

JAZZ: Human Transformation in a Musical Key by Thomas E. Reynolds

This essay risks reflecting on the spiritual qualities of jazz performance, that is, its *dynamic*, *relational*, and *open* character. I say “risks” because most of us might not immediately connect spirituality and jazz. Unless, of course, we think of John Coltrane and the church named after him: The Church of St. John Coltrane in San Francisco, which is affiliated with the African Orthodox Church. There the music of John Coltrane is part of the liturgy, the services conducted with haloed icons of Coltrane gazing down from above the altar. They portray him holding a scroll in one hand and a saxophone with other. In one, throngs of fire emanate from the bell of his saxophone. The obvious allusion is to Pentecost — the outpouring of the Spirit on the followers of Jesus shortly after his resurrection, which empowered those gathered to speak in tongues and go forth to enliven the world in Christ’s name. I don’t want to make any dramatic theological claims about jazz here, but I do think there is something basic to it that can be gleaned from the connection of spirit to someone like Coltrane.

I never had the fortune of hearing him live, for his life ended shortly after I was born. But there is something about his music, especially in the period following his famous recording of “A Love Supreme” — and up until his death in 1967 — which exemplifies the spiritual and transformative potential of jazz. What is this? It is several elements rolled into a single package. I will focus on the three mentioned above — dynamic, relational, and open — all of which point to the deeper impulses of “being alive” and suggest potential ways to think differently about transformation and the life of faith.

First, it is *dynamic*, restless and searching. The jazz improviser explores possibilities, never content with mere repetition or being held captive by the past. In fact, the musician deliberately seeks to break free from constraining mechanisms in order to pry open a passageway to something more, to new forms of variation and novelty. What is it that the jazz musician searches for? It is not one

specific thing; it is many things. And these things cannot be predicted as commonplace conventions can, familiar and ordinary as they are. The creative pulse of the artist moves toward the unexpected, the unfamiliar, the uncanny and perhaps the shocking.

The improviser plays the same music anew, re-telling the story in a way that ruptures ordinary perceptions and opens new possibilities of perception and meaning. (It's like a good sermon.) A different combination of notes and rhythms, a different intensity — these can remake the ordinary, moving musical mountains. So the search is not for “some-thing”, but rather for different ways to inhabit the world, which “sing a new song” and enable a fresh take on an old theme. This allows the musician, and by implication, the listener, to enter the world differently, as enriched and vitalized, even transformed. More than merely “expressing” themselves, the goal of improvisers is to become open to the world anew. The search is for innovation, not simply for its own sake or for the communication of inner feelings, but as a vehicle for reentering the world with insight and experiencing its beauty. And the possibilities are endless, for the world is inexhaustibly rich. Thus jazz generates a forward momentum of hopeful anticipation, an anticipatory openness to the surprise of insight. And this enlivens.

Coltrane incarnated this kind of search. He would work a solo over endlessly to the point of screeches and screams on his horn, pushing forward and forward as if to some elusive end. He would explore the harmonic possibilities of chords from all angles, almost at the same time. In a conversation he explains what he was up to:

It's more than beauty that I feel in music — that I think musicians feel in music.... I think the main thing a musician would like to do is to give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows and senses in the universe. That's what music is to me — it's just another way of saying this is a big beautiful universe we live in, that's been given to us, and here's an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is. That's what I would like to do. I think that's one of the greatest things you can do in life, and we all try to do it in some way. The musician's is through music.¹

¹Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and his Quest* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1995) p. 121.

Wynton Marsalis, the great jazz trumpeter who is Musical Director of “Jazz at Lincoln Center”, says it this way:

Jazz music is freedom of expression with a groove. Jazz music is down-home and it’s sophisticated....When you talk about the message brought by great jazz musicians you definitely are talking about something that’s spiritual.... Jazz music is existence music. It doesn’t take you out of the world. It puts you into the world and it says, ‘This is’.²

And for Coltrane, departing from prevailing modes of expression was essential to this process. In a letter, he once commented that he related to the art of Van Gogh. He states: “...innovators always seek to revitalize, extend and reconstruct the status quo in their given fields, wherever it is needed. Quite often they are the rejects, outcasts, sub-citizens, etc. of the very societies to which they bring so much sustenance.”³ One can hear distinct echoes of a critique of racism. Like the music of many other African American jazz musicians of the 1950s and 60s, such as Charles Mingus and Thelonius Monk, Coltrane’s music trades on a creative pulse that symbolically reconstructs and subverts the world as white society makes it. This new world resonates with “life” — with the freedom-making power of improvisational vitality.

This brings us to a second spiritual component of jazz: its *relational* quality. Relation means connection, being part of a circle greater than oneself. While the improviser gives voice to his or her own unique interpretation of the music, this is only possible in the incubator of what drummer Art Taylor calls “the jazz brotherhood”.⁴ Like Christianity and other spiritual heritages, jazz has its tradition. A collective consciousness indwells the jazz musician. One must “pay your dues”, study the great masters and their own improvisational styles to “find your own voice”, and “cut your teeth” through experience with others in the tradition. Thus, if

²Wynton Marsalis, “Freedom of Expression with a Groove: An Interview with Wynton Marsalis,” in Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* (New York: Knopf, 2000) pp. 116, 121.

³Nisenson, p. 131.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 23.

improvisation requires the freedom to take a leap into the unknown, it also requires a disciplined, technical and conceptual preparation that can take years to develop. The present-day jazz musician cannot help but in every performance enact genuine solidarity with musicians from the past who have prepared the way.⁵ The parallels with religious education and theological training for ministry are striking. One must know and creatively engage the tradition to find one's unique "voice" and, in turn, facilitate such creative growth in others. The past is preserved even as novelty is introduced.

Jazz improvisation takes this idea further by emphasizing the spontaneous composing of new layers of meaning in and through the performance itself. A high degree of indeterminacy is built into jazz performance, a progressive looseness in conception that releases the musician from being bound by mere imitation and repetition. It reaches ahead as if for a final resolution, but keeps forging a wider and wider terrain, taking risks that bring new moments of variation and innovation. In such a process, traditions are not discarded but carried forward into new possibilities. This is crucial because it implies a fundamental trust in the vitality of contrast and differentiation over the stasis of uniformity, a trust that risks a stretch into strange and unfamiliar musical terrains.

But this does not happen alone. There also exists solidarity with other musicians in the performance itself. Here is where the stage for originality is set. Here is where the improviser is challenged to push the jazz language into a fresh response for a present context. How so? Through a musical conversation in which real interplay and mutual exchange takes place in the immediacy of the moment. This kind of interplay can be traced back to African religion in the form of a call-and-response pattern of alternation between a leader's address and a group's response. And, as in African religion, attentiveness, sensitivity, flexibility and an overall readiness to react are high priority virtues in the jazz group.

⁵See William G. Carter, "Singing a New Song: The Gospel and Jazz," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 [1998], pp. 40-51, esp. pp. 42-3.

Indeed, these are spiritual qualities. For each participant becomes present and attuned to others in the performance, playing out their unique role, but contributing to each other's innovation, and indeed transforming each other in the forward direction of invigorating novelty. And through the conversation a dynamic resonance is created that is greater than the sum of individual efforts. But this only happens as differences come into relation, producing the play of genuine contrast and difference. Performers in a jazz group each bring a unique musical voice to the collective conversation. Indeed, it is the contrapuntal interplay of these contrasts that creates a sonic force field that moves and shifts as the group dialogue moves and shifts to accommodate the interpretive slant of different voices. There are distinct analogies here that resonate with what it might mean for the United Church of Canada to be an "intercultural church", a community of differences-in-relation. For, in jazz performance, each musician becomes attuned to and creates a space for the other's difference. In turn, performers become taken up into a musical momentum that honours, challenges, inspires, and indeed re-creates each participant. Jazz improvisers "find their voice" not only by being engaged with past tradition, but also as contrasts are invited into a present musical conversation, as differences come into relation. Being church, like playing jazz, is relational and contextual. It happens in a tradition-steeped present moment of forward-moving interaction.

We see this exemplified in Coltrane's group. Without the piano stylings of McCoy Tyner, the ferocity of drummer Elvin Jones and the flexible pulse of Jimmy Garrison, Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" would not have come off as it did. The individual's voice cannot help but be incorporated into the group's play; and the group play cannot help but be incorporated into the individual's voice. Thus, if it is true that jazz is an expressive art of the individual, it is equally true that jazz is only such because it is communal to the core. Jazz is a medium of give and take, an economy of relational exchange opened to novelty.

With this, the third quality of the spiritual in jazz comes to the fore: *openness*, the willingness to let go and forego ownership to the music at hand. Meister Eckhart, the great medieval Christian mystic, once used the term *Gelassenheit* to describe the mystic's posture toward God. This word basically means "releasement", the unbinding of all preconceptions and expectations, letting go of the guard-rails, so to speak. Such letting go entails risk, and thus requires courage. For things could become undone; mistakes could be made. But the improviser moves forward nonetheless, perhaps even transforming mistakes into new possibilities. Space for error is required if space for creative advancement is also to exist. And this not only entails courage; it also requires a heightened level of attentiveness and focus, a kind of meditative "mindfulness" (as Buddhist's call it). It means being attuned to and in fact "becoming" the music as it happens, flowing with it and being carried by it, losing oneself along the way. This indicates a kind of conversion from egotism, from self-preoccupation. For, as we all have experienced at some point or another (whether in worship, prayer, art, sports, a good conversation, or whatever), relentless self-consciousness can stultify and wreak havoc on the creative impulse. Attentiveness to something beyond our ego-selves, which has called us out, so to speak, is the stuff of "inspiration".

This word "inspiration" is fundamental. It means being "inspired" by something else, something more. It means one has gotten out of the way and let a greater force or power take hold — perhaps the music, perhaps the muses, perhaps God. Coltrane believed it was God, and gave constant thanks for it as something given and not his own. Regardless of how one names it, this gift empowers the state of self-transcendence so often extolled by mystics and artists alike. And it is a gift, something that "comes" and indwells like the spirit at Pentecost. Such a gift cannot be possessed or conjured mechanically and on command. Paradoxically, it comes as the artist lets go and steps forward into the open, willing to reenter the world differently, loosening his or her grip on reality as it is or may seem to be. This brings us 'round

full circle to the dynamic quality of jazz, for openness charges the moment with possibility, the potential for creative vitality and novelty.

In concluding, I want to emphasize what might already be obvious: these three spiritual qualities — the anticipatory search for sounding the world anew, the relational connection with others, the letting-go and openness — are not just properties of the performers. They involve the listener as well. Like a good liturgy, jazz calls the audience into participating in the performance, anticipating and connecting and letting go along with the musicians. Like all art does, and perhaps worship should do, jazz opens us to the world differently. And through this, we can become transformed and, dare I say, spiritually renewed. As Francis Davis wrote of Coltrane, we might say of all jazz musicians, and perhaps of all artists. That is, Coltrane made us “believe that whatever was at stake for him in his solos is also at stake for us”.⁶ And there is much at stake for all of us. Perhaps the spiritual life itself is like jazz performance. It may lead us to think differently about faith, tradition, cultural differences, church, and God’s work in our midst.

⁶“Coltrane at 75,” *New York Times*, Sept. 23, 2001.