

# The Jazz Aesthetic as a Model for Theological Discourse

-Elise M. Edwards

This essay explores how a jazz aesthetic might contribute to and enhance the way we think about and write theology. One theologian, Sharon Welch, has examined jazz for its theological relevance in a larger work where she is concerned with how aesthetic models teach theology an ethos of vision. She poses an engaging question for theologians. “To think about jazz and to learn from it is to enter a compelling engagement with a complex, changing, intricate form of art.... [As art,] it is meaningful and valuable in its own terms. And yet, if we immerse ourselves in this complex play of insight and form, what will we discover?”<sup>1</sup> I wish to respond to Welch’s question by examining descriptions of jazz from, particularly, musicians and cultural critics, as well as other commentators, and, in so doing, suggest something of what theologians might discover in this aesthetic regarding their approach to sources, forms, and processes of theological discourse.

## *The Jazz Aesthetic in Sources and Forms of Theological Discourse*

In its origins and development as a genre, jazz is known for synthesizing African, American and European musical traditions. The jazz aesthetic uses the self as a source, illustrating that subjective experience acts as an interpreter of texts. In describing Billie Holiday’s jazz musicality, Angela Davis writes that the artist would subvert the composer’s lyrical intent and literal signification, “She was able to set in profound motion deeply disturbing disjunctions between overt statements and their aesthetic meanings” through her vocals’ relation to the instrumental accompaniment.<sup>2</sup> Holiday’s subjective experience not only interpreted the text of the music, but interpreted the lives of her listeners, particularly African American women, through her experience. “Lady Day’s genius was to give her life experiences an aesthetic form that recast them as windows through which other women could peer critically at their own lives.”<sup>3</sup> Davis continues:

It is a woman’s vision she presents, and as women’s realities filter through the prism of her music, we are educated and enlightened about our interior emotional lives. Her message is able to escape the ideological constraints of the lyrics. In the music, in her phrasing, her timing, the timbre of her voice, the social roots of pain and despair in women’s emotional lives are given a lyrical legibility.<sup>4</sup>

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common factor in these musicians’ technique is their willingness to use personal expression to communicate through the song. The sound of an accomplished musician is as distinct and personalized as the sounds of someone’s voice,<sup>6</sup> and the jazz musician’s interpretation of the music is what makes it theirs. The musician “reads” the text aloud to an audience in his or her own voice, which colors and shades it with meaning.

Although the delivery of lyrics was Holiday’s technique of using subjective experience to interpret texts, instrumental jazz musicians, too, use timing and phrasing techniques to “read” texts according to their experiences. The form the music takes depends on its interpretation. Different musicians will use different approaches: Miles Davis uses intelligence and feelings to create haunting sounds, Charlie Parker relies on quickness in tempo and organization to communicate, and Louis Armstrong combines blues realism with the bright sound of the trumpet.<sup>5</sup> The

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## NOTES

1. Sharon D. Welch, “Lush Life: Foucault’s Analytics of Power and a Jazz Aesthetic,” in [The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology](#), ed. Graham Ward, [The Blackwell Companions to Religion](#) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 79.
2. Angela Y. Davis, [Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday](#) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 179-80. Davis gives examples of this in Holiday’s renditions of “Some Other Spring,” “You’re My Thrill,” “Lover, Come Back to Me,” and “There Is No Greater Love.”
3. *Ibid.*, 179.
4. *Ibid.*, 177.
5. Wynton Marsalis and Geoffrey C. Ward, [Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life](#) (New York: Random House, 2008), 14.
6. *Ibid.*, 7.

This communication generates audience response. I attended a theatrical master class led by Sharon Bridgforth, whose performance novels are based in the jazz aesthetic, in which several sessions were dedicated to teaching participants to “witness” to others. Witnessing as a part of the jazz aesthetic operates in much the same way as some church contexts. Within an emotionally safe environment, space is created for individuals to present their work openly. The audience’s primary function is to listen empathetically to what is being said, and if they offer commentary or critique, it is presented with respect and affirmation. This positive attitude is not uncritical, but it requires criticism to follow empathetic listening.

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The metaphor of jazz as language is a prevalent one in writings about the jazz aesthetic. When musicians and critics such as Wynton Marsalis and Jonny King employ this metaphor, they are not speaking of a language of words, but one of feelings.<sup>7</sup> They recognize that what is conveyed through the music can often not be captured in words, but the sentiments are nonetheless real and felt by the musicians and audience. Jazz, as do other forms of music, provokes individuals to shape a language out of their feeling and use that personal expression to communicate how the world feels to them.<sup>8</sup> This expression is not, however, univocal. In jazz, communicated experience is open to the many interpretations of its audience.<sup>9</sup> Even works that are articulated literally can be subverted through the tone of their reading. Therefore, performance has a place in interpreting the text, not only presenting it, which is already done in the context of worship. There is a tension, however, between the aims of academic or didactic theological writing to be clear and unambiguous and the jazz aesthetic’s willingness to subvert a plain meaning. In essay form, the ironic move of saying one thing but meaning another is more difficult to accomplish than it is in poetry or narrative. Yet, instead of casting this as a limitation of the jazz aesthetic’s applicability to theology, I believe that it suggests a need for openness in the genres through which theological discourse is expressed.

The form of jazz – the music – is not only oral or textual, as academic theology tends to be. The music communicates through rhythm, texture, and tone. In fact, when jazz is performed without vocalists or introductions and explanations, it may not be oral or textual at all. But it is always aural and physical. It is aural because the music paints a picture that is received by listening. It is physical because it is created through the exercise of the musician’s bodies, the movement of their fingers and hands over the instruments. The intensity of the music and its resonance within the band and its audience are also communicated physically through clapping hands, tapping feet, swaying bodies, closed or rapt eyes, nodding heads, and other bodily motions. The non-textual nature of music, and of jazz in particular, requires an attention to imagistic expression. Jazz artists’ skill in expression is the criteria by which they are judged. Sound communicates the performer’s depth and understanding of life.<sup>10</sup> Marsalis compares the way a great musician delivers insight to life the soul with the poetic expressions of spiritual wisdom delivered by a great preacher.<sup>11</sup> Theologians must also see the capabilities of poetic expression. The jazz aesthetic prompts us to assess our own communicative skills as Marsalis does: Do we, as theologians, possess such a broad understanding of life? (And do our audiences? They will not be able to hear it if they do not.) Does our theological discourse express that understanding? Do its sound, tone, and imagery communicate information? The jazz aesthetic’s attention to image in expression prompts us to seek ways that our work can be aural, physical, textured, and visual.

In the jazz aesthetic, experience is communicated through a blues sensibility. Although it is a distinct style of music, the blues remains a part of jazz. The blues represents jazz’s origins and its expressive quality.<sup>12</sup> It is not always sad, but it deals with melancholy topics. Blues recognizes the pain of lost love and injustice, but also expresses

7. Jonny King, What Jazz Is: An Insider's Guide to Understanding and Listening to Jazz (New York: Walker and Company, 1997), 10.

8. Marsalis and Ward, Moving to Higher Ground, 8-9.

9. Ibid., 15.

10. Ibid., 68.

11. Ibid., 69.

12. Ibid., 61.

the victory of outlasting a broken heart and facing down adversity. Blues introduced a “personalization of feeling into popular songs”, which became a feature of American music, including jazz.<sup>13</sup> However, jazz and blues maintained a fearless, unadorned realism that most other forms of American popular music abandoned.<sup>14</sup> Modern jazz forms evoke loss and suffering, but do so without despair or self-pity. A blues sensibility reassures its audience through the inevitability of the unpredictable nature of life, not through a magical happy ending. Instead of contrived happiness, it presents our sad states as something that will get better or could have been worse.<sup>15</sup> It begins with pain, but does not let pain have the last word.

By holding sorrow and promise in tension within the same song, the blues element in jazz becomes a model for incorporating the pain of human experience into theology. It allows painful experiences to be told--individual suffering like abuse and neglect or corporate suffering like oppression, marginalization, and genocide--without being subsumed into another’s master narrative of hope. Instead, the telling itself becomes the source of hope. The blues element in the jazz metaphor is a challenge to easy sentimentality and asks theologians to refrain from explaining suffering away, inviting us instead to address and confront suffering, and by doing so, express hope. Our theological challenge is to develop “intellectually challenging”, “aesthetically pleasing”, and “profoundly healing” work to respond to the sources of life experience.<sup>16</sup>

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This aesthetic approach could inform theological discourse not only as an attitude of interpreting one’s own experiences, but as a hermeneutic of the gospel. The blues element of the jazz aesthetic provokes hopeful, yet unsentimental readings of the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Proclaiming the lived reality of joy in the face of suffering and the yearning for happiness despite its “attendant ambiguities and contradictions” demands an interpretive approach that does not seek a simplistic “moral of the story” or a happily-ever-after ending.<sup>17</sup> A blues hermeneutic would look for the concurrent presence of joy and suffering in Jesus’ acts and teachings. It would affirm hope prevailing against sorrow, but would not site such hope in the eradication of pain and suffering. In the blues aesthetic, the cause of the blues is never overcome, but worked through. Whether the performer expresses resilience or regret, the past is never undone. His or her suffering is told and it is delivered with irony, satire, or an impulse to dance. From this perspective, a creative retelling of the sorrow and joy of Jesus’ death and resurrection would result in a “Good Friday theology.” It would emphasize the pain and suffering of sin and death. Jesus’ suffering would not be cast as something to emulate or model in our own lives--the blues does not provoke you to go and make a sad situation of your own--but cast as something with which we empathize and we recognize in our own lives. His resurrection and his followers’ response to it would be interpreted as an ironic and unpredictable element to the story, something that models the ambiguous and unknown results of our sufferings.<sup>18</sup> The blues hermeneutic encourages us to hear, understand, empathize with and learn from Jesus as the protagonist in a blues song. It encourages us to face our own lives with realist recognition of the sorrows we bear, but to keep on living in spite of them.

### *The Jazz Aesthetic in the Process of Constructing Theological Discourse*

In jazz, process as well as final product is important. Because the process in which jazz is articulated is commonly identified as the unique element of this art form, it merits distinct consideration. In light of the jazz process, which we will explore, I offer the following proposal: that the process of constructing theology could be enhanced if modeled on at least these two characteristics of jazz: the interaction between the individual and the collective, and an ephemeral yet real definition of success.

Although jazz music can be played by a single performer, most jazz is played by

13. Arnold Shaw, The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920's (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 77-78.

14. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, 23. In this chapter on ideology, sexuality and domesticity in the blues, Davis argues that romantic love and desire are not sentimental in blues as they are in the American popular song tradition. Marsalis also argues this.

15. Marsalis and Ward, Moving to Higher Ground, 52.

16. Welch, "'Lush Life'," 89.

17. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, 23. “The classic blues women sang of female aspirations for happiness and frequently associated these aspirations with sexual desire, but they rarely ignored the attendant ambiguities and contradictions.”

18. Although the resurrection is often told in churches as the happy ending to the story of the cross, the verse 16:8 ending of the Gospel of Mark does not present it as such. Even the longer endings and the other gospels and New Testament writings attest to the confusion, doubt, and suffering that Jesus’ followers experienced after the resurrection. I interpret these as ambiguous representations of the joy of resurrection and the sorrow of suffering.

groups of musicians. A defining characteristic of the jazz aesthetic process is the interaction between the individual and the collective. Jazz music is a “social situation,” as pianist Bill Evans remarked, in which a number of musicians speak a shared language with individual sensibilities.<sup>19</sup> Tom Piazza describes this social situation as a relationship between the voice of the individual and the voice(s) of the community in which the individual operates. That relationship can take many forms in jazz: a clearly defined lead voice against clearly defined accompanists; an entwined, symbiotic form; a solo against a written-out ensemble accompaniment; or other permutations of these.<sup>20</sup> The characteristics of the relationship between and individual and the group is explored through improvisation, respect, and reliance on others in the jazz aesthetic.

One of the most reflected-upon expressions of the interaction of individual selves and collective groups in jazz is improvisation. To improvise is to compose and perform at the same time.<sup>21</sup> Improvisation is one of the most noted features of jazz and when scholars use the jazz aesthetic as a model for work in non-musical disciplines; this is frequently the element by which they draw parallels--as a model of the doctrine of creation, as a model for dialogue, and as a model for response to beauty.<sup>22</sup> It has also been articulated by Alfonso Montuori as a metaphor for the learning community, which Ann Pederson applies as a model for academic theology. Improvisation has often been described with the metaphor of conversation, in which individual expressive skills are brought to bear on a central topic. The notes that each musician contributes speak to the other musicians and the audience about the “subject” of the underlying song.<sup>23</sup> The conversation metaphor emphasizes the collaboratively creative and communicative qualities of improvisation.<sup>24</sup>

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The jazz aesthetic teaches us that the power of composition and creation comes from a shared power that builds on the strengths of the present artists. Jazz icons Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn were acclaimed for their ability to compose works around the strengths of individual performers. In a jazz band, one individual does not have the ability to create a great work by themselves. This principle is developed in the theatrical jazz aesthetic also, but as it is explained by Joni L. Jones, the mentor relationship is prominently featured,

[The process] is about the humility involved in apprenticeship as one painstakingly acquires one’s own aesthetic character at the feet of the master. It is about the performers finding their way, bringing their distinctive gifts to the work and letting those gifts ring forth through the characters, through the breath of the company.<sup>25</sup>

The interaction between the individual and the collective in the jazz aesthetic is ultimately based on respect and the goal of enjoying oneself *and* relationship to others, while working toward a common goal.<sup>26</sup> The assertion of one’s self is balanced by dependence on others. This attitude of respect and desire for balance would become a key feature of a theological jazz aesthetic. A theologian who writes or teaches with this principle will locate his or her work among contributions of others. It is not a denigration of one’s own work, but humility in discourse; it is a recognition that the individual’s work is limited and emerges through interactions with others, and insight acquired from mentors, instructors, and great thinkers. As a cooperative project, the voice of a single theologian does not dominate over others in that theologian’s community of composers.

Finally, we must consider the reception of a work of jazz as part of its process.

19. Tom Piazza, Understanding Jazz: Ways to Listen, ed. Jazz at Lincoln Center (New York: Random House, 2005), 3.

20. *Ibid.*, 4.

21. Mark C. Gridley, Jazz Styles: History & Analysis, Seventh ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 4.

22. This references Pederson, Fischlin and Heble, and Benson respectively. Bruce Ellis Benson, "Call Forwarding: Improvising the Response to the Call of Beauty" in The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic). Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, eds., The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004). Ann Pederson, God, Creation, and All That Jazz: A Process of Composition and Improvisation (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001).

23. King, What Jazz Is, 11.

24. Ingrid Monson, Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

25. Joni L. Jones, "A Forum on Black Theatre: Cast a Wide Net," Theatre Journal 57, no. 4 (2005): 599.

26. Marsalis and Ward, Moving to Higher Ground, xvi.

The fulfilled expectations of something coming to be, a piece being activated by the skills of its musicians is what makes a jazz show exhilarating for its performers and audiences. The goal in jazz, as Welch describes it, is to engage in action that demonstrates accountability and creativity, not to seek a final or universal resolution.<sup>27</sup> As the jazz aesthetic models for us, our creations are dependent on the creations of those who formed our theological tradition, yet they simultaneously evoke further creativity. The products of our process are ephemeral, but because they exist for our time and place, they are also real, and to the degree that they address the issues of which we are concerned and engage our audiences, they are successful.

An attentive and critical audience is therefore crucial to success. It is interesting that the implication Marsalis draws from the performers' need to have an audience who listens and receives its message is to require humble communication from the musician; he challenges performers to commit *more* musicianship, feeling, sophistication and professionalism to reach out audiences. "In jazz, the most sophisticated musicians should consider it a challenge to try to communicate with the most inexperienced listener.... When you lose the desire to communicate with an audience that hasn't been exposed to your music, you begin to step away from the humility required to develop your artistry."<sup>28</sup> When theologians adopt this desire for their audience they are inviting themselves to create work that is accessible to a broad audience. This is not asking less of professional theologians, but more. It requires the effort to explain sophisticated work and develop approaches that communicate that work. If theologians capture the spirit of the jazz aesthetic, our theological work will be done in a spirit of humility that supports the construction of theology intended to be broadly accessible. If theology is important enough to construct, it should be important enough to communicate to any audience that will listen.

Theological discourse modeled on the jazz aesthetic would be expressed through a language of feelings, ideas, and concepts that rely on imagery and metaphor.

### *Conclusion*

Theological discourse modeled on the jazz aesthetic would be expressed through a language of feelings, ideas, and concepts that rely on imagery and metaphor. This discourse allows subjective experiences to interpret texts, stories, and Scripture. It addresses life experiences with a blues sensibility, creatively expressing joy and sorrow with fearless and unadorned realism. In a jazz-informed process of theological engagement, we would improvise, composing while performing, listening to others and respectfully allowing and encouraging participants to contribute their skills and artistry to a collective goal. This model of theological engagement would seek success for our present time and project, not permanent resolution. Ultimately, the jazz aesthetic model for theology provides a vision and ethos for doing our work in the context of shared power in a free society.

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