. Two years later, plans were resumed and Duke began composing for his first of three Sacred Concerts.

Given Duke’s celebrity status as an American musical icon, the press coverage of the event was significant. \textit{Time} magazine ran a press release to preview the show with a picture of Duke and Bishop Pike, a colleague of Canon Yaryan’s. The mail poured into the Cathedral office, people were both excited and critical. Press conferences were held as the public anticipated for the concert.\textsuperscript{207}

And finally, on September 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1965, Duke’s first Sacred Concert was premiered. It consisted of many of Duke’s previously written compositions including selections from \textit{Black, Brown and Beige} and \textit{My People} as well as his 1943 composition ”New World A-Comin.” Esther Marrow sang “Come Sunday,” in a fashion resembling Mahalia Jackson. And the premier piece of the night, “In the Beginning God” featured Jon

\textsuperscript{206} Ellington, \textit{Black, Brown and Beige}.

\textsuperscript{207} Steed, \textit{Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography}, 120.
Hendricks, Harry Carney, Paul Gonsalves, Cat Anderson, and Drummer Louie Bellson.\textsuperscript{208}

The concert was incredibly successful. Hundreds of newspapers across the country reviewed the concert positively. The \textit{Saturday Review} commented that Duke and his orchestra were “offering what they did best—better than any other in the world—to the glory of God.”\textsuperscript{209} Members of the clergy made a point of letting Duke know of their approval. Duke was so invigorated that he went on to present the Sacred Concert at the Monterey Jazz Festival later that month. He also performed it at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City as well as many other houses of worship all over the country and even one in England. In total, Duke performed this first Sacred Concert around fifty times. In a sense, he began to think of himself as God’s “messenger boy.”\textsuperscript{210}

In 1967, Billy Strayhorn died due to complications from esophageal cancer. When Duke received the news, he was distraught. His ‘musical accomplice’ for the past thirty years was now gone, and although the two were opposites in physical size and disposition, they had been singularly minded in their musical ambition. By the time Strayhorn had passed, Duke was already preparing for his second sacred concert. On January 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1968 at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, Duke premiered his Second Sacred Concert, for which he had written many new pieces. “Supreme Being” was the lengthy opener and featured Alice Babs, an excellent vocalist that would sing Duke’s sacred music for years to come. “The Shepherd Who Watches Over the Night


\textsuperscript{209} Ellington, \textit{Music is My Mistress}, 263.

“Flock” featured Cootie Williams growling over a blues form. The longest piece was “It’s Freedom,” which featured the choir as well as Duke in a Strayhorn-inspired piano solo in the middle. Duke, was “visibly moved” as he played his tribute to Strayhorn.

Like the first concert, the second was an enormous success. The crowd of about seven thousand gave a roaring response to the concert, especially to the show’s finale, when two groups of dancers danced through the crowd to “Praise God and Dance.” The press was particularly positive in their reviews of the Second Sacred Concert. Publications such as the *Daily News*, the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Saturday Review* unanimously praised Duke’s efforts. Duke’s themes of love, unity, forgiveness, and freedom were ever powerful and resounded with his listeners. In fact, from 1968 to 1973 he would continue to perform the Second Sacred Concert, or portions of it, all over the world. One commenter noted that:

….whether in the White House or on the streets of Harlem, in supper clubs or on college campuses, Duke Ellington’s music—particularly the Sacred Concerts—had great potential for linking people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, religious persuasions, and political views.

This was particularly evident when Duke performed the Sacred Concert in New Orleans, and the first interracial and intercollegiate dance group was hired to perform with Duke’s Orchestra.

Duke’s Sacred Concerts are fascinating pieces. Although Duke was asked to compose music for a mass, none of his Sacred Concerts were meant to be liturgy—a fact Duke would reiterate many times. They were performance pieces. After all, many of his one hundred plus performances of the Sacred Concerts took place in non-Church settings.

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212. Ibid., 125.
He always gave mention to soloists and featured members of the band, much like the way he did in secular venues. Nevertheless, Duke viewed his performances as a his own form of worship, and his audiences always reacted to the energy—laughing at Duke’s humor, clapping in rhythm, snapping their fingers, and tapping their toes. Duke was helping redefine the roles of accepted church music. African American bands and music were not generally tolerated at the established places of worship that the Sacred Concerts were occasionally performed in. By leading his bands there, he was becoming much more than a bandleader—he was developing into a civil rights icon and leader as well.\textsuperscript{213}

Musically, the Sacred Concerts provided a plethora of performance styles. There was blues (both in form and melodic language), dancing, spoken word, theatrics, and even vocalese. Church choir sections were juxtaposed with soaring soloists for dramatic effect. Large, complex orchestral shouts were cued by solo piano soliloquies—a device commonly used in Black Gospel churches. Duke foreshadowed transitions with piano fills and melodies, much like keyboardists do in church. He even played an electric piano, probably to imitate the sound of a church organ. And of course, there was swing.\textsuperscript{214}

In the Sacred Concerts Ellington reunited the strains of black music that had been divided into two types labeled sacred and secular: the spirituals and hymns reserved for Sunday morning, the blues and jazz associated with Saturday night. What he [Duke] did was to reclaim the sacred origins of jazz and demonstrate that all musical instruments could be employed in praise of God, just as Psalm 150 commanded.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 135-140.


Duke was awarded many prestigious honors late in life. He performed at the White House in 1965 and received the President’s Gold Medal in 1966. In 1968 he was appointed to the National Council on the Arts. In a 1971 tour that included the Soviet Union, Duke was given membership to the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. Later that same year he received honorary doctorates from the Berklee College of Music and Columbia University. He also received honorary degrees from Armstrong (the high school in Washington that he never graduated from), Yale, Brown, Howard, and St. Louis.216

Duke also began traveling with his band even more than he had in previous years. The orchestra performed in Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, and Hawaii. They also extensively toured the U.S. playing at low-key venues to enthusiastic crowds. In the liner notes to album Duke Ellington Live at the Whitney, Dan Morgenstern commented that no other composer-performer in history kept up as rigorous of a performance schedule as Duke.217

Naturally, his travels were reflected in his writing. His later suites were entitled The Far East Suite, The Latin American Suite, and The Queen’s Suite.218

The Third Sacred Concert happened seven months before Ellington’s Death in Westminster Abbey. Duke opened with a solo piano rendition of “The Lord’s Prayer,” featured Alice Babs on his ballad “My Love,” and Toney Watkins on “Ain’t Nobody

216. Lawrence, Duke Ellington and His World, 419-421.


Nowhere Nothin’ Without God.”  

By this point in his life, Duke was tiring. His eyesight was failing, and needed to be hospitalized. Towards the end he had a piano installed in his hospital room and dictated notes for his son to engrave. His body wasted away from cancer, and having caught pneumonia, Duke died May 24th, 1974.


JOHN COLTRANE

John Coltrane is a jazz legend and a cultural icon. It is impossible to learn jazz music without studying some part of his short-lived career. His improvisational approach has been copied and built into mainstream soloing approaches. Many of his compositions for small group have become international standards, and his directive for the jazz ensemble has been imitated many times over. Furthermore, many musicians outside of the jazz world, including Philip Glass, Terry Riley, Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers, Carlos Santana, Bono of U2, and Jerry Garcia of the Grateful dead, have referred to Coltrane’s influence on their music. His spiritual investigations both in his musical and personal life have influenced the poets Michael Harper, Al Young, and Amiri Baraka, and even paintings by Ralph Fasanella. The late Elvin Jones said simply, “I believe that he was an angel.” 221

John William Coltrane was born Sept 23rd, 1926 in North Carolina to Alice and John Robert Coltrane, a minister’s son. His mother’s family (the Blairs) was well respected in the community as they were a literate family (uncommon for African-Americans in the south). The elder Blair was a minister who opened up a school for black children in the local community. Since both sides of his family were involved in the church, Coltrane appears to have come from a family that instilled him with God-

221. Elvin Jones in a radio interview broadcast by Alan Grant shortly after Coltrane’s death, 1967.
fearing sense of right and wrong. His grandfather was also somewhat of an activist, speaking out about civil rights.  

In the late 1930s a series of deaths rocked the Coltrane family. His Aunt, Grandfather, and father died in 1938 and his Grandmother passed away in 1939. John was devastated, especially by the death of his father. His family was decimated. Only he, his cousin Mary, and their mothers remained, and without the paternal income, they became very poor. Distraught, Coltrane took up the alto and clarinet and practiced hours upon hours.

Coltrane faced other difficulties as well. In North Carolina, there was a constant threat of racism for black families like his. Schools were segregated, and blacks were routinely denied the same privileges that whites had. School textbooks were scarce and outdated, and many of the materials that were available were obtained secondhand from white schools. Ironically, even the surnames Coltrane and Blair were constant reminders for Coltrane that his family was once enslaved, as it was common for slave masters to give slaves their last name. Both Coltrane and Blair are Scottish in origin, not African. Coltrane would later avoid visiting the South, most likely due to the overt racism he experienced there throughout his life.

Coltrane was 13 when he started his first instrumental training with a community band. He played alto horn but soon switched to clarinet. The band played a number of functions, the most common being marches. Coltrane had a particular affinity for learning and practicing. He enjoyed memorizing, and the other musicians in the band


223. Ibid., 16-17.

noted his passion for practicing and learning. He soon made the switch to alto saxophone, however and got the chance to play all the melody and solo parts, which he learned by heart. He was always practicing, even when he was off of the bandstand.225

From the beginning John is said to have practiced constantly...he had played the clarinet in his backyard at three or four in the morning. He was already noted for his ability to concentrate. Later in life, his ability to both practice and perform for hours at a time became legendary.226

In 1942, during Coltrane’s senior year, his mother Alice moved to Philadelphia to find work. That same year he began drinking and smoking with his friends, a habit that would last for much of his life. He graduated in 1943, moved to Philadelphia, and began work at a sugar refining factory. For years, Coltrane held a number of jobs that had nothing to do with music. He shined shoes as a boy in the local country club, and later got a job working at the headquarters for the Cambell Soup Company in Camden.227

Coltrane eventually made the decision to become a professional jazz musician, a choice that sat well with his family. His mother was a singer and an amateur pianist, and his father had been a clarinetist. Moreover, their North Carolina house always had the radio on playing the music of the day. In elementary school, his music teacher taught spirituals and hymns as well as piano lessons. Coltrane even participated in high school boys choir and mixed choir. His cousin Mary later recalled that in the late 1930s, she had frequently gone with him to see traveling big bands play – those included Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Count Basie with Lester Young (who would later become Coltrane’s idol).

226. Ibid, 33.
227. Ibid., 23.
Philadelphia was a thriving place for jazz musicians in the 1940s. The older generation of active swing musicians included Jimmie Tisdale, Jimmy Gorham, and Charlie Gaines. Big bands were dying out, however, and being replaced with the smaller ensemble. Philadelphia musicians embraced these changes that were sweeping the jazz scene, and Coltrane started getting gigs, the first of which was with a pianist and a guitarist – a cocktail gig that paid the bills. Shortly thereafter, Coltrane met Benny Golson, a saxophonist two years younger than him. The two became very close, constantly practicing with each other. Coltrane was with Golson when he first heard the great alto saxophonist Charlie Parker – Coltrane, in particular, was blown away, and had encountered his first major musical influence.\footnote{J.C. Thomas, \textit{Chasin’ the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane} (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1975), 36.}

In 1946, Coltrane began building a career in Philadelphia after returning from a short stint with the navy. His early influences, Johnny Hodges and Charlie Parker, helped shape his lyricism, tone quality, and knowledge of music theory and the upper chord structures as used in bebop. At the time, Philadelphia had a strong lineup of active musicians. Saxophonist Benny Golson, saxophonist Jimmy Heath and his brother bassist Percy Heath, drummer Philly Joe Jones, pianist Red Garland, trumpeter Johnny Coles, and drummer Al “Tootie” Heath were all from Philadelphia and they all had an impact on Coltrane. There were also many visiting stars as Philadelphia had a great nightclub scene. Coltrane was fortunate and got plugged into weekly gigs with local musicians, playing at Joe Pitt’s Musical Bar during the week, and the Caravan Republican Club on the weekends. He got his first traveling gig with Joe Webb in an R&B band. Shortly
thereafter, he returned from tour and joined the King Kolax big Band, a band which played more modern jazz, as opposed to Rhythm and Blues.\(^2^{29}\)

Coltrane didn’t stay with Kolax for long. He joined Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson’s band, and was assigned the Tenor Saxophone chair. Coltrane became enamored with the instrument.

\[\text{[W]hen I bought a tenor to go with Eddie Vinson’s band [he may have borrowed Golson’s before or owned a low-quality instrument], a wider area of listening opened up for me….On alto, Bird had been my whole influence, but on tenor I found there was no one man whose ideas were so dominant as Charlie’s were on alto. Therefore, I drew from all the men I heard during this period. I have listened to about all the good tenor men, beginning with Lester [Young], and believe me, I’ve picked up something from them all, including several who never recorded. The reason I liked Lester so was that I could feel that line, that simplicity. My phrasing was very much in Lester’s vein at this time.}\(^2^{30}\)

He loved saxophonists like Coleman Hawkins, Jimmy Oliver, Ben Webster, Don Byas, Illinois Jacquet, Sonny Stitt, and Dexter Gordon. Yusef Lateef was also an influence on Coltrane, as he was in Vinson’s band with Coltrane. It was Lateef who first introduced Coltrane to Eastern religions and philosophies. Coltrane would reference these beliefs later in his career.\(^2^{31}\)

It was 1948, and Coltrane had already begun drinking, smoking, and using heroin. Later in life, younger jazz musicians would look up to him and also began similar addictions. Jimmy Heath thought that Coltrane’s used drugs to help even out his intensity. He was an extremely diligent in his practicing and was a serious, focused

\(^{229}\) Porter, John Coltrane: His Life and Music, 54-57.

\(^{230}\) Devito, Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews.

\(^{231}\) Tirro, Jazz, a History, 386.
individual. Unlike most other musicians that used drugs during that time, Coltrane did not manifest changes in personality or violent outbursts while he was doing drugs. He always remained calm, and was able to stay himself no matter what he was doing. He was fortunate that he was never arrested, but his ability to control himself was perhaps a misfortune as well. There would be no real ‘wake-up’ call for Coltrane until about a decade later.\textsuperscript{232}

Late in 1949, Coltrane left Vinson’s band and joined Dizzy Gillespie’s big band, playing alto saxophone. Dizzy served as a mentor to all of his musicians, and he had a big effect on Coltrane. Unfortunately, Coltrane’s drug addiction was at an all time high. He and Jimmy Heath would get drugs from numerous suppliers while on tour with Dizzy’s band. They soon found that drugs in cities like New York were cheaper, and more effective. Consequently, during a trip to Los Angeles, Coltrane passed out after getting high, and Heath had to revive him. The experience scared Coltrane, but he kept drinking, and soon returned to heroin. Dizzy noticed the addiction and was angered by their lack of responsibility. He eventually fired both Heath and Coltrane.\textsuperscript{233}

Over the next few years, Coltrane worked a lot in Philadelphia. He had irregular stints with Dizzy Gillespie’s sextet (even after being fired from the touring band), and played with rhythm-and blues bands such as Gay Crosse and His Good Humor Six and Bullmoose Jackson. He free-lanced with drummer Specs Wright – who was at one time with Dizzy Gillespie but was also fired for drug use – did lounge cabaret gigs with Daisy Mae and the Hep Cats, and most notably, joined Johnny Hodges swing band. Essentially,

\textsuperscript{232} Thomas, \textit{Chasin’ the Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane}, 40, 47, 49.

Coltrane took any work he could get in order to support himself, his family, and his drug habits.\(^{234}\)

His drug habits were a major problem. Eventually, Johnny Hodges also let him go while on tour in Los Angeles because his drinking and heroin usage were getting in the way of his professionalism. Coltrane returned home to Philadelphia but found little work save for a short stint with organist Jimmy Smith. It didn’t take long, but he had earned a reputation as a drug addict. Lewis Porter has commented on this:

> His [Coltrane’s] stint had been musically invaluable, but it had not led to his being ‘discovered.’ Perhaps this was partly a result of his occasional unreliability when he was drunk or on heroin.\(^{235}\)

The 50s were a turning point for Coltrane. Miles Davis rose to prominence after the 1955 Newport Jazz Festival, and decided to put a regular group together. His normal tenor player was Sonny Rollins, but Rollins was also struggling with drug addiction. In order to combat his addictions he “started a pattern of ‘sabbaticals’ during which he suddenly disappeared from public view and established his own personal retreat for practice, recuperation, and contemplation. Then just as suddenly he would return fresh and inspiring.”\(^{236}\) One of Rollins’ mini retirements occurred in 1955, the same year Miles was forming his quintet. Davis hired Red Garland along with Philly Jo Jones (both hailing from Philadelphia) and the two convinced Miles to hire Coltrane. That same year (1955) Coltrane married Naima, a Muslim woman who would eventually help him quit his addiction. Like Coltrane, Naima was born in North Carolina, which probably helped

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\(^{235}\) Ibid., 88.

\(^{236}\) Tirro, *Jazz, a History*, 384.
create an immediate connection between the two. “Neta,” “Naima,” “Wise One” and “Syeeda’s Song Flute” were all written for his wife.\textsuperscript{237}

Miles had many dates lined up because of his success at the Newport Festival, and soon Coltrane was playing regularly with the quintet. The band did not immediately gel however. They were still discovering their sound, and most of them were strung out on drugs (including Coltrane who had not yet quit his habit).\textsuperscript{238} Critics were also very skeptical. They seemed to favor Sonny Stitt as well as Davis’ competition in Max Roach and Clifford Brown’s Band.\textsuperscript{239}

Some early notable recordings that Coltrane made with Miles were 	extit{Cookin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet, Relaxin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet, Workin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet, Steamin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet} (all on the Prestige label), and ‘	extit{Round about Midnight}, released in 1957, the first record Davis released for Columbia Records.\textsuperscript{240} It took Coltrane quite some time to find his sound and place in this band, and was often frustrated with his own playing. Later in life, he expressed remorse at how poorly he felt he played on the early Davis Prestige recordings.\textsuperscript{241}

Drug use continued to get in the way of Coltrane’s progression, and after a particularly rough stint of gigs, Davis decided to use Sonny Rollins for a time. Coltrane was in bad shape – showing up to gigs four or five nights in a row in the same wrinkled

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\textsuperscript{238} Diliberto, “\textit{Jazz Profiles} from NPR, John Coltrane: First Impressions.”

\textsuperscript{239} Tirro, \textit{Jazz, a History}, 386.

\textsuperscript{240} See Discography.

\textsuperscript{241} Porter, \textit{John Coltrane: His Life and Music}, 100.
clothes, without having showered. He had attempted to stop using drugs several times but was continually unsuccessful. To make matters worse, in April of 1957 Miles briefly fired Coltrane. His habits had gotten out of hand and the two had verbal and physical altercations.

This was a wakeup call for Coltrane. He knew he needed to quit heroin, and he eventually did. But to deal with the withdrawal symptoms, Coltrane drank heavily. It wasn’t until May of 1957 that he was able to quit his alcohol addiction as well. He locked himself in his bedroom for two weeks and drank nothing but water.

Getting over drug addiction was something that Coltrane would later relate to as a spiritual experience. He certainly relied on the support and encouragement of friends.

During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. I feel this has been granted through His grace.

Coltrane’s career was forever changed once he rid himself of his drug habit. In 1957, he recorded two albums. The first of which was simply titled *Coltrane* and featured two new originals, “Straight Street” (presumably a reference for quitting alcohol/drugs) and “Chronic Blues.” Already, Coltrane was experimenting with alternate II-V-I progressions, as is evident on the changes in “Straight Street.” The entire song is

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244. Bryant, “Jazz In The Church: A Lecture/Concert.”

essentially a series of chromatically descending II-V progressions. “Chronic Blues” is worth noting because of its minor key. Many of Coltrane’s later works were written in minor keys, and it seemed that he tended to favor them to suit his evolving sound and improvisational style.\textsuperscript{246} The second album Coltrane released in 1957 was \textit{Blue Train}. On “Lazy Bird” Coltrane highlights three different II-V progression which outline three different tonic chords, each a major third apart (G, Bb, and Eb, forming an Eb major triad). Al \textcentry{ already, Coltrane was toying with the techniques that would lead him to composing one of the greatest jazz standards of all time (Giant Steps).}\textsuperscript{247}

Coltrane’s relationship with Thelonious Monk also began in 1957. The two would meet at Monk’s house for regular rehearsals, playing music all day. The two had a similar proclivity for extended practice sessions. Without a doubt, Monk helped change Trane’s thinking about soloing. Coltrane felt free to explore irregular ideas, motifs that were asymmetrical and unusual. He began to play more extended solos, searching for the next phrase as he played over bar lines.\textsuperscript{248}

Later in 1957, Monk and Coltrane would record (\textit{Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane}) and begin a weekly stint at the Five Spot, an engagement that drew much positive acclaim for Coltrane. In fact, during his time with Monk, Coltrane would be in the studio ten times – twice as a leader, once for a special Blue Note special, and seven as a sideman. He was as in demand a player as he had ever been.\textsuperscript{249}


\textsuperscript{247} John Coltrane, \textit{Blue Train}, Various instrumentalists directed by John Coltrane, Blue Note, Vinyl, LP 1577, 1957.

\textsuperscript{248} Tirro, \textit{Jazz, a History}, 388.

\textsuperscript{249} Porter, \textit{John Coltrane: His Life and Music}, 113.
In the beginning of 1958, Coltrane was accepted back into Miles band. And now, he had resolved to hold onto his chair, a position he would hold for the next fifteen months. His time with Monk had opened his eyes personally to his own sound and musicianship. He was practically a new musician. Improvisationally, he began employing a rush of notes over implied changes – a style that would later be coined ‘sheets of sound’ by Ira Gitler.\textsuperscript{250} This way of playing would be brought out in two particularly important albums recorded in 1959, \textit{Kind of Blue} and \textit{Giant Steps}. That year Coltrane was making a very good living with Davis, and didn’t want to leave the security that the band gave him. But Davis was very supportive and encouraged all of his band members to branch out. Many of Miles’ previous band members had left and gone onto successful careers as leaders, including Bill Evans, Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, Cannonball Adderly, and Sonny Rollins. Coltrane saw his peers success and wanted a group of his own. He left in 1960, to be eventually replaced by George Coleman, and ultimately, Wayne Shorter.\textsuperscript{251}

\textit{Giant Steps} was a phenomenal landmark in John Coltrane’s career. It showcased Coltrane’s harmonic genius as well as established him as the top improviser at the time. Although it has been well documented that Coltrane drew upon several sources to create “Giant Steps” (the song), Coltrane’s investigation into the possibilities of composing and

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\textsuperscript{250} Henry Martin and Keith Waters, \textit{Essential Jazz: The First 100 Years}, 2nd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2009), 189.
\textsuperscript{251} Porter, \textit{John Coltrane: His Life and Music}, 140-144.
\end{flushright}
soloing over a song which tonicizes three major chords, each a third apart, was quite literally groundbreaking.\textsuperscript{252}

As fate would have it, Miles Davis began working on his modal concept around the same time that Coltrane was working on Giant steps. Davis’ idea was to do away with moving harmony altogether, and replace it with forms which highlight slow moving chordal schemes where one chord may last eight or even sixteen measures. The freedom inherent in such an idea was liberating for a player like Coltrane. He explains his understanding in his book \textit{Coltrane on Coltrane}:

\begin{quote}
We found Miles in the midst of another stage of his musical development. There was one time in his past that he devoted to multichorded structures. He was interested in chords for their own sake. But now it seemed that he was moving in the opposite direction to the use of fewer and fewer chord changes in songs. He used tunes with free-flowing lines and chordal direction. This approach allowed the soloist the choice of playing chordally (vertically) or melodically (horizontally). In fact, due to the direct and few-flowing lines of his [Davis’s] music, I found it easy to apply the harmonic ideas that I had. I could stack up chords—say, on a C7, I sometimes superimposed an Eb7, up to an F#7, [resolving] down to an F. That way I could play three chords on one. But on the other hand, if I wanted to, I could play melodically. Miles’ music gave me plenty of freedom. It’s a beautiful approach.\textsuperscript{253}
\end{quote}

On one hand, modal songs are simple because the improviser is not burdened with fast moving harmony. But on the other, modal music is very difficult because it demands that the soloist be melodically creative in such a way that the listener is engaged regardless of the stagnant harmony. Coltrane’s mastery of such a concept is evident in his solo on “So What.” He begins with short ideas, lengthens them rhythmically, and


\textsuperscript{253} Devito, \textit{Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews}. 
develops and expands them until they explode in a dramatic flurry of notes. His development as a soloist on the album *Kind of Blue* was unparalleled, and his work on this album, along with *Giant Steps*, helped open his mind up to the possibilities of improvisational and melodic freedom. Furthermore his work on both records established him as an international jazz star, both as a performer and a composer.

In 1961, Joe Termini, the owner of the Five Spot and the Jazz Gallery, encouraged Coltrane to put together his own band. Coltrane wanted McCoy Tyner, Art Davis, and Elvin Jones, but McCoy and Elvin were not available. Instead, Coltrane hired Steve Kuhn on piano, Steve Davis on bass, and Peter Sims “LaRoca” on drums. Coltrane was not happy with Kuhn’s playing, and after a month, replaced him with McCoy. A similar circumstance ended LaRoca’s tenure with the band. He would be replaced with Elvin Jones. This band – Tyner, Jones and Davis – would record the albums *My Favorite Things* (1961), *Coltrane Plays the Blues* (1962), and *Coltrane’s Sound* (1964).

These recordings have the freshness of discovery. They’re full of lightness and grace, buoyant, and yet at the same time fiery, passionate, and deep. And it’s not only Coltrane who makes this happen. It’s the joy of Tyner and Jones working with him, finding themselves and creating musical excitement.

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257. See Discography.

Reggie Workman replaced Davis in 1961. By this point, Coltrane was experimenting with improvisational, rhythmic elasticity. Eric Dolphy had done some dates with Coltrane, and his improvisational concept had certainly opened up Coltrane’s mind to the possibilities of freedom. After all, Coltrane had become enamored with music from India, a music that is “primary melodic, devoid of harmony, and organized along principles unrelated to traditional modes of Western Musical thought.” Coltrane would occasionally hire two bassists for gigs, Workman and either Art Davis or Donald Garrett. This allowed one bass to a drone like low note, while the other played percussive lines.

With McCoy and Jones, Coltrane had a different accompaniment than what was available anywhere else. Whereas Monk would lay out or play sparsely during Coltrane’s solo, McCoy would play pedal points and moving quartal shapes which were harmonically mobile and perfectly suited to accompany the free-flowing mentality that Trane began prescribing to. The pedal point seems to resemble the drone of Indian music, in which pitches and melodies are placed around a pedal point to create tension and release. Coltrane’s playing began more and more to reflect Indian melodies which have exotic ornamentation around one pitch center which often gets played over and over. Even his sound on the tenor was changing. His early approach was lighter and obviously influenced by Charlie Parker, while his later sound was heavy, round, biting, full and loud. As for Elvin Jones, he shared Coltrane’s vision for powerful and complex

259. Tirro, *Jazz, a History*, 388.
rhythms. Jones’ driving swing combined with his uncanny ability to anticipate Coltrane and Tyner made him a perfect fit for Coltrane’s band.\textsuperscript{260}

But, by 1961, Coltrane was unhappy with his bassist. He needed someone to provide a strong foundation for the band. At the time, Jones was smothering Workman. His concept of rhythmic freedom on the drums demanded a bassist with a similar authority. In December of that year, Coltrane had bassist Jimmy Garrison, who had been with Ornette Coleman’s group earlier that year. With the addition of Garrison, Coltrane had formed his legendary quartet.\textsuperscript{261}

Coltrane’s interests in world music, particularly Indian and Japanese music, were reshaping his thinking. He “favored no one religion”\textsuperscript{262} highlighting his inclusive nature, and his changing philosophies on religion and spirituality seriously influenced his playing. His music had become less harmonically driven, instead favoring a “dense melodic covering of long improvisation, free flowing lines, and seamless melodies.”\textsuperscript{263} Elvin Jones later commented on this time period.

John was studying a lot of religious philosophies of different parts of the world. He was also interested in Japanese folk songs. He had a shakuhachi (end-blown bamboo flute), and he used to drive on tense trips and he’d have it in his mouth, he had one hand on the wheel and one on the shakuhachi.\textsuperscript{264}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 390.
\item Porter, \textit{John Coltrane: His Life and Music}, 200-201.
\item Brown, “John Coltrane as the Personification of Spirituality in Black Music,” 55.
\item Tirro, \textit{Jazz, a History}, 390.
\item Brown, “John Coltrane as the Personification of Spirituality in Black Music,” 67.
\end{enumerate}
Later in his career, after delving into the realm of avant-garde, Coltrane would tour Japan, and was welcomed with open arms. He was always warmly accepted there, regardless of what American critics said of his music.

Coltrane also delved into African-American music and culture for influence. Although racism was not as overt in the North as it was in the South, there was still an institutional racism that pervaded most establishments. At one point in Philadelphia, where Coltrane grew up, “unemployment for black youths aged between 16 and 28 remained at 70 percent.” 265 Socially, his music mirrored the civil rights movement and the struggle that African Americans endured during the 1960s. It also reflected his beliefs about freedom, equality, African traditions, mysticism, and civil liberties. He loved musicians like Ornette Coleman who wrote music that so clearly reflected the struggle and angst felt by African American’s during that period in history. Later in life, Coltrane would explore free music himself, pushing the boundaries of what people were comfortable with. Furthermore, in 1964 Coltrane played several performances in support of Martin Luther King Jr. He also wrote several songs which so clearly were inspired by the civil turmoil he experienced – i.e. “Reverend King,” 266 “Up ‘Gainst The Wall,” 267 “Spiritual” 268 (based directly on the song “Nobody Knows De Trouble I See” from The Book of American Negro Spirituals) 269 and “Alabama” (written after the events in


266. John and Alice Coltrane, Cosmic Music, Various instrumentalists directed by John and Alice Coltrane, Coltrane Recording Corporation, Vinyl, LP AU 4950. 1968.


Montgomery where a Black Church was bombed and four little girls were killed). Moreover, Coltrane simply loved the blues. His later playing is infused with the blues, almost reminiscent of the Baptist black churches prevalent in the area where he grew up. He even recorded an entire album dedicated to the genre—*Coltrane Plays the Blues*.

Leonard L. Brown has recently tied blues and spirituals with the music represented in his later work, *A Love Supreme*.

An examination of Coltrane’s original compositions reveal over thirty that either use the term “blues” in the title or are harmonically and melodically based on the blues form with some variations. In his renewed and most well-known sacred suite, “A Love Supreme,” Coltrane illustrated his understanding of the close relationship between blues and spirituals by incorporating the blues form and feeling as the basis of the third movement, “Pursuance.” Coltrane always seemed to personalize his blues performances, which again is in the tradition of the music.

Coltrane was not known as an orator, but he was viewed as a civil rights icon of sorts. His drummer Rashid Ali is quoted as saying:

Those were trying times in the 1960s. We had the civil rights thing going on, we had King, we had Malcolm, we had the Panthers. There was so much diversity happening. People were screaming for their rights and wanting to be equal, be free. And naturally, the music reflects the whole period…I think that that’s where really free form came into it…I’m sure that the music came out of the whole thing.

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Club owners noticed that Coltrane’s crowds towards the end of his life were vocal about their political beliefs. When Coltrane would take hour long solos, people in the crowd would start shouting “Freedom Now!” 274

Coltrane’s interests also extended into West African music. He studied recordings of African drummers, and at one point even played at the Village Vanguard opposite Michael Babatunde Olatunji, a drummer from Nigeria. Coltrane later composed “Dahomey Dance,” a blues from the album Olé, inspired by a recording of two African singers. His album Africa/Brass is a clear example of his investigation into this type of music. Garrison’s bass parts on this recording are based on recordings of African singers, and he implemented an African ground rhythm as the underlying groove instead of 4/4 swing. 275

Coltrane’s new quartet recorded their first three albums Africa/Brass (1961), Live at the Village Vanguard (1962), and Impressions (1963). 276 Each of these albums moved farther and farther away from traditional short ‘cuts’ for the record side, and instead favored long, energetic, and constantly building songs. Coltrane began to explore improvisationally. Although he had not abandoned his solo methods employed in Giant Steps, he had begun moving away from his “sheets of sound” approach. He experimented with “sideslipping,” 277 a technique whereby the soloist briefly goes to a key that is not the key that the song is based. Furthermore, his playing seems devoid of singable melodies in the traditional sense. However, the brilliance in Coltrane’s music

274. Ibid.


276. See Discography.

lies not in catchy phrases, but in passionate, unadulterated, raw energy that sweeps his band for hours at a time.

If one could go along with him and get involved in his concentrated and focused discipline of improvisation, and get involved with the powerful energy and passion of the whole group at each moment, it is…like no other experience in jazz.\(^{278}\)

Approximately two years after Mary Lou Williams’ first and less than a year before Duke Ellington’s first sacred music, Coltrane released his first Sacred Jazz. Coltrane had been working on his first original suite to represent spirituality in his life and the universal religion that he favored. This new composition was entitled *A Love Supreme* and made up of four sections – “Acknowledgement,” “Resolution,” “Pursuance,” and “Psalm.” Each section leads to the next both thematically and musically. The titles of the pieces “suggest a kind of pilgrim’s progress, in which the pilgrim acknowledges the divine, resolves to pursue it, searches, and, eventually, celebrates what has been attained.”\(^{279}\)

The music starts with a repetitive theme which increases in tension with the second movement and reaches its climax in the third and fastest movement. The fourth movement, a drone, is almost a reflection of the journey and acts as an appropriate ending and release to the first three movements.

Coltrane’s first suite also marked a dramatic musical development. The framing of the suite is symmetrical; the first and last movements are through composed and freer, while the middle two have set forms – 24 and 12 bars respectively. All of the melodic material in the entire suite can be traced back to the F minor pentatonic scale, and as Coltrane develops small sections of the scale, he creates tension and release within the

\(^{278}\) Ibid., 229.

\(^{279}\) Ibid., 232.
ensemble as his lines create dissonance with the established harmony. In “Acknowledgement,” he develops one small cell of the pentatonic scale and plays it in every key. He even sings the title to his suite over and over again before beginning on his horn again. His solo is almost chant-like in its repetition. In “Resolution” and “Pursuance” Coltrane explores and develops many phrases and is both melodic and virtuosic, given freedom by the energy and movement of the rhythm section. Particularly in “Pursuance” Coltrane and Jones connect during his last chorus with Jones dropping crashes and splashes while Coltrane screams in the altissimo register. “Psalm” is an open, free song. The piano and drums drone with a pedal tone while Coltrane plays a theme that matches the syllables of a spiritual poem he put in the liner notes—the poem is appropriately titled “A Love Supreme.” Certain musical phrases of a descending minor third or perfect fifth to the tonic coincide with the repeating sentence “Thank you God.”

And at the very end of the movement, a second saxophonist can be heard. Rudy Van Gelder, who was working this session, recalled that Coltrane overdubbed the track on alto saxophone, recalling his earlier days.

*A Love Supreme* was a significant commercial success for Coltrane. Normally, his records would sell around 30,000 units per release, but *A Love Supreme* sold around 500,000 copies by 1970, and even more since. The album was voted album of the year by both *Jazz* and *Downbeat* magazines in 1965. The readers for *downbeat* elected


Coltrane to the magazine’s hall of fame, an honor that to that point had only been bestowed upon Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young.\textsuperscript{282}

Because Coltrane’s music had been becoming increasingly freer and explorative, he was considered a leader of sorts in the avant-garde genre. He helped younger musicians get recording dates and even let some of them, like Archie Shepp, sit in with him. He eventually brought in Freddie Hubbard and Dewey Johnson, on trumpet, Marion Brown and John Tchicai, on alto saxophone, and Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp, on tenor saxophone, to record his newest piece, “Ascension.” The piece is loosely based on certain chords and scales that change at Coltrane’s cue, but the musicians eventually merge into free soloing and divert from any written tonality.\textsuperscript{283} This album marked a turning point for Coltrane. No longer was he interested in playing 4/4 swing. In fact, from 1965 on, Jimmy Garrison no longer walked bass lines in the way he had done previous to that year.\textsuperscript{284}

Coltrane’s music was spiritually and musically intertwined in the last few years of his life. In 1965, he recorded a piece he had written called “Om,” a reference to Hinduism and its name for the being which set everything else in motion. Coltrane himself chanted on the recording: “I, the oblation and I the flame into which it is offered. I am the sire of the world and this world’s motherland grandsire. I am he who awards to each the fruit of his action. I make all things clean. I am Om—OM—OM—OM!”\textsuperscript{285} In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{282} Ibid., 232, 262.
\item \textsuperscript{283} John Coltrane, \textit{Ascension}, Various instrumentalists directed by John Coltrane, Impulse!, Vinyl, LP AS-95, 1965.
\item \textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 264.
\item \textsuperscript{285} John Coltrane, \textit{Om}, Various instrumentalists directed by John Coltrane, Impulse!, Vinyl, AS-9140, 1967.
\end{itemize}
1966, Coltrane recorded an album that would be released posthumously, *Cosmic Music*. On this album he and Pharoah Sanders say a prayer as well as chant on the song “Reverend King” written in homage to Martin Luther King Jr.\(^\text{286}\)

Furthermore, Coltrane’s musical approach was becoming increasingly freer and experimental. Elvin Jones was given leeway to branch out from the traditional swing feel. Jones was a master of polyrhythmic effects, and even over a set time feel, Jones had a way of making the music feel open. “He [Jones] generated a kaleidoscope of ever-shifting cross-rhythms over at least one underlying pulse, with two or four measures rarely played the same.”\(^\text{287}\) As was Coltrane’s way, he liked to develop, and rarely stayed settled with the same musical setting. He began regularly hiring two drummers for gigs. This decision proved to be the beginning of the end for Coltrane’s famous quartet. Jones did not enjoy bashing as loud as he could night after night with no chance to swing. McCoy Tyner felt similarly, as he had little chance of ever being heard because the band was so loud. In 1966, both of them would leave Coltrane’s band to pursue other endeavors.\(^\text{288}\) But before they left, Coltrane recorded one final album, *Meditations*. The album is a suite of five pieces, and displays Coltrane’s abstract soloing. He plays in the extended registers, wails at the top and bottom of his horn, and turns simple motifs into a cascading flurry of notes.\(^\text{289}\)

\(^{286}\) John and Alice Coltrane, *Cosmic Music*, Various instrumentalists directed by John and Alice Coltrane, Coltrane Recording Corporation, Vinyl, LP AU 4950. 1968.

\(^{287}\) Brown, “John Coltrane as the Personification of Spirituality in Black Music,” 70.


Coltrane’s personal life was changing. His wife, Naima, had had two miscarriages, and the couple never had a child of their own. Moreover, his star status after *A Love Supreme* and consequent world tours had caused a rift between them. New York State law did not allow married couples to get divorced except in case of adultery, so Coltrane and his new partner, Alice, flew to Mexico, finalized the divorce with Naima, and obtained a marriage license with each other within a few days. They would have two children, John W. Coltrane Jr. and Ravi John Coltrane.  

Furthermore, he was facing increased criticism from fans and critics alike over his musical choices. Alice Coltrane soon replaced McCoy after he had left Coltrane’s band, and the new group, consisting of Coltrane, Alice, Pharoah Sanders, Garrison, and Rashied Ali, recorded *Expression* (released posthumously) in the winter of 1967. The group was certainly controversial; all of the music was rhythmically free, and what had attracted so many listeners (swing feel, driving in-time rhythms) was now gone. One concert at Temple University was particularly memorable, because after the first song, most of the audience simply walked out. Club owners and managers began getting anxious with Coltrane, demanding that he play the standards that their attendees were familiar with. John Tynan, had long been opposed to Coltrane’s freer musical experimentations, so much so that he labeled Coltrane’s music as “anti-jazz.”  

Nevertheless, Coltrane was unfazed, and remained stoic in the face of this type of response. In 1967, Coltrane recorded one of his last albums, *Interstellar Space* (released

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291. Ibid., 274.
posthumously), with Rashied Ali. Still without a rhythmic meter, Coltrane’s concept was to play a theme, embellish it, build up to a climax, and eventually return to the main theme. His constant musical searching lead him to play multiphonics, explore the extreme registers of his horn, and play the full gamut of dynamics – from whispering to roaring.

By this point, John Coltrane had slipped back into his drug habit. Although LSD is not as physically dangerous as heroin, Coltrane’s reliance on the drug certainly could have helped him ignore his declining health. Obviously his music was very physically and emotionally demanding on him. He was forced to cancel various gigs and tours. He began sitting down at performances, getting tired quickly. Coltrane himself made a remark about his health after being asked how he liked Pharoah Sanders in his group:

Well, it helps me. It helps me stay alive sometimes, because physically, man, the pace I’ve been leading has been so hard and I’ve gained so much weight, that sometimes it’s been a little hard physically. I feel that I like to have somebody there in case I can’t get that strength. I like to have that strength in the band, somewhere.

By the spring of 1967, Coltrane was in a lot of pain. He went to the hospital a number of times, but refused to be operated on. He kept his sickness and pain from Alice, his boys, and his friends. No one knew how serious Coltrane’s situation was. In July of 1967, Coltrane’s situation had deteriorated so much that he could not even eat. He went to the hospital, and died the next day due to complications from liver cancer.

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In the last three years of his life, Coltrane’s music changed dramatically, yet his intent in playing music stayed the same. *A Love Supreme* is a drastically different musical statement than *Interstellar Space*, but each recording exudes an expressiveness that clearly reflects his spiritual inclusiveness. In subsequent years and in many sacred jazz articles, John Coltrane’s name has been tossed in the fold with the likes of Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington.

The endless debate of who musicians should play for – the audience or themselves – can perhaps be answered by Coltrane’s example. It is arguable that Coltrane played for both. During his time he played the music that reflected a culmination of his life experiences, which at times dismayed avid fans as well as fellow musicians. Ironically, after his time, audiences applauded his ventures into the avant-garde as being masterful.

Paradoxically, Coltrane’s ‘free jazz’ expressionism—the culmination of his musical evolution to which Elvin Jones contributed—created an antinomy that resulted in Jones and then McCoy Tyner leaving the group. Coltrane’s further musical explorations with unmetered collective improvisational modes, inspired by his urgent intellectual, spiritual, and humanistic impulses, exceeded the boundaries of engagement for many of his listeners as well. Nonetheless, Coltrane’s quest to express all of the ideas and feelings he had inside produced a music and a sound that continues to captivate new audiences to this day. His musical and cultural influence has been global and intergenerational, and he continues to inspire musicians and nonmusicians alike with a message of unity, dedication and freedom.  

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CHAPTER EIGHT
DEANNA WITKOWSKI

Deanna Witkowski is certainly one of the leaders of the current Sacred Jazz movement. She has often worked as a church musical director, and she has traveled all over the country to perform her Sacred Jazz at various worship services. Witkowski’s career has included everything from performing with her jazz trio, to writing and arranging for various choirs. Her piano playing is widely praised and her ability to represent any musical style has resulted in several tours of Brazil. By and large, Witkowski’s career has reflected her religious convictions as she blends the jazz and the catholic traditions that have played such a prevalent role in her life.

Deanna Witkowski was born in New Hampshire and trained as a classical pianist from a young age. Her family was very religious, and because her father was a radio DJ, the family had to move quite frequently (eleven times). Therefore, she was constantly being introduced to new Christian churches, mainly in the Episcopal tradition. Witkowski’s musical development continued regardless of her constantly moving home life. She played as a substitute pianist on many occasions in church services. She also played in the jazz ensemble in the last two years of high school, although it would not be until her college years that she would be given the direction that would form a major inspiration to her career.298

Upon entering Wheaton College as a classical piano major, Witkowski began studying with Larry Pannella, a saxophonist and one of the few teachers at the school with any knowledge of the history of jazz. Larry gave Witkowski direction and insight into the lineage of jazz music and musicians. She studied the music of Bill Evans, Errol Garner, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, Ed Simon, Danilo Perez, Antonio Carlos Jobim, and Shirley Horn. He taught her the fundamentals of theory and improvisation, and at the end of her sophomore year, recommended a jazz pianist, Brad Williams, for her to begin studying privately with. Witkowski knew that “as soon as [she] started these lessons, [she] knew that [she] wanted to play jazz piano.” 299

Witkowski’s entrance into the world of Sacred Jazz began shortly after she finished her undergraduate degree. Upon graduation, she moved to Chicago and joined the Lasalle Street Church. Witkowski relates her experience:

> After college, I moved into the city (of Chicago), and started attending LaSalle Street Church. During one of my first Sundays at LaSalle, a guest Dixieland jazz group led in worship. I remember observing that there wasn’t a lot of congregational singing happening while the group was leading, so I talked with one of the pastors and told her that I’d love to help out if they ever wanted to have another jazz service. Because of that, I ended up coordinating and arranging/composing both congregational, choral, and instrumental music for two annual jazz services while at LaSalle (I returned to LaSalle on two occasions to lead morning worship with my jazz group after having moved to New York). 300

In 1997, Witkowski accepted a full time job at the All Angels’ Church in New York as Music Director. “One of the appeals of All Angels’ Church was its practice of having its music directors compose Masses of their own.” 301 She began composing and arranging,

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300. Ibid.

301. Blaney, “A Catholic jazz artist explores sacred music.”
the beginnings of two jazz masses as well as other congregational music. Over a third of the music on *From This Place* would be taken from this period in her life. Witkowsk
would leave All Angels’ Church in 2000 and begin to travel and perform her sacred and secular jazz music at various venues.

Witkowski had already begun to form a following for herself in the jazz world. She had been an established musician in the Chicago area for a few years, and had even ended up on a summer tour with prominent vocalist, Lizz Wright. As a leader, she recorded released three albums before *From This Place: Having To Ask* (2000), *Wide Open Window* (2003) and *Length of Days* (2005).\(^\text{302}\) *Jazz Journal International* labeled her as “one of the best of the new generation of jazz pianists.”\(^\text{303}\)

Having previously toured Africa and Brazil, she was clearly open to uniting Jazz, Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban genres in her music. In 2002 she won the Great American Jazz Piano competition, and subsequently was invited to appear on National Public Radio’s “Weekend Edition Sunday” and Marion McPartland’s “Piano Jazz.” In the meantime, Deanna had discovered the music of Mary Lou Williams. She was asked to play at the annual *Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival* at the Kennedy center several times, and she eventually headlined there alongside Tammy Kernodle, Mary Lou William’s biographer, to present a concert/lecture that outlined Mary Lou’s life, faith, and music.

Mary Lou Williams became a musical idol for Witkowski. She (Williams) was most likely the only musician to live and play almost all of the jazz styles from the 20s through the 50s, i.e. Blues, Boogie-woogie, Early Swing, Stride, and Bebop. Williams

\(^{302}\) See Discography.

was open to try new genres and was seemingly always ahead of her time. Witkowski’s career has also incorporated many styles—swing, Bossa Nova, groove, classical, and blues. After her conversion in 1956, Williams took her role as a ‘musical evangelist’ very seriously, traveling and performing her Sacred Jazz all over the country. Following Williams’ example, Witkowski began touring and playing Sacred Jazz with her trio after leaving her job at All Angel’s. She would contact a church and send sheet music before coming in as a guest musician. Upon arrival, she would involve the entire church in singing her jazzed up masses and hymns. Her goal was to unify churches with her music, getting as many people involved as possible. However, like Williams, Witkowski would occasionally face difficulties within the church. Certain members may not relate to the musical idiom of jazz or to specific instrumentation choices. A recent interview obtained her opinions on this matter:

Church is not supposed to be a shopping mall experience where we search until we find exactly what we want -- or fight until we get it. We are in community, so there will be some things that we like and some things we dislike. That goes for musical styles as much as for anything else….. In white America, we tend to separate music from our everyday lives. I like how African and Latin American cultures don't do that. They know how to express the height and depth of emotions in music, in dance, in community. Isn't the church supposed to be about celebrating community? We live in a global community where we have access to many different styles of music, and we should take advantage of that.  

In a very real sense, Witkowski carries on the tradition of Mary Lou Williams. Her cultural and musical openness help her to relate to any audience, regardless of ethnicity. Furthermore, her perseverance through difficulties resemble Williams’ fervor throughout her life. Despite the aforementioned grievances, Witkowski’s church tours were generally very successful. Many churches would ask for her music for them to continue

being able to perform it, even after she would leave. The music from this time period inspired her to write and record her first sacred album, *From This Place*.

In the years leading up to *From This Place*, Witkowski had been going through a change of faith. She began to read books on contemplative prayer, and she found encouragement in Catholic authors like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. She experienced God in silence and in reflection. Her Episcopal experience to that point had been intellectually driven, whereas, through her meditations she began to experience God’s love in an intense way. Furthermore, she found that the doctrine of the Catholic Church reinforced her musical efforts.

One of the things I like about Catholicism is its emphasis on seeing God in all things. If God is present in all things, then He's present in the joyful feel of a samba, in the depth of a jazz ballad, in reggae, in Latin jazz, in salsa.\(^{305}\)

After attending RCIA classes to become a Catholic, Witkowski started worshiping at the Church of St. Francis Xavier. In 2009, Witkowski was offered a job at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, directing the young adult choir and accompanying the Sunday evening Mass.

*From This Place* (released 2009) became an amalgamation of many aspects of Witkowski’s life. It represented her Catholic beliefs in that the title track, “From This Place” represented the story of Mary Magdalene’s journey of going to Christ’s tomb three days after his crucifixion, only to find an empty tomb. This title track was coincidentally written for an Easter jazz vespers at Saint Peter’s Church, where Ike Sturm works. It also featured all star sidemen including John Patitucci, Donny McCaslin, and even Peter Eldridge on a few of the choir pieces. It also reflected her time spent at All

\(^{305}\) Ibid.
Angel’s Church, The selections on the album included the parts of the Mass she had written while she was at All Angels’ Church (“Kyrie,” “Gloria,” “Sanctus,” and “Agnus Dei”) as well as “Never Before” (written in 1998 while at All Angels’). Several pieces were also a resetting of traditional hymns: “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say,” “O, the Deep, Deep Love,” “Pass Me Not,” “Take My Life and Let It Be.” “Make Your Wonders Known” is a bluesy setting of Psalm 88:12, featuring McCaslin on an impressive, extended solo. The remaining songs (“Let My Prayer Rise,” “Christ the Light,” and “Song of Simeon”) were commissioned by Bill Carter for a jazz hymnal entitled Swing a New Song to the Lord. Carter is a jazz pianist who is a contemporary of Witkowski’s that performs Sacred Jazz music at churches around the country.

Furthermore, From This Place marks an important landmark for Witkowski because she is featured as a singer just as prominently as she is a pianist. In commenting on her preparation for the album, Witkowski relayed that she hired a vocal coach, Jocelyn Rasmussen, to help.

One of the big things that Jocelyn helped me to focus on was in terms of delving even more deeply into much of the text (which I’d already spent a lot of time with- both in terms of writing new settings for the Mass, Psalms, and several 19th-century hymn texts; and in writing two pieces with my original text). Because I most often perform these pieces in the context of a worship service- and because some of the pieces are congregational, where I’m focused on leading a group of people in singing together, it was a different experience to be able to sing without having the added function of leading group song. I journaled about several of the pieces while studying with Jocelyn. In particular, I remember working on the Kyrie. Since the phrase, ‘Lord, have mercy,’ or ‘Christ, have mercy’ appears so many times in my setting, Jocelyn suggested that I make a list of people, places, or situations where I wanted to ask God to have mercy. I made a list and would practice singing with some of those situations in

306. Witkowski, From This Place.
mind. I created a lot of visual images for myself, not only in the Kyrie, but in my original piece (text and music), “From This Place.”  

*From This Place* has been widely praised on many internet forums as well as NPR’s “Weekend Edition Sunday,” EWTN’s *Faith and Culture*, and UrbanFaith.com.  

*Jazz Times* raved that Witkowski’s work showed just “how invigorating this marriage of secular and spiritual” can be. Both her singing and playing are lauded as being “natural and affecting” as well as “rich and enjoyable.” But perhaps the greatest complement to the album came from writer Paul Abella from ChicagoJazz.com.  

This is also a disc that rewards multiple and intensive listenings. Once I started to realize that this disc is more about affirming one's faith than blowing one's mind, it started to reveal its charms. This disc has some beautiful moments that aren't at all jazz, and it has some gorgeous moments that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. Because this is music meant first and foremost for church services, the rhythms are simple, and the improvisations are short (I'd love to hear a few of these songs in more performance oriented situations), but, considering their purpose, they are effective.  

Deanna’s work on *From This Place* is both a musical and spiritual accomplishment. Her composing and playing all come from a place of honesty and passion. It is impossible to listen to the album and not get a sense of the reality of her life which is reflected in this album. Her work has also continued to the present day. She still  

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307. Witkowski, Interview with author.  
311. Ernest Barteldes, review of *From This Place* by Deanna Witkowski, *Beyond Race Magazine*.  
312. Paul Abella, review of *From This Place* by Deanna Witkowski, *ChicagoJazz.com*. 
plays Sacred Jazz at various churches and festivals throughout the country. She also speaks and colleges and conferences on jazz and its relationship to theology and contemplative prayer.
Ike Sturm is a New York-based bassist, composer/arranger, and director of music for the jazz ministry at Saint Peter’s Church in New York. He also works as an educator and clinician, traveling the world performing his original music. Sturm’s latest recording, Jazz Mass, has drummed up considerable interest in the jazz world, and his life of faith and music are of particular importance to this project.

Sturm began playing music at a very early age – piano in Kindergarten and the bass at age nine. His elementary school did not own a bass, so he learned to tune a cello to fourths and played it standing up like an acoustic bass until a family friend gave Sturm both an upright and an electric bass. Soon after, his father encouraged him to take classical lessons as well as take part in creative exercises like composing, playing along with the radio, and transcribing sounds that excited him. He was learning both by note and by rote from childhood on.313

Sturm’s parents are largely responsible for his musical development. His mother brought Ike and his sister, Madeline, to a Lutheran church every Sunday. The two sang hymns and anthems in the church choir, and became a part of a small, integrated church family. His father, Fred Sturm, is an internationally renowned composer and arranger. Fred is currently the director of the Lawrence University Jazz and Improvisational Music Department in Wisconsin, and has written for the likes of Bobby McFerrin, Wynton Marsalis, Bob Brookmeyer, Clark Terry, Phil Woods, Gary Burton, Arild Andersen, and

313. Sturm, Interview with author.
John Scofield. Needless to say, Fred Sturm was and still is a huge influence on his son. During Ike’s childhood he constantly introduced his son to new musical sounds, brought him to his Eastman Jazz Band Concerts (Fred taught there while Ike was younger), and always encouraged him to compose and write.

Getting into Eastman school of music was a major milestone in Ike’s life. His father was still directing the Eastman Jazz Ensemble, and he got to be in the jazz band that he idolized as a child. Ike talks about his experience in college very fondly:

Eastman School of Music was a huge step for me and opened the door to a world of musical relationships and friendships. I feel that my time at Eastman was an especially creative time that allowed for a great deal of individual expression and innovation. Listening to music and playing music together with my peers helped shape our concepts and voices as improvisers and composers.

Ike eventually received both his Undergraduate and Master’s degrees at the Eastman School of Music, getting a chance to study with acclaimed bassist, Dave Holland. Furthermore, later in his career, Ike obtained a grant from Eastman to fund his first album as a leader, Spirit.

Ike has since had a successful career as a sideman. While still in college, he played bass at a Gospel church in Rochester. This gave Ike “a new perspective on the range of musical aesthetics that may be used in worship and also led to lifelong


315. Sturm, Interview with author.

friendships.”Since that time, he performed as a sideman with Gene Bertoncini, Bobby McFerrin, Ben Monder, Maria Schneider, Kenny Wheeler, and orchestras throughout the US. He also played on Steve Reich’s most recent releases on Canteloupe and Nonesuch Records. He currently lives and plays in New York.

In 2003 Ike was hired at Saint Peter’s Church in Manhattan as the Director of Music for the Jazz Services. Saint Peter’s is widely regarded as the “Jazz Church” and has a lineage of minister’s who have been involved with the jazz community in the New York area. In 1965, Pastor John Gensel started a Jazz Vesper’s service – a Sunday evening mass designed for musicians who have late gigs on Saturdays. Gensel had implanted himself in the jazz world, going to night clubs regularly and interacting with the musicians. Moreover, Gensel was a warm and inclusive man, kind and compassionate to any person with any beliefs. Naturally he fit the role of mentor for many struggling musicians, a role he took seriously. Duke Ellington was a close friend of Gensel’s and wrote “The Shepherd Who Watches Over the Night Flock” for him. Billy Strayhorn willed Gensel a Steinway piano after his death. Furthermore, Gensel, along with his eventual successor, Reverend Dale Lind, held funerals and memorial services for several famous jazz musicians including Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis.

Ike Sturm’s position is a direct result of Gensel’s efforts, and he holds his predecessor in high regards. Gensel died in 1998. Of the late pastor, Ike Sturm has said:

317. Sturm, Interview with author.
I had heard about him [Gensel] before I came to NYC. Unfortunately I never met Reverend Gensel, but his legacy has an effect. You always feel it. There’s this sense of someone who’s come before you and all the heart and dedication that they put in. I don’t take it lightly.⁵²⁰

Sturm now plans the music the weekly Jazz Vesper’s services on Sundays. This entails writing, arranging, and playing music with a variety of different musicians that are featured each week. Sturm also composes for public church festivals, conferences, workshops, and when possible, composes congregation pieces for the traditional, morning service at Saint Peter’s in order to unify the earlier service with the later, jazz service.

In 2007, Saint Peter’s Church commissioned Sturm to write a Jazz Mass for David Lind, the Reverend that worked with Gensel since the 60’s and was now retiring. The project was to feature a small jazz ensemble, string section, and a choir – a challenging proposition to be sure.

    The summer leading up to the first performance and recording was unquestionably the most challenging time. The dates approached and I was staring at empty paper, desperately trying to find sounds that could relate to the powerful text. Composing renders you completely vulnerable at times like this and it is simultaneously the most frightening and wonderful thing in the world.⁵²¹

Sturm relied heavily the talents of his father for arrangement help, sending him sections of the scores for input.

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The end result was *Jazz Mass* (released in 2009), a worship service in and of itself, meant to be part of the liturgy. *Jazz Mass* is made up of the five parts of the mass ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei) as well as a few hymns and prayers set to music. Sturm’s imagining of the mass is reminiscent of “Maria Schneider’s recent work: implied time that’s felt rather than directly heard, an emphasis on texture and color, several exposed parts and plenty of room for soloists to stretch out.” Sturm’s writing organically transitions from section to section utilizing the orchestra and choir effectively to build as each soloist simultaneously reaches their musical climax. Moreover, a strong lineup of soloists in the small jazz ensemble, including Donny McCaslin, Loren Stillman and Ingrid Jensen, provide excellent improvisations throughout the album.

One of Sturm’s goals in writing *Jazz Mass* was to reach a diverse audience, Christian or not. This reflects Pastor Gensel’s original vision for ministering to jazz musicians, and it seems like Sturm has effectively done this. Sturm has commented on this very point:

> By respecting and learning about other religions, we may be drawn deeper into our own Christian faith, stimulating new means of expression. This is at the heart of what jazz has always been, a mixture of ideas and sounds from different cultures.

However, most jazz audiences do not associate jazz music with any sort of religion or philosophy at all. In commenting on this point, one interviewer complemented Sturm by saying that “if you took the words out, and there was just the music, it just sounds like a large ensemble composition, skillfully done, that fits completely in what we expect as the

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323. Sturm, *Jazz Mass*.

324. Sturm, Interview with author.
jazz tradition.” If there is such a thing as ‘religious music,’ Sturm made a conscious effort to avoid it, writing freely and uninhibited by the tradition of established worshipful expression.

But the words do add a significant element. They cry of the mercy and awesomeness of God, and the music, as Sturm admits, is changed because of this.

I have always considered my compositions as sacred jazz due to their source of inspiration. I ask God to breathe life and creativity into my ideas and have experienced powerful moments of insight and peace through this process.

*Jazz Mass* was and still is well-received by audiences. *Downbeat* magazine gave the album 4 ½ out of 5 stars, a very high mark. Ike Sturm’s ability to juxtapose the simple melodies with complex rhythms and untraditional harmonies reveals his mastery as an arranger and composer. The listener never feels overburdened with musical elements that accompany the soaring, peaceful melodies. Furthermore, Ike Sturm has had many opportunities to play his mass both around the country and overseas, most recently in a tour of Scandinavia in March of 2012.

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326. Sturm, Interview with author.
CHAPTER TEN
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND CURRENT TRENDS

The efforts of these Sacred Jazz artists had left a lasting effect on American music and culture and on modern day musicians and composers who aspire to emulate them. Several other current-day jazz artists have made sacred efforts that are worth noting and will now be discussed.

Born the son of a church organist and a choir director, jazz pianist Cyrus Chestnut has his roots in gospel music. As he grew up, his parents filled their home with the sounds of gospel church music that they performed on Sundays as well as jazz albums they loved. He started playing piano at age four and learned the song “Jesus Loves Me.” By age nine, Cyrus had become his church’s pianist. He entered the prep program at Peabody Institute in Baltimore, and subsequently obtained his undergraduate and Master’s degree from Berklee College. As his musical style matured, Chestnut displayed a brilliant mix of gospel and bebop styles. He also began to display a sensitive a touch on the piano that rivaled most of his contemporaries. Some of his most memorable works are his solo renditions of traditional hymns and spirituals which he renders with incredible lyricism and clarity.327

Chestnut has had an impressive career. He has worked as a sideman with John Hendricks, Terence Blanchard, Donald Harrison, and Wynton Marsalis. When Betty Carter found herself without a pianist in 1991, she hired Chestnut to be in her band. He has repeatedly stated that he found his tenure with her band as “a form of graduate

327. Chestnut, “Biography.”
In 1994, Chestnut formally started his commercial career as a leader and released *Revelation*. The title and music of his debut album reflect the role that religion and jazz would always play in his life.

> I believe the ability to play music is a gift from God and every time I play, I’m thankful. Every time I sit down to play, for me, is worship and expression.  

Since then, Chestnut’s creative output has been astounding, releasing 17 albums within a 16 year period. Interestingly, Chestnut is perhaps the only other musician besides Alice Coltrane to pay tribute to his spiritual beliefs in almost every album he records. In fact, he has made a habit of recording at least one hymn on each of his albums: “Sweet Hour of Prayer” on *Revelation* (1994), “It Is Well With my Soul” on *The Dark Before the Dawn* (1995), “In the Garden” on *Earth Stories* (1995), “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” on *Soul Food* (2001), “Precious Lord” on *Your are My Sunshine* (2003), “Lord, I Give Myself to You” on *Genuine Chestnut* (2006), “How Great Thou Art” on *Cyrus Plays Elvis* (2007), and “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” on *Plenty Swing, Plenty Soul* (2010). And then there are his albums and *Blessed Quietness: Collection of Hymns, Spirituals, and Carols* (1996) and *Spirit* (2009). Both are solo piano albums which are entirely dedicated to Gospel cannon and the church-hymnal tradition.

Throughout Chestnut’s career, he has been able to successfully mix the gospel and jazz worlds he seems to dually inhabit. His playing and recording is unanimously

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328. Ibid.
329. Ibid.
330. See Discography.
well reviewed, being described as “lyrical,” yet also “meditative” and “sonorous.” His playing is not virtuosic or overly ‘notey,’ nor does he attempt to push the boundaries of the jazz tradition that modern audiences have come to expect. Nevertheless, his music is incredibly effective because it displays a melodic use of the blues as influenced by the history of those that came before him on his instrument, and an interesting mix of gospel and jazz harmonic traditions. As one journalist noted, “Cyrus Chestnut’s brand of jazz may not be cutting-edge, but it’s tasteful and substantial, and few pianists play so many different styles so effectively.”

Lance Bryant is another Sacred Jazz musician to have roots in the gospel church. Growing up in an African American Baptist church in Markham, Illinois proved to be musically beneficial. His older brother was the church pianist; so naturally, he followed him into music, joining the church choir at the age of eleven. At home, Bryant’s family “Listened mostly to R&B, soul, gospel and jazz…such as Count Basie, Frank Sinatra, and Cannonball Adderly.”

Bryant started playing the saxophone in high school and soon saw that he had an affinity for jazz music. In 1979, the year he graduated high school, Bryant attended the Berklee College of Music and studied saxophone performance as well as composition and arranging. He also formed relationships with other Berklee peers: Greg Osby, Marvin


334. Ibid.


336. Bryant, interviewed by author.
“Smitty” Smith, Wallace Roney, Branford Marsalis, and Cyrus Chestnut. After graduating, Bryant moved to New York in 1985 and started his multifaceted career. He joined Steve Coleman’s M-Base collective – a band which included Lonnie Plaxico, Graham Haynes, and Cassandra Wilson – and subsequently recorded and toured with the group. In 1990, Bryant auditioned and got into the Lionel Hampton Orchestra, and three years later became their musical director and principal arranger, a role which he would hold for seven years. In between tours with Hampton, Bryant stayed active around New York. He did gigs and short tours with Bootsy Collins, Abdullah Ibrahim, and Phyllis Hyman, Wallace Roney, and Pete “LaRocca” Sims. After a ten-year tenure with Hampton’s Orchestra, Bryant left the band to join the on-stage band for “Swing!,” the acclaimed Broadway musical which garnered several Tony nominations as well as a Grammy nomination.337

“Swing!” ended in 2001, at which point Bryant, at the behest of his wife, decided that it was time to focus on his solo career. He moved his family to New Jersey and joined a church where he was able to sing in the choir and write jazz arrangements for some of the church services. His first project, Psalm, was released in 2002 and reflected a culmination of his influences and musical experiences up to that point in his life. Bryant lists many influences including John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Joe Henderson, Richard Smallwood, Andre Crouch, and Donny Hathaway. Bryant has specifically mentioned Coltrane’s importance on him and on Sacred Jazz as a whole.

337. Bryant, All About Jazz Biography.
I think Coltrane has a huge impact on Sacred Jazz. He is the one musical figure that opened the gates towards limitless expressiveness and really giving your all through the music.\textsuperscript{338}

This influence is all but apparent on Bryant’s “Psalm,” the title track of his first album. The repetitive piano figure shifts through key centers using quartal shapes a la McCoy Tyner. The bridge highlights a soaring melody over an out-of-time drone provided by the rhythm section. Musically and spiritually, the piece reflects Coltrane’s composition of the same title.\textsuperscript{339} However, aside from the title track, and a few other religious songs, Psalm (2002) was not intended to be a strictly sacred project. In fact, by his own admission, it was not until Count It All Joy (2005), his third release as a leader, that his practice blending of jazz and sacred themes had matured.

*Count it All Joy* was a landmark album for Bryant for several reasons. It featured a variety of pieces which reflected his spiritual beliefs. Bryant’s originals included “Count it All Joy,” “My Holy Intended” and “Give Me a Faithful Heart.” The traditional pieces “Every Time I Feel the Spirit,” “Go Down Moses,” “Give Me Jesus,” and “Witness” represent his gospel upbringing. Secondly, it featured several prominent jazz musicians – Mulgrew Miller, Kenny Davis, and Yoron Israel. James Williams was originally slated to play piano, but he passed away in 2004, before the recording session had been booked. Williams’ memorial service occurred in St Peter’s Church, and Miller gave the final speech, after which, Bryant approached him and asked him to play piano. Miller graciously accepted. *Count It All Joy* was actually recorded live at St. Peter’s.

Since living in New York, Bryant frequented the church many times to play in the

\textsuperscript{338} Bryant, interviewed by author.

vesper’s services, play memorial and funeral services, play concerts, and host educational workshops. In fact, in the liner notes of his album he specifically thanks Dale Lind and Ike Sturm, both of whom were undoubtedly involved with the making of this album.340

By the time Bryant released *Count it All Joy*, He had already been working in a church for several years. In 2005, Bryant gave a lecture on Sacred Jazz. The transcription of this speech is a great resource available on the history of jazz and sacred music as it is tied to the three main pioneers of the music – Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane. Bryant eventually moved to Massachusetts and became the Minister of Music at the Andover Baptist Church. He released *As For Me and My House* (2008), a family collaboration and his fourth and most recent release as a leader.341

Many jazz musicians have taken the same approach that Chestnut and Bryant have taken by compiling albums of American hymns and/or spirituals. This trend was clearly begun by musicians like Grant Green, Ella Fitzgerald, Hampton Hawes and Max Roach. But it continues now through several others including such artists like vocalist Joe Williams *Feel The Spirit* (1994), bassist Charlie Haden and pianist Hank Jones’ *Steal Away: Spirituals, Hymns and Folk Songs* (1995) and *Come Sunday* (2012) [their second collaboration occurred just months before Jones would pass away]342, pianist Gene Harris’ *In His Hands* (1997), vocalist Jubilant Sykes’ *Jubilant* (1998) [done in collaboration with Terence Blanchard], cornetist Jim Cullum’s *Deep River: The Spirit of Gospel Music* (1998), pianist Barry Sames’ *Awaiting the Spirit* (2000), saxophonist Kirk


Other notable jazz artists have released sacred projects recently as well. In 1995, drummer Carl Allen released one of his first albums as a leader, *Testimonial*. It features many sacred compositions, most of which are originals. Pianist and Composer Lalo Schifrin revisited the mass he composed for Paul Horn, and in 1998 recorded *Jazz Mass in Concert*. While the original recording was reflective and perhaps quiet, the newer version is much more adventurous and expressive, even bombastic at times, most likely due to the efforts of tenor saxophonist, Tom Scott. Prominent pianist Ahmad Jamal recorded *After Fajr* (2005), the tile track of which reflects his Muslim faith (fajr is the

343. See Discography.


Islamic word for dawn). Accompanying him on drums is a brother in his faith, Idris Muhammad.348

In 1998, Smooth Jazz saxophonist, Kirk Whalum, started a “Gospel According to Jazz” series, which featured prominent sidemen George Duke and Paul Jackson, Jr. Whalum’s original compositions showcase a mix of influences including gospel, Latin, swing, R&B, and blues.349 There have since been two more chapters to the series, one in 2002 (The Gospel According to Jazz: Chapter 2)350 and the latest, The Gospel According to Jazz: Chapter 3 (2010). In the latest album, Whalum actually utilized popular songs to reflect his faith, including “You Are Everything” (Thom Bell & Linda Creed), “Because You Loved Me” (Celine Dion), “Running Away” (Frankie Beverly & Maze), and “Make Me a Believer (Luther Vandross).”351 Many critics have positively reviewed Whalum’s work, saying that his ability to blend multiple styles make his albums “work for different audiences and at different levels.”352

Geri Allen is yet another artist to delve into the sacred world. Her album Timeless Portraits and Dreams (2006) was a collection of sacred spirituals, originals, and other


352. Dennis Poole, review of The Gospel According To Jazz Chapter 3 by Kirk Whalum, Smooth Jazz Therapy, April 5, 2010.
work. Coincidentally the title track, “Timeless Portraits and Dreams,” served as the starting point for her composition “For the Healing of Nations, A Sacred Jazz work,” a work commissioned by The Whitman Arts Center and Meet the Composer that was written for the victims and survivors of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center.

Eric Reed’s work in the sacred realm is also impossible to ignore. His parents reared him to play in church as a youngster. He became enamored with jazz music as he grew older, and soon after moving to New York, joined Wynton Marsalis’ band, beginning a musical relationship that would last several years. Reed recorded several secular works with Wynton, including Blood on the Fields (1994), Standard Time Volume 4 – Marsalis Plays Monk (1994), Live at the Village Vanguard (1994), and Mr. Jelly Lord - Standard Time, Volume 6 (1999). Wynton knew about Reed’s gospel upbringing, and collaborated with him on various sacred projects, including Wynton’s album In This House, On This Morning (1994) and a Lincoln center performance of Duke Ellington’s’ sacred concerts in 1999. Reed branched out to pursue his own solo career when he left Wynton’s band that same year. He often pulls influence from Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk, and in his many albums has recorded compositions written by the two. In 2003, Reed released Mercy and Grace, an album


355. See Discography.

356. Wynton Marsalis, In This House, On This Morning, Various vocalists and instrumentalists directed by Wynton Marsalis, Columbia, CD 53220, 1994.

357. Luckett, “Eric Reed.”
featuring solo piano renditions of hymns, spirituals and sacred pieces. Reed has often mixed sacred elements into his music. He has elaborated in an article he wrote for allaboutjazz.com in 2009.

Merging my personal life with my music has become more than merely composing some swing ditty and pasting God's name in the title. Boldly and unabashedly, I put my love, honor and thanks to God at the forefront of my music—before the transcribed solos, Hanon exercises, repertoire—even the commitment to swinging.

In 2010, Reed teamed up with Cyrus Chestnut to record Plenty Swing, Plenty Soul, a piano duo album which featured many jazz standards as well as hymns from both pianists.

The sacred efforts by all of these current jazz artists constitute a collection of performance pieces, music which is intended to be recorded and/or played outside of church services. These sacred projects are certainly important releases, but by and large the above artists have achieved most of their success performing and recording secular music. Coincidentally, there are a handful of musicians today who actively compose and play jazz music intended for use in a church, or liturgical music. Two such musicians are Bill Carter and Chuck Marohnic.

Bill Carter, a jazz piano and jazz history teacher at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania, is also a jazz performer, composer, arranger and Presbyterian minister. Although he has been a minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Clarks Summit, PA for over twenty years, Carter felt a call to use his musical gifts very early on.


359. Reed, "Eric Reed: Sacred Jazz."

In 1993, he formed the aptly titled ‘Presbybop Quartet,’ a jazz quartet in the bebop and hard bop tradition who travel the country playing Sacred Jazz at various church and worship services.

They have served as the “house band” for significant clergy conferences, led worship services for the PC(USA) General Assembly, and served as “musical theologians in residence” at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Massachusetts United Church of Christ, and Arkansas conference of the United Methodist Church.  

Carter’s compositional influence on the group has been astounding. To date, the group has recorded eight albums, most of which feature Carter’s original works that explore thematic topics in the sacred realm. In *John According to Jazz* (2005) the jazz band offers a jazz backdrop a reading of the New Testament book of John. *Welcome Home* (2006) marked a revisitation of hymndoy and gospel music as well as originals by Carter which reflect their devotion to swing and the spiritual. *Psalms Without Words* (2009) wordlessly represents ancient Hebrew texts, like the title implies. And, the music of *Interior Windows* (2011) was written to “reflect on the spiritual power of jazz.”

Carter’s influence as a national figure in the world of Sacred Jazz is hardly debatable. He was the editor of *Swing a New Song to the Lord: Jazz Resources for Worship* (2004), a jazz hymnal which featured over two dozen of Carter’s composition and arrangements as well as submitted material by musicians such as Chuck, Marohnic, Presbybop, “Who We Are.”

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361. Presbybop, “Who We Are.”


Deanna Witkowski, and Dave Brubeck. He has written seven books, and published several articles and biblical reflections which detail the crucial relationship between jazz and the church. In the spring of 2012, he was highlighted as the main speaker on “Day One,” an international radio program. He currently serves as a teacher, speaker, and workshop leader throughout the country.366

Chuck Marohnic, a peer of Carter’s, is a prolific composer, author, and pianist. For 20 years, he has served as music director and clinician at various Churches and church conferences around the US. He served as director of Jazz Studies at Arizona State University from 1981 until 2003, at which time he moved to Louisville, Kentucky and helped develop a jazz based worship service in his church there. It was at this time that a friend, Reverend Eric Elnes, encouraged Marohnic to start an internet ministry. The result was Sanctuary Jazz, an online resource of Church’s recordings, videos, publications, and other works.367

Marohnic has had quite an accomplished career.

Chuck has recorded 35 albums and CDs. Downbeat Magazine awarded his performances 4 ½ stars. Rolling Stone Magazine’s review states “Marohnic’s ingenious changes and arrangements show that he should not be overlooked.” Cadence Magazine concluded, “The Chuck Marohnic Trio could become the standard of interactive mastery in this decade.”368

He has worked as a sideman with Buddy Rich, Joe Henderson, Jamey Abersold, Chet Baker, and Ira Sullivan. Furthermore, he has performed and put on clinics at festivals in

366. Presbybop, “Who We Are.”
367. Sanctuary Jazz, “The Artist.”
368. Ibid.
Germany, Brazil and France. As an author/arranger, Chuck has published four jazz method books for jazz piano.

Marohnic’s contributions to Sacred Jazz are also quite extensive. He has made a practice of writing piano arrangements and worship songs for use in the church, as in his books Just A Closer Walk With Thee: Eight American Hymns for Piano in Jazz style, Sanctuary Jazz, We Shall Overcome, American Hymn Classics, Piano Meditations, Pianoel, and Christmas Jazz. He has also recorded many of his sacred works in albums like Desert Spirit (1996), Sanctuary Jazz (1998), Listen (2002), Seeds (2005), Morning Prayer (2009) and The Door (2010). He has even written a Sacred Jazz concerto, Desert Spirit, which was finished as part of a grant from the Jazzbird Foundation of San Diego, California.

It is clear that Marohnic’s large body of work has been made public in order to offer “church musicians a viable musical alternative to contemporary worship.” Throughout his career, he has used his vast skill set to serve churches across the country. His most recent work is called the Jazz Psalms Project, where he intends to write a jazz composition for every Chapter in the book of Psalms (150). At this time, the project is intended to be finished by 2015.

369. See Discography.
There are certainly other musicians who are composing and performing jazz for use in the church. Will Todd’s 2003 *Mass In Blue* represents an interesting mix of choral and jazz trio writing. Andy Tecson has led the ChurchJazz ensemble since the early 1980s, and has written “Jazz Psalms,” the “Chicacgo Jazz Mass,” and arranged “more than a hundred hymns for jazz band and congregational singing.”  

Bob Chilcott, a celebrated choral composer, wrote *A Little Jazz Mass* in 2004 for the Crescent City Choral Festival in New Orleans. And Craig Curry composed “Jazz Mass” for the Wartburg College Castle Singers, who performed the work throughout Europe during the Spring of 2012.

The jazz vespers (or mass) service has also become a popular trend in America as of late. The Church of the Ascension on the Upper West Side of New York holds three weekly services, a Spanish service in the morning, a traditional English service in the afternoon, and an evening jazz service. Father Norm Freeman, an accomplished vibraphonist, frequently leads a Jazz Vespers services at St. George’s Episcopal Parish in

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Laguna Hills, California. The University of Michigan offers a Jazz Mass every Sunday at 5:00 pm where the music of John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler is featured. And, Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey holds an annual Jazz Vespers concert series and it has featured prominent jazz musicians including Cyrus Chestnut, Mulgrew Miller, Geri Allen, Slide Hampton, and Houston Person.

In relatively recent years, several artists have expounded upon John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* suite and made adaptations of their own. Carlos Santana and John McLaughlin released *Love Devotion Surrender* which included the song “A Love Supreme” – a cut which showcases a truncated version of the main theme from “Acknowledgment.” R&B vocalist Will Downing released his version of Coltrane’s main theme which ended up reaching number 4 on the Billboard Hot 100. The American rock band, Gumball, even recorded a version as a bonus track on their album *Revolution on Ice*.

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Branford Marsalis (Footsteps of our Fathers \(^{384}\) and A Love Supreme: Live in Amsterdam \(^{385}\)), The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis (A Love Supreme) \(^{386}\), Bob Mintzer (his big band recorded only “Acknowledgement” on Big Band Trane \(^{387}\), Dave Murray (recorded “Acknowledgement” with his octet on Octet Plays Trane) \(^{388}\), and Kurt Elling, who put lyrics to “Resolution” on Man In The Air. \(^{389}\)

Surveying the scope of current Sacred Jazz yields a remarkable find, almost all of it is representative of the Christian faith. There are a multitude of reasons as to why this is so. Firstly, for the purposes of this study, the sacred music in America, not the world, was surveyed. Obviously the musical elements of the Black Gospel genre have much in common with jazz. It is only natural for musicians raised in gospel churches to represent their music through the music they grew up with. As Lance Bryant commented:

To me, the jazz and African American church traditions share the same soil – the same roots. They are of the same blood. In fact, to swing “Go Down Moses” and “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” requires no stretch of the imagination. It’s just simply natural. \(^{390}\)

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But, perhaps a far more telling reason is that the overwhelming majority of Americans are in fact Christian. A recent study showed that nearly 80 percent of all adults in the US identify themselves as being in a religion tied with Christianity.\(^{391}\)

Another reason Sacred Jazz could be a primarily Christian phenomena is because the theology of Christianity goes hand in hand with jazz music. Christians believe that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”\(^{392}\) Each Christian is commanded to worship “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.”\(^{393}\)

Worshipful jazz music can act as a way for Christians to obey the above verses. Bill Carter has commented on this.

Like the lyrics of biblical psalms and songs, jazz music can express an astonishing variety of human emotions. Within the song of Isaiah, we hear sounds of joy and cries for help, labor pains and peaceful silence, the thunder of praise and the screams of fury. All of these sounds are appropriately human, and appropriately offered to God. So it is with jazz. A jazz quartet can utter things in the presence of God that mere words cannot say. A saxophone can lament on behalf of the helpless. A piano may offer intercessions for the needy. A string bass can affirm the firm foundation of faith. Drums and cymbals may call pilgrims to break into joy. . . . Sometimes the music can speak for us in the fullness of human expression.\(^{394}\)

It is worth noting that there is a noticeable gap of commercial Sacred Jazz recordings and/or efforts between 1975 (Mary Lou’s Mass premier at St. Patrick’s) and the mid 1990s, when many prominent jazz musicians began recording albums comprised of hymns. Simply put, there are almost no recognized Sacred Jazz recordings in this


\(^{392}\) Jn 4:23-24 (WEB).

\(^{393}\) Dt 6:5 (WEB).

almost 20 year gap. The albums that do comprise the small amount of Sacred Jazz work during this time frame are not mentioned in the large majority of articles or interviews dealing with Sacred Jazz. Those albums are Alice Coltrane’s *Eternity* (1976), *Radha-Krsna Nama Sankirtana* (1976), *Transcendence* (1977), and *Transfiguration* (1978), Archie Shepp and Horace Parlan’s *Goin’ Home* (1977)\(^{395}\) — a compilation of spirituals — and Oscar Peterson’s “Easter Suite” which was recorded for a TV show called *South Bank* in 1984, although it was never released as a commercial recording.\(^{396}\) One possible explanation for the recording gap would be the emergence of Contemporary Christian genre based in Nashville in the 1980s.\(^{397}\) Artists/groups like Amy Grant, Sandi Patty, DeGarmo & Key, Petra, Michael W. Smith, and Phil Keaggy were all very popular.\(^{398}\)

Whatever the reason is, it is clear that the tradition of jazz has certainly worked its way into church services. The aforementioned musicians, composers, arrangers, and authors have all made substantial contributions to the field of jazz.

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395. See Discography.


CHAPTER ELEVEN

ORIGINAL SACRED JAZZ SUITE

After surveying the large body of Sacred Jazz it I was motivated to write my own sacred suite. I have been heavily impacted by the music in many of the aforementioned recordings and compositions. There is obviously a broad scope of music represented there. From Free Jazz, to Bebop, to Smooth Jazz, to Modern Jazz, and Brazilian or Latin Jazz, many sub genres can be placed under the umbrella of what I have labeled ‘Sacred Jazz.’

My project is a culmination of influences on my life both spiritually and musically. As a Christian I am very aware that each day I have in this life is a gift from God. My suite is written in light of this, and reflects the qualities of God for which I am most thankful. Musically, I have many had influences. Growing up I was very interested in the hard bop swing of Art Blakey, Horace Silver, Miles Davis 1950s quintet, Cannonball Adderly, Wynton Kelly, Thelonious Monk, Lee Morgan, and Sonny Rollins. As I got older, I became interested in an eclectic mix of music. From classical composers like Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Niccolò Paganini, to Modern Jazz musicians like Brad Mehldau, Joshua Redman, Christian McBride, Chris Potter, Kenny Kirkland, Brian Blade, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Branford Marsalis, Mulgrew Miller, Joey Calderazzo, and Kenny Garrett. An attempt to show every instance of influence in the following suite would be seemingly endless and therefore pointless, but suffice it to say, plenty of the musicians listed in this project have had a musical impact on my growth and development throughout my career.
I have entitled my suite “God’s Character: A Sacred Jazz Homage.” It consists of five movements:

1) Foreknowledge
2) Eternal
3) Our God is Good to Us (for Mary Lou Williams)
4) Sovereignty
5) Immutable

It was my aim to make each movement a musical representation of one of the above qualities of God. There are no words, but the essence and the intent of my suite is in fact worshipful. Each movement will now be explained both musically and factually.

I) Foreknowledge

The word ‘foreknowledge’ simply means to know something before it happens. It is said that God possesses infinite foreknowledge. In fact, in the Christian doctrine, God is believed to be omniscient – that is, he knows everything.

1) Yahweh, you have searched me, and you know me. 2) You know my sitting down and my rising up. You perceive my thoughts from afar. 3) You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4) For there is not a word on my tongue, but, behold, Yahweh, you know it altogether 5) You hem me in behind and before. You laid you hand on me. 399

The Old Testament figure, Job, said “he [God] knows the way that I take.” 400 Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, you know everything.” 401

399. Ps 139:1-5 (WEB).
400. Jb 23:10 (WEB).
In “Foreknowledge” I have attempted to represent this quality of God in a number of different ways. The song is the opening movement of my suite, setting the mood for the rest of the pieces (‘foreknowing’ the rest of the songs). Furthermore, many elements of the song come back in some version later on. This happens with the first chord progression as seen in the “Intro” (See Example 1.0)

![Example 1.0](image)

This chord progression reoccurs during the solo section, which acts as a four bar vamp for the soloist. There are only two basic scales represented by this chord progression: 1) C major scale on “Cmaj7” and “F2/A;” and 2) F melodic minor scale on “Abmaj7+” and “Fmin(maj7).” The simplicity of this allowed me to manipulate rhythms, melodies, and countermelodies throughout the scope of the piece.

A counter-melody is introduced over the above harmonic progression in the fifth bar of the song before the melody starts (See Example 1.1).

![Example 1.1](image)

This theme outlines the harmonic rhythm of the song and creates tension as the rhythm deceptively implies a 7/4 pulse. After this counter-melody is repeated twice, it is mirrored by a similar line placed a sixth above (See Example 1.2)
When intro is finished, both counter lines stop, but the initial one returns in the second and last “A” sections.

The first “A” section is comprised of four, 4-bar motives. The first, 4-bar melodic statement starts at measure 24 (See Example 1.3) and each following 4-bar statement develops this initial idea in some way.

There are several musical elements that I develop from this opening statement. Firstly, the ascending quarter note triplet line is a simply an arpeggiation of an “Eb” triad. Each subsequent 4-bar melodic statement after the first (there are 3 more) arpeggiates an “Eb” triad in some way. Secondly, in the third bar of the first melodic statement, the melody jumps down by a perfect fourth (from “C” to “G”) on beat four. This musical element is reflected in each of the following statements. They each employ a perfect 4th (or 5th) jump on beat four in the third measure. Thirdly, and finally, each of the four motives end on a different degree of a C major9 chord. The first ends on an “E,” the second on a “B,” the third on a “D,” and the fourth on a “C.” I have put the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th melodic statements below for reference.
The harmonic rhythm on the interlude and the “C” section is taken from the rhythms that the counter line creates underneath the melody. An example of that is shown below (See Example 1.7)

Melodically, section “C” is derived almost entirely from the “A” sections. In fact, the melody at “C” is a rhythmically augmented version of the melody from measures 24-32. The only note difference would be the “Eb” in measure 25. That note is absent in the newer version. See the appendix for the full bridge section.

The song closes with a restatement of the “A” section. The formal scheme, then, is: “Intro,” “A,” “A’,” Interlude (or “B’), “C,” “A.” The solo section is harmonic restatement of the “Intro,” and after the solos, the song does a D.S. al Fine to “C.”
II)  Eternal

I have written two slower pieces for this suite. “Eternal” is the first, and is written with a straight-eighth feel. God is said to be eternal, which means he has always existed, and will continue do so forever. This is a remarkable trait, and difficult to fully comprehend. Several verses in the bible make direct references to God’s eternal quality:

The eternal God is your dwelling place. Underneath are the everlasting arms.  

For Yahweh is good. His loving kindness endures forever, his faithfulness to all generations.

In Revelation, a particularly poignant description of God’s eternal quality is displayed:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’”

As I reflected on this, a simple and relatively short composition came to me that I called “Eternal.” As I played through my piece, I became convinced that the best way to musically reflect God’s eternal character was to do so by composing in a reflective, repetitive style. “Eternal” takes a repeating harmonic rhythm, as seen in Example 2.0, and employs it for the entirety of the song.

I inserted a triplet-oriented melody over the established harmonic ostinato. That melody, and the ostinato, can be seen below (see Example 2.1)

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402. Dt 33:27 (WEB).
403. Ps 100: 5 (WEB).
404. Rv 1:8 (WEB).
There are four, 4-bar phrases, each of which build off of the initial motive. The first three have much in common. (see Examples 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3)

As is evident, they all start on beat two as well as highlight a triplet idea at the beginning of the second bar. The second motive changes the shape and direction of the triplet in the first (see Example 2.2). The third motive is an exact retrograde of the first idea, with some register changes added to manage the range of the melody. Furthermore, the last two notes of the third motive trigger an isolation and expansion of the intervallic sizes within the melodic statement (see Example 2.3). The result is a dramatic shift from a melody that is initially quite predictable.
The last motive departs from the expected starting point on beat two, and instead starts on beat one. Nevertheless it references the initial four-bar motive in that the triplet idea at the end of the first bar into the beginning of the second is a transposition of the triplet idea in the first phrase – i.e. the first phrase is “Gb – Eb – F” and this phrase is “E – Db – Eb.” (see Example 2.4)

It should also be noted that the melody can and should be repeated throughout the entirety of the song, even during the solo sections. My intention is that the soloists trade choruses while the members who are not improvising are softly playing the melody underneath. I would expect that this would naturally build tension and facilitate the appropriate aesthetic.

III) Our God Is Good To Us (For Mary Lou Williams)

The blues was an ever-present element in many of the works I overviewed for this project. Musicians like Cyrus Chestnut, Ramsey Lewis, Eric Reed, Gene Harris, and John Blake Jr. entrenched their own playing and compositions with bluesy musical elements. Mary Lou Williams’ presents a particularly strong example of a Sacred Jazz musician infusing the blues into their performances. Her Sacred Jazz recordings heavily utilize the blues to convey the struggle she endured throughout her life as well as the
hope she had for the future. On Black Christ of the Andes, almost every solo of hers reflects the blues idiom in some way, and 7 out of the 12 songs are reflect the tonic, subdominant, to dominant harmonic movement in a common blues form.

I have also been heavily influenced by the blues because of the myriad of expressions it conveys. For this song specifically, the blues melodies and parallel moving dominant chords should reflect a happiness and joy from the fact that God is good.

The goodness of God refers to many things in the bible: God is kind (Psalm 145:17), God is generous (I Timothy 6:17), God is compassionate (Matthew 9:36), God is loving (Romans 5:8), God is slow to anger (Psalm 145:8), God is patient (2 Peter 3:9), God is faithful to forgive (1 John 1:9), God is our healer (Psalm 147:3), and God is our savior (Psalm 68:19). These are but a few of God’s qualities that are wrapped up in His goodness.

When Mary Lou Williams’ converted to Catholicism she devoted herself to a life of charity, focusing her musical efforts on spreading the message of love, peace, and equality through her Sacred Jazz. Her example is remarkable, and I felt strongly that I should write a piece specifically dedicated to her.

“Our God Is Good to Us” is a fairly straightforward song. It is my belief that the best way to represent goodness musically is to write a groove-based, simple blues, thus I chose a 16-bar minor blues with a bridge as the form for this composition. The “A” sections are strengthened by a repetitive rhythmic vamp (see Example 3.0).
The vamp, as shown above, affects the way in which each measure is heard. The natural way to hear the song is actually in two-measure groupings (the accentuated by the existing chromaticism). Furthermore, the initial four-bar harmonic vamp repeats itself twice once the melody starts. When the harmony changes, the rhythmic ostinato remains the same.

Melodically the “A” sections are loosely based around the D minor pentatonic scale. As the song progresses, the melody expounds upon moments where the melody punctuates a note, moves away from it (always by a whole step), and then moves back to the original note. In the first phrase alone, this happens twice – once in the 2nd to the 3rd measures and again in the 5th measure (see Example 3.1). The phrases in question have been enlarged and bracketed for clarity.

![Example 3.1](image)

The same concept happens again in the second musical phrase (see Example 3.2).

![Example 3.2](image)

In order to develop this idea, I employ several musical concepts, with the first being rhythmic displacement. On the bar before the bridge, I start a transposed phrased based on Example 3.1 on beat two, instead of beat one as had previously been established (see Example 3.3).
Underneath the rhythmically displaced melody, a harmonic ostinato similar to Example 3.0 occurs, but with one added eighth note anticipation to increase tension and setup the bridge.

The bridge of “Our God is Good to Us” also serves as an extrapolation on the melodic idea as seen in Example 3.1. Every melody note, steps down or up a whole step, and then returns back to the original note. (see Example 3.4)

The first eight measures of the bridge segue into an idea that hints at the step-wise melodic motion, but doesn’t explicitly replicate the idea. This four bar phrase, which temporarily shifts to 4/4 time, serves as a transition between the bridge and the last “A” section. It also references the idea as shown in Example 3.1. Two other places in this piece are built off of this new 4/4 idea, and all three figures are shown below and labeled in order of appearance for reference.
There are a few similarities. All three employ the same chord changes—i.e. “Gmin13 – Bb7 – E7Alt. – A7 Alt. – Dmin13.” Also, at the “A7Alt.” chord, the step-wise motion is abandoned in favor of voice leading that brings the listener to the next section (or to the ending as in the third example).

Despite their many similarities, there do exist quite a few differences amongst the motives. Rhythmically speaking, the first motive is syncopated and definitely sparser than the other two. Obviously, the third motive is made up entirely of quarter note triplets, and is in 3/4 instead of 4/4. Furthermore, with each subsequent motive, the step-wise idea as seen in Example 3.1 becomes more explicit. On the first occurrence, (Example 3.5) the original idea is hinted at, but at no point does the top note step back
down to the original note. The second occurrence (Example 3.6) highlights syncopation much like the first idea, but each time a new chord change is stated, the melody steps away and steps back, just like the original idea. By the final occurrence of the motive (Example 3.7), the step-wise motion is in full effect; each note is stepped away from and stepped back in to.

By and large, the overarching groove which lasts for most of the song, besides the fairly short bridge, is what holds the piece together. I implanted the evolving melodic ideas to add depth, but I intended the groove to be the main focus of this piece. Moreover, this composition should be uplifting, and I believe the use of the blues and repetitive rhythmic figures accomplish that goal.

IV) Sovereignty

The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is a rather controversial one because it refers to the fact that God is in control of all things at all times. Many people hold the belief that if something good happens, God is at the center of it, and if something bad happens, the Devil (or his demons) is at the center of it. The idea of God’s sovereignty allows for this viewpoint, but ultimately recognizes that if God wants something to happen, it will, and if He does not, it will not. Reformed Christians believe that God even allows evil to happen in order that his ultimate and glorious purposes will come about. Ultimately this viewpoint is taken because, as the Bible shows, God allowed his own son to be tortured, betrayed, denied, and crucified so that future sinners could simply call on the name of God to be saved. The book of Isaiah refers to God’s role in the murder of Christ and the results for those who put their faith in Him:
10) Yet it pleased Yahweh to bruise him [Jesus]. He has caused him to suffer. When you make his soul an offering for sin, he will see his offspring. He will prolong his days, and Yahweh’s pleasure will prosper in his hand. 11) After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light and be satisfied. My righteous servant will justify many by the knowledge of himself; and he will bear their iniquities.\textsuperscript{405}

The beautiful thing about God’s sovereignty is that it not only refers to God’s ultimate rule over sin and death, but it also refers to God’s involvement in each Christian’s individual lives. Romans 8:28 says:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.\textsuperscript{406}

I decided to reflect God’s sovereignty musically in a very simple way. For almost the entire composition, the melody is comprised of two notes, “F” and “Ab.” Regardless of the harmonic complexity underneath, the melody does not stray from “F” and “Ab”. I felt that the sure and steady nature of this melody expresses God’s control, while the harmony and changing meter reflect different circumstances that come in life. Although the melody is only two notes, it is fairly through composed and evolving. For instance, Example 4.0 shows the initial melodic motif.

\textsuperscript{405} Is 53:10-11 (WEB).

\textsuperscript{406} Rom 8:28 (WEB).
Each phrase begins differently, and ornaments the tonal center, which is clearly “F.” The next section centers on “Ab” and jumps from one octave to the next, outlining the growing texture and increasing angularity (see Example 4.1)

Underneath these two melodic statements is a slow, repetitive, chord ostinato in a 5/4 swing feel. One part of it (see Example 4.2) juxtaposes “Ebmin/Gb” and “Bbmin” while the other (see Example 4.3) repeats “Ebmin” to “Gbmaj.”

The bridge section highlights a complete harmonic and rhythmic shift. In “A” and “B”, a tonality of either Bb minor or Db major could be perceived, but in the “C” and “D” sections, the use of nontraditional chord patterns make it difficult to pin down any one tonic center. Furthermore, each phrase in “C” and “D” lasts three measures, whereas the phrases earlier in the piece are 4 measures. The first phrase in “C” is shown in Example 4.4.
The same figure is repeated, but in the second motive the melody hangs on an Ab in the third measure, while the chord “Dmaj9#11” is held underneath it. It is worth mentioning that there are meter changes in this section as well (from 5/4 to 4/4), which serve to further separate the section from the rest of the composition.

After the bridge section subsides, a return is made to the repetitive, slow ostinato as shown in Example 4.2 and Example 4.3. Each soloist improvises on those changes, and the last soloist cues the interlude. This new section starts out as a trio between piano, drums and soprano saxophone before coming to fruition with the full band at letter “G.”

The interlude is entirely in 4/4 and is unique from the rest of the tune because it finally departs from the two-note melody technique. Here, the notes “Ab” and “F” become a part of a larger melodic phrase which includes (in order of appearance) “C,” “Ab,” “F,” “Db,” and “Bb.” (see Example 4.5)

This section is comprised of the above phrase, plus another 5-bar phrase identical to it with the exception of the last chord being B Aeolian (see Appendix). It repeats as many
times as necessary for a drum solo. When the drummer cues the ending, a quiet return to the opening theme and harmonic ostinato occur.

\[ V \] \quad \textit{Immutable}

The Immutability of God refers to the unchanging nature of God. That is, He will always be God. He will always honor his promises, and He will never change. This Godly characteristic is particularly reassuring because promises as outlined in scripture can always be relied upon. Furthermore, God will always and forever retain all of the qualities that have been described in this suite. God will always be good, all knowing, eternal, and sovereign. It is a fitting character attribute to end with and reflect on.

Several places in scripture refer to God’s immutability:

\begin{quote}

Also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.  
\end{quote}  
\begin{footnote} 407 \end{footnote}

\begin{quote}

For I, Yahweh, don’t change; therefore you, sons of Jacob, are not consumed.  
\end{quote}  
\begin{footnote} 408 \end{footnote}

Furthermore, Jesus Christ is described as being “the same yesterday and today and forever.” \begin{footnote} 409 \end{footnote} Even though difficulties come into our lives, we know we can always count on Him who does not change. Representing this characteristic of God was difficult, because even though God is unchanging, there are many aspects to his infinite personality.

\begin{footnotes}

407. I Sam 15:29 (WEB).
\end{footnotes}
In the first section of the piece (“Intro,” “A,” and “B”), I decided to represent God’s unchanging nature in two ways. Firstly, a 16 bar repeated rhythm section vamp is played throughout. The beginning of the rhythmic vamp is displayed in Example 5.0.

The rhythmic hits provide the foundation for the lengthy melody, which is through-composed and doubled by the guitar and saxophone for its entirety. Secondly, every chord change (with the exception of the last two measures of each motive) lasts for four bars. The last two measures (see Example 5.1) always set up a return to the next harmony which lasts four bars.

In the first two sections, the melody is not repetitive, but free flowing, often landing on non-dominant beats and holding over even-numbered bar lines. I intended for this section to sound like a simple, improvised solo line, where no one motive is developed (see Example 5.2).
At “C” the scope of the entire piece changes. The chords last two bars instead of four (see Example 5.3), the melody becomes repetitive instead of through-composed, and the horns switch to a two-part harmony (see Example 5.4).

Besides the spiritual purpose, the unchanging and most fundamental aspect of the piece is the never faltering swing feel, which provides the groove and drive throughout the composition.
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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

The Evolution of Sacred Jazz as Reflected in the Music of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane and Recognized Contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists

By Angelo David Versace

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PURPOSE:

The goal of this research is to trace the evolution of Sacred Jazz from Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and Mary Lou Williams to recognized contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists. Ultimately, this project will attempt to legitimize Sacred Jazz.

Responses to the interview questions by are intended to provide insight into the most recent happenings in the world of Sacred Jazz. The music and careers of each individual will be discussed.

PROCEDURE:

The informed consent form will be sent in an email (recruitment letter) to the participants. All participants are asked to voluntarily answer the interview questions, over Skype or in an email.

The participants will be asked to include in their email response whether they consent to their names being published or not. Each participant acknowledges through his/her email response that he/she has read and understood the informed consent form and further agrees to its terms. The responses will be used for research and will be included in the researcher’s doctoral essay. Through responding to the questionnaire and
editing it as the participant wishes it to appear in the document, each participant also agrees that his/her responses will be published in the essay

RISKS:

No foreseeable risks or discomfort are anticipated for you by participating. Because this research is being conducted through email, security of your correspondence cannot be guaranteed.

BENEFITS:

Although no benefits can be promised to you by participating in this study, the information gathered will help establish Sacred Jazz in the world of academia.

ALTERNATIVES:

You have the alternative to not participate in this study. You may stop participating any time or you can skip any question you do not want to answer. There is no penalty incurred should you choose to halt participation.

COSTS:

No costs are anticipated for you to participate in this study.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPATE:

No monetary payment will be awarded due to participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The participants’ names and responses will be made public in my dissertation, which will be submitted to the faculty of the University of Miami this Spring 2013 and will be available for educational purposes unless he/she indicates to the principle investigator that they would like their information to be kept confidential. Please state
your preference in your email response on whether you want your name to be published or not.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

Your participation is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study.

OTHER PERTINENT INFORMATION:

The researcher will answer any questions you may have regarding the study and will give you a copy of the consent form after you have signed it. If you have any questions about the study please contact Angelo Versace researcher, at 724-422-9199 or angelo.versace@gmail.com, or Professor Rachel Lebon, at 305-284-5813 or RLLebon@aol.com. If you have any questions about you rights as a research participant, please contact the Human Subjects Research Office (HSRO) at 305-243-3195.

Please print a copy of this consent documentation for your records.

Author’s Note

Upon inception of this document, two of the informed consent form documents submitted to me by the interviewees were corrupt for an unknown reason. Therefore, I had to retroactively obtain informed consent forms. There is a discrepancy between the dates on the Ike Sturm and Lance Bryant’s consent forms and the dates of their email interviews. In both of these cases, the interview dates precede the consent forms.
1) If you were to define Sacred Jazz how would you do so? If you can, include in your answer what element(s) you think separate Sacred Jazz from the rest of jazz.

I believe Sacred Jazz is music that is dedicated to the glory and the service of God in the mind of the artist when he or she performs or creates the music. If the music has lyrics this is more obvious. But in sound and feeling, there is no difference between instrumental secular and Sacred Jazz. I don't believe there is any certain spirit inside this jazz performance or that jazz composition that one can say this one is spiritual and that one is not. Music is its own language. It is up to the Sacred Jazz artist to make it known what is in his or her heart in terms of their spiritual motivations and faith. One could say that playing with much sincere emotion and passion might sound "spiritual." Or a peaceful and reflective piece may sound prayerful. But all of those qualities are a part of most jazz performances at some time or other. Again, it is up to the Sacred Jazz artist to convey their spiritual message, whether by lyrics, titles, spoken word, etc.

2) Describe your musical upbringings, and at what point did you decide to play/record Sacred Jazz?

I was raised in a typical African American Baptist Church. I started singing in our gospel choir when I was about eleven years old. My big brother was a very talented musician (and church pianist) so I followed him into music. My family listened mostly to R&B, soul, gospel and jazz. My parents had some jazz records such as Count Basie, Frank Sinatra, and Cannonball Adderley. My generation was more into Funk. This was in the Chicago suburb of Markham. I started playing saxophone in high school and really took to jazz. Then I went to Berklee College of Music in 1979.

I started doing sacred jazz in 2002 after about ten years of much travel and freelance performance with other artists. My wife helped me to realize it was time to focus on my own solo efforts and find my own "voice" as an artist. So I attempted to pull together all of my musical influences. At the same time the Holy Spirit was working in my family life, guiding us through challenges. Personal life and music life sort of all came together around that time.
3) Do you consider Sacred Jazz necessarily Christian, and if so, why or why not?

I don't think it has to necessarily be Christian. I think it traditionally has been Christian because that is the faith of the artists that create the music that this term has been connected to. But artists do what they do and are what they are. The terms and labels come later.

4) How did you approach making your album(s), both musically and spiritually?

My first album, "Psalm," was not really intended to be a spiritual or Christian themed project, except for the title song. It was really meant to showcase my influences and talents as a player, singer and arranger, as well as to honor my faith on a couple of tracks. By the time we did "Count It All Joy " I had developed a more pointed desire to mix my jazz life with ministry. I had been doing music in church for a few years by then and was led more and more in that direction. The last project, "As For Me and My House" was a move towards involving family in the music more. That's partly why the style is more contemporary. The songs, written by my wife and me, reflect how the Lord was working in our lives.

5) Who are your major musical influences, and if applicable, what would you think their impact is on contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists?

I think my major influences are John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Joe Henderson, Richard Smallwood, Andre Crouch, and Donny Hathaway, to name a few. I think Coltrane has a huge impact on Sacred Jazz. He is the one musical figure that opened the gates towards limitless expressiveness and really giving your all through the music.

6) How would you describe the current trends in writing, performing and recording Sacred Jazz music?

I think so much has been happening and developing in this genre recently and I haven't really been up to date with what others are doing. I can't really say. But I do believe people are finding their own voices and creating new ways of expression. I think there is more variety out there now in terms of style.
7) **What is your overall sense of how the Sacred Jazz movement is developing?**

I think its growing but I'm not really sure how much. We are so spread out across the country and I get the sense that many of us are not aware of what others are doing or even how many others there are. I would like to see more networking and sharing.

8) **Do you have anything to add to this conversation?**

I commented that I'd like to see more networking and sharing but I must admit I'm guilty of not doing just that. Life as a family man and musician seems to only allow me time for the highest priority work and activities. But perhaps in the near future Sacred Jazz artists will pull together and create opportunities for support, growth, audience development, and awareness. I think studies like yours is a wonderful step in that direction.

I had asked him to expound on his career between his time at Berklee and 2002, the year he started doing Sacred Jazz.

Response sent on February 26, 2013

I left school I went back to the Chicago area for a couple of years and played around locally. I also played on a couple of cruise ships to save money. That allowed me to move to New York, which I did in 1985. There I reconnected with some of my Berklee school mates (and future wife). I played jam sessions, little jazz gigs in bars and even in the subways. I spent some time with Steve Coleman's M-Base collective which included Graham Haynes and Cassandra Wilson and Lonnie Plaxico. This was about 1989 or so. Out of that I did a recording with Steve Coleman, a recording with bassist Lonnie Plaxico and went on my first trip to Europe with Graham Haynes. I played on a couple of recordings for vibraphonist Monte Croft on Columbia Records. Then I auditioned for the Lionel Hampton band (my 2nd audition) and got in. That was 1990. We toured all over the states and Europe. In between tours I played gigs and short tours with Phyllis Hyman, Bootsy Collins, Abdullah Ibrahim, and some local big bands in NY. In 2000 I was called to be a part of the on-stage band for the Broadway musical Swing! That kind of took me out of the Lionel Hampton Band for a while. At the same time my wife and I joined a fantastic church in New Jersey and I ended up singing in the choir. Then playing sax and eventually forming and writing for a horn section for the church. This was mostly gospel music but I wrote some a capella horn arrangements that were jazz based to play during a certain part of the church services. After the Broadway show closed my wife and I decided it was time to do my own recordings so I started writing for the first Cd, Psalm. My idea was to pull all my musical influences together and mix in a little spiritual music. Then after the first CD the Spirit was moving me to do Christian jazz projects.
IKE STURM INTERVIEW
Via E-mail – November 19, 2012

1) If you were to define Sacred Jazz how would you do so? If you can, include in your answer what element(s) you think separate Sacred Jazz from the rest of Jazz.

Jazz has seemingly limitless boundaries, perhaps being defined only by process and improvisation. What is sacred can only be perceived through the artist's intention or the listener's ear. By opening our hearts and minds to God's voice, almost anything could be viewed and heard as sacred. A sorrowful cry, angry response or joyful burst can express our unique emotions. If a piece that is not created as "sacred" can be used to heal or reveal God's voice in another, can we honestly label any jazz as sacred or secular? I'm not sure of the answer to this question. However, I have always considered my compositions as sacred jazz due to their source of inspiration. I ask God to breathe life and creativity into my ideas and have experienced powerful moments of insight and peace through this process. Are our hearts as creators and listeners all that may define what is sacred?

2) Describe your musical upbringings, and at what point did you decide to play/record Sacred Jazz?

My parents are wonderful musicians and teachers. My upbringing in the Lutheran Church was always tied to hearing strong hymns and has certainly shaped my musical nature. My Dad is an incredible composer and arranger and has shared with me a lifetime of music that spoke to him. My life experiences have all pointed me to where I am right now.

I am reminded of a Charlie Parker quote that I love:
"Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art."

3) Do you consider Sacred Jazz necessarily Christian, and if so, why or why not?

No. My own music could be considered Christian, because what I play and write grows out of my heart and Christian faith. However, I can't label my neighbor's heartfelt expression as unsacred because it doesn't line up with my view of God. The diverse Christian jazz genre demands that we must be mindful of a wide spectrum of beliefs. By respecting and learning about other religions, we may be drawn deeper into our own Christian faith, stimulating new means of expression. This is at the heart of what jazz has always been, a mixture of ideas and sounds from different cultures.
4) How did you approach making your album(s), both musically and spiritually

I always begin every project by asking God to breathe life into my own ideas. I usually experiment for years to refine an overall concept or instrumentation that I'd like to pursue and then try to study works for form and orchestration that speak to me at that time. I am fortunate to be surrounded by wonderful friends that are also extremely gifted musicians. I find that our personal relationships dramatically shape the music we play and suggest new combinations of instruments that I might not have otherwise imagined.

I like to have a very specific idea of what compositions to play and how to organize the tracking and recording when I enter the studio. I have discovered that having a clear framework gives musicians a structure that can support layers of improvising and new ideas. Hearing the voices of our friends come together in ways I couldn't have imagined or pre-ordained is a powerful experience, growing out of a community of band members and friends.

For our next project, I am planning to surrender even more creative responsibility to our ensemble, trusting them to listen closely and express themselves with less specific instructions from me. A leap of faith...

5) Who are your major musical influences, and if applicable, what would you think their impact is on contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists?

It can be difficult to define where your deepest influences end and your own voice begins. I was motivated and inspired by composers like Vince Mendoza, Kenny Wheeler, Ben Monder, Pat Metheny, Joni Mitchell, Dave Holland, Arvo Pärt and many other artists. As I studied some great sacred settings, I was surprised to discover a beautiful mass by Stravinsky with woodwinds and voices. In a different vein, Bjork's *Vespertine* with studio orchestra and voices planted in me a desire to compose and record with voices and strings, looking for a way to generate powerful and dramatic highs and lows.

I think any music that inspires will continue to inform sacred jazz, regardless of style or context.

6) How would you describe the current trends in writing, performing and recording Sacred Jazz music?

(combined with 7)

7) What is your overall sense of how the Sacred Jazz movement is developing?

There are a growing number of musicians that are composing sacred pieces within a jazz context. Many of the people that I know as composers within this genre offer their works at our Jazz Mass or Jazz Vespers at Saint Peter's and I have seen new works influence other composers to experiment with new sacred jazz settings. It is wonderful
to meet new composers from around the world that are listening to new pieces and collaborating overseas. It is my hope to continue fostering these relationships and discovering innovative ways to share this music.

8) Do you have anything to add to this conversation?

Music is at the core of my being, as is my faith, so I have never really been able to separate the two when hearing something that affects me deeply. Whether the material is overtly programmatic or sacred doesn’t change the source of my inspiration; composition is an extremely emotional activity that is inextricably wrapped around my mind and spirit. The question of adding to a genre is not up to me, so instead I focus on offering a dedicated and heartfelt piece.

I asked him to expound on his musical upbringings, mentioning specific events like when he started playing, and what lead to his current position at St. Peter’s Church.

Response sent on February 20, 2013

I started playing piano in Kindergarten and began bass at age 9. My school didn't have a bass, so tuned a cello in 4ths and played standing up, like a bass. I eventually got an upright bass and also an electric bass and tuba from a family friend. I was immersed in music through my parents, who are both teachers and musicians. My Dad is an amazing composer and arranger and always encouraged me to do disciplined practice (classical bass/tuba studies) and then follow it with something creative and inventive in every session. I composed songs, played along with pop radio, transcribed sounds that engaged me and imagined new ways of approaching the instrument.

My Mom raised my sister and me in the Lutheran church. We sang hymns and anthems in the choir and became a part of a small, rural church with a loving and dedicated church family. Our relationships forged back then as kids remain strong to this day.

I have had many inspiring musical events in my life, beginning with my Dad's Jazz Ensemble concerts that I attended as a child. Eventually joining his band at the Eastman School of Music was a huge step for me and opened the door to a world of musical relationships and friendships. I feel that my time at Eastman was an especially creative time that allowed for a great deal of individual expression and innovation.

Listening to music and playing music together with my peers helped shape our concepts and voices as improvisers and composers.

During college, I also played bass at a Gospel church in Rochester every Sunday morning. This gave me a new perspective on the range of musical aesthetics that may be used in worship and also led to lifelong friendships.

Since I have lived in NYC, I have experienced countless meaningful playing opportunities at Saint Peter's and in ensembles here. The fellowship of our church band
is one of the most inspiring things in my life, both personally and professionally. I love watching these relationships grow and I am excited to see what God has yet to reveal!
1) If you were to define Sacred Jazz how would you do so? If you can, include in your answer what element(s) you think separate Sacred Jazz from the rest of jazz.

“Sacred jazz” means music in a jazz style that either uses text or tune coming from a religious tradition. It can also include original instrumental (or purely free improvisational) music that is meant as a meditation on a particular religious theme or concept.

“Liturgical jazz” is another term that is sometimes used, and is perhaps more specific: it names that the text is coming from a faith tradition and that the music is written to be used in the context of liturgy.

I do not believe that “x” music is “sacred,” and “y” music is “secular.” The main reason to use the term “sacred jazz” is because of the text. It’s the same thing as saying that Bach wrote sacred choral music. Everyone knows what that means- and it doesn't mean that Bach's other music was not worthy of the term "sacred."

2) Describe your musical upbringings, and at what point did you decide to play/record Sacred Jazz?

I primarily played classical music on piano and flute from around the age of nine, and was a classical piano major in undergraduate school. I also played piano in church on many occasions as a substitute pianist. During my last two years of high school, I played in our school’s jazz band, and wanted to learn to improvise, but didn’t have anyone giving me guidance in terms of how to do that in a jazz context. I wasn’t listening to jazz then, except for a couple of concerts at Eastman School of Music the summer before I began college outside of Chicago (at Wheaton College).

While at Wheaton, I began studying alto and tenor saxophone with Larry Panella. Larry was one of only two adjunct professors who were jazz players. In Larry, I finally had someone to give me direction in terms of names of musicians/recordings to check out, and in learning elements of jazz theory and improvisation. Before my sophomore year ended, I asked Larry to recommend a jazz piano teacher, as there were none at Wheaton. On his recommendation, I started studying with Brad Williams. Brad lived in Oak Park, about a half hour from Wheaton, and I drove to his place every week for lessons during my junior and senior year. I recorded each lesson and spent hours with those cassettes each week, trying to soak up everything. As soon as I started these lessons, I knew that I wanted to play jazz piano.
After college, I moved into the city (of Chicago), and started attending LaSalle Street Church. During one of my first Sundays at LaSalle, a guest Dixieland jazz group led in worship. I remember observing that there wasn’t a lot of congregational singing happening while the group was leading, so I talked with one of the pastors and told her that I’d love to help out if they ever wanted to have another jazz service. Because of that, I ended up coordinating and arranging/composing both congregational, choral, and instrumental music for two annual jazz services while at LaSalle (I returned to LaSalle on two occasions to lead morning worship with my jazz group after having moved to New York).

In late 1997, I moved to New York with a full time job as music director at All Angels’ Church (Episcopal). This is where I began composing sacred music/sacred jazz in earnest. I wrote the beginnings of two jazz Masses along with other congregational music, and arranged music for our gospel choir.

After leaving All Angels’ in 2000, I began contacting churches when I would plan tours with my trio or quartet. My group would come in as guest musicians, and I’d send sheet music ahead of our visit so that music directors could introduce music to their choir or congregation in advance. At first, I didn’t have piano parts written out for everything (I had lead sheets, or choral scores with chord symbols, but no notated piano parts). Many church musicians began asking me on these trips if I had recordings and notated piano parts, as they wanted to be able to continue to use my music in their repertoire after my visits. This is in part why I chose to record “From This Place,” and is definitely the reason why I created a corresponding songbook, with fully notated piano parts for all of the pieces on the album.

“Sacred jazz” is not the only genre that I play: three of my four recordings are not music with sacred text; and my upcoming album features arrangements and improvisations based on Chopin preludes and nocturnes. Playing and composing in church is something that happened very organically. I also don’t even care if the term “jazz” is applied or not. Some of my music is through-composed, and doesn’t have room for a lot of improvisation in terms of melodic content. But it does leave room for interaction/improvisation within the rhythm section, or even in solo piano accompaniment, in terms of how to voice chords or change rhythmic underpinnings.

3) Do you consider Sacred Jazz necessarily Christian, and if so, why or why not?

No. Last week I found a recording of Jewish liturgical jazz- Herbie Hancock is on piano! Most of the sacred jazz that I know of, or have listened to, is working within the Christian tradition.
4) How did you approach making your album(s), both musically and spiritually

I'll just reflect on my sacred jazz album, "From This Place." We recorded in 2008, so it was some time ago.

I had a vocal coach/producer for this recording, Jocelyn Rasmussen. I'd accompanied for Jocelyn's voice classes on and off for years, and liked her approach to teaching voice. Jocelyn loved my sacred music, and so I asked her if I could take some lessons with her to prepare for the recording.

One of the big things that Jocelyn helped me to focus on was in terms of delving even more deeply into much of the text (which I'd already spent a lot of time with - both in terms of writing new settings for the Mass, Psalms, and several 19th-century hymn texts; and in writing two pieces with my original text). Because I most often perform these pieces in the context of a worship service - and because some of the pieces are congregational, where I'm focused on leading a group of people in singing together, it was a different experience to be able to sing without having the added function of leading group song. I journaled about several of the pieces while studying with Jocelyn. In particular, I remember working on the Kyrie. Since the phrase, "Lord, have mercy," or "Christ, have mercy" appears so many times in my setting, Jocelyn suggested that I make a list of people, places, or situations where I wanted to ask God to have mercy. I made a list and would practice singing with some of those situations in mind. I created a lot of visual images for myself, not only in the Kyrie, but in my original piece (text and music), "From This Place."

I also had additional vocalists on this recording, something I'd never done before on an album. It was a challenge to be able to sing and conduct while recording at the same time.

The instrumental quartet recorded all of the tracks in two days' time. While I sang and played simultaneously on those tracks, because I was sick with a bad cold, I had to redo some of the solo vocal tracks (without playing piano) later on. For the four part vocal tracks, I needed to be able to have all of the vocalists together at the same time (we spent one day doing just the vocal ensemble tracks).

5) Who are your major musical influences, and if applicable, what would you think their impact is on contemporary Sacred Jazz Artists?

Bill Evans, Erroll Garner, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, Ed Simon, Danilo Perez, Shirley Horn, Blossom Dearie, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Djavan, Stevie Wonder.

All of these musicians have influenced many jazz artists as players, composers, and improvisers.
Mary Lou Williams has been a major source of encouragement and inspiration for me personally. She is one of the few jazz musicians who composed liturgical jazz in the 1960s/early 1970s and really concentrated on it as a large part of her work. Her music was meant to be used in the context of the Mass, and she worked to bring jazz into churches all around the country. She was also the only jazz musician to live through and play in many of the different styles of jazz (blues, boogie woogie, early swing, stride piano, bebop). Her compositions and playing were always a little ahead of her time; she was very open both musically and spiritually. Williams converted to Catholicism in 1956 and truly lived her faith.

6) How would you describe the current trends in writing, performing and recording Sacred Jazz music?

To my knowledge, there seem to be more pockets of musicians who are creating music for their individual church settings. It's not like sacred jazz or liturgical jazz is a huge genre in terms of recording— but there is definitely an openness in many churches to having jazz services, or occasional services where jazz is a part of the mix. There is an interest in many churches where I play as a guest to have their church musicians (who aren't necessarily fluent in jazz) be able to play sacred jazz after I leave— again, this is why I created notated piano parts in addition to lead sheets.

I can also think of one musician in particular who has released an instrumental jazz recording that is a musical reflection on the concept of the Trinity. "Sacred jazz" does not necessarily have to have religious text or be a new arrangement of a hymn tune. Improvisation in itself, and especially in jazz, needs to come from a very deep place in order to be truly in the moment. I think that this in itself- the act of improvising (and especially with others)- is a sacred act. It's something that takes courage, honesty, and the willingness to not be in control.

7) What is your overall sense of how the Sacred Jazz movement is developing?

For the most part, the musicians I know who are creating sacred jazz are doing it in the context of a worshiping faith community. One of the great things about this is that the music is organic and specific to the community where it is birthed. For instance, when I composed the Kyrie and Sanctus in my Evening Mass, I wrote it with the gospel choir and the evening congregation at All Angels' in mind. I knew what would make sense musically in that particular setting.

One thing that I find a bit curious is the handful of books that have come out in the last several years that attempt to marry jazz and theology, or at least to mention jazz as a buzzword that sounds cool and somehow relates to not being stuck in knowing the end answers all of the time (i.e., to improvise). I've been invited on numerous occasions to speak at colleges and conferences on jazz improvisation as active contemplative prayer. I
think that it takes a musician who is also a person of faith to really be able to articulate a dialogue between jazz and theology.

8) Do you have anything to add to this conversation?

Not at the moment! Feel free to write if you have additional questions or need clarification on anything. I could, for instance, tell you more about Mary Lou Williams' importance to me-- and I have a written article on this subject at Urban Faith, which might be helpful to you in your research: http://www.urbanfaith.com/2010/04/mary-lous-sacred-jazz.html/
APPENDIX C

FOREKNOWLEDGE

FOREKNOWLEDGE

Angele Versace
APPENDIX D

ETERNAL
APPENDIX E

OUR GOD IS GOOD TO US

Our God is Good to Us

New Orleans Groove (Sambouline)

For Mary Lou Williams

Angelo Versace

\( \text{Intro. - A} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

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\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)

\( \text{D Min.} \ - \text{Ab}^\#11 \ - \text{G Min.} \)
Our God is Good To Us

Soloist Starts

[Piano notation with music staff and notes]
Our God is Good To Us

Pno.

[Music notation image]
APPENDIX F

SOVEREIGNTY

SOVEREIGNTY

Angelo Versace
IMMORTAL

SINGING/WALK

SEASON SWING