

# Biblical Themes in All That Jazz

Sharon Kay Dobbins

O sing to the Lord a new song,  
for he has done marvelous things!

His right hand and his holy arm  
have gotten him victory ...

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;  
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody!

With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
Make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who dwell in it!

Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing for joy together  
before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

Psalm 98

Whether it was the morning stars' song at creation, Miriam's song of the sea, Deborah's voice of victory, Gideon's trumpet, David's harp, the voices of the heavenly hosts or the shout of the Lord Himself with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, music has always played a vital part in ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Most often when we think of 'religious' music we tend to limit our vision either to these Biblical images or to traditional forms of liturgy, hymns, cantatas, oratorios, anthems or gospel song. But should we limit our vision to the status quo? Certainly not! A life of faith calls for a

dynamic vision of newness of life. It compels us to listen to the voices of contemporary culture and to respond in praise with a new song. A strong community of faith needs not only the foundation of traditional sounds, but also the vitality of the new song.

We need not look very far to see a burgeoning musical form that was cultivated in American soil. Inherent in this 'new song' is a panorama of Biblical imagery. Indeed, jazz history is the history of a new song emerging from a slave class, a song powerful enough to transform the very nature of musical language.

Duke Ellington once said that 'every man prays in his own language and there is no language God does not understand.'<sup>1</sup> For Ellington, the language of praise was jazz and that language was no doubt the result of a uniquely American cultural synthesis.

I would like to suggest that the same dynamic spirit that called up the nation of Israel out of bondage is still very much alive and at work in the world, creating new forms of culture. By examining the birth and development of jazz, we may discover striking thematic parallels found in the biblical account of the development of the Yahwistic community.

What is jazz? Jazz musicians themselves have been puzzled by this question. Louis Armstrong said, 'Jazz is my idea of how a tune should go.' Ella Fitzgerald said, 'Why, er — swing is — well, you sort of feel—uh—uh—I don't know — you just swing!' Terry Shand said, 'Jazz is a synthetic cooperation of two or more instruments helping along or giving feeling to the soloist performing.' Chick Webb said, 'Jazz is like lovin' a gal, and havin' a fight, and then seein' her again.'<sup>2</sup> Although these definitions are all quite different in their individuality, they all testify to the dynamic quality, the *esprit de vivre* inherent in jazz music.

Offering a musicological definition, Barry Ulanov describes jazz as a 'new music of a certain distinct rhythmic and melodic character, one that constantly involves improvisation.'<sup>3</sup>

Improvisation in jazz brings forth new creation in the form of musical conversation. As Rev Mark Harvey, both a Methodist minister and jazz musician, explains:

In many ways, elements of this improvisational approach are similar to several contemporary theological notions: complexity grounded in unity; human agency actively engaged in an evolving process, an interdependent world view; and a hopeful perspective that sees creation as an open system.<sup>4</sup>

We may say, then, that jazz is a dynamic language of new beginnings. Creation begins anew with each performance. Every jazz interchange is imbued with innumerable potentialities, not only for the performer but also for the listener.

How did jazz come to be? Although it is impossible to give an exact

account of the time, place or persons out of which jazz emerged, we can trace a general historical pattern evolving out of the experience of African slaves interacting with European descendants in the process of American cultural history. As the French musicologist André Hodeir describes this new cultural transformation:

Negro-American music, from which jazz issued, resulted from a rupture in the African musical tradition brought about by the brutal change in environment experienced by natives who were seized by slave-traders; it also resulted from the introduction of new musical elements which enabled the slaves of Louisiana or Virginia to form a new tradition. These elements, all of Anglo-Saxon or French origin—hymns, songs and, later, popular dances and military marches—gave jazz some of its principal characteristics: its tonal system, its form.... Thus, external influences have affected the evolution of jazz at least as strongly as internal currents.<sup>5</sup>

From this account we may clearly see that the jazz idiom is the culmination of cultural synthesis generated by the cries of a slave class. The resonance of these Afro-American slave cries within the walls of the Euro-American cultural context produced a new song—jazz. Out of the depths of suffering slaves emerged a dynamic that transformed the external structures, creating a new voice.

Striking parallel themes of this type of cultural transformation may be found in the birth and development of Yahwistic religion. The Israelites were a slave people who, although freed from their bondage in Egypt, were thrust into constant interaction with other cultures (i.e., Babylon, Persia, Egypt). In his *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Frank Moore Cross outlines in detail the connection between the external influences of Canaanite myth and the development of Yahwistic faith. The static images and myths of Canaan were somehow invigorated and transformed by a new dynamic. This dynamic emanated from the praises of a band of slaves who had been delivered out of bondage.

The religion of Israel in its first lusty and creative impulse absorbed mythic elements readily into its language of faith and into its cult, its dynamic transforming these elements to the service of Yahwism.<sup>6</sup>

Through the interaction of Israel with external mythic influences a dynamic was generated which vitalized her faith. For example, the Canaanite conflict myth of Baal and Yam Sea was transformed to describe the historic account of the Hebrew slaves' deliverance out of Egypt by Yahweh, the Divine Warrior, who cast Pharaoh's chariots into the sea. This re-appropriation and revitalization of Baal imagery continued to be a major force in the development of cultural and religious forms in Israel.

Just as the Baal imagery continued to cultivate Israelite religion and culture, the Euro-American cultural sounds continue to fuel the evolution of jazz.

What is it about the Yahwistic faith that prevented it from being absorbed or destroyed by external forces? And what is it about jazz music that keeps it from being assimilated by other musical forms?

I would like to suggest that the same dynamic force that enlivens Yahwistic religion invigorates jazz as well. Such a dynamic holds within it a vertical and horizontal tension creating a power that sustains community by pointing beyond. This power has been described by the religious community (and by many jazz musicians as well) as the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit in the Biblical tradition has manifested itself in many ways—in the breath of life at creation, in the promise of Abraham, in the calling of Israel out of Egypt, in the charismatic leadership of the judges, in the voice of the prophet, in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ and in the tradition of authentic faith community.

In describing the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the first-century Christian community Paul D. Hanson in *The People Called* reminds us:

... belief in the Holy Spirit as the presence of the risen Lord ... kept alive the dynamic inferential process at the heart of early Yahwism and prophetic faith according to which the quality of life of the community was clarified and renewed by each generation through the ongoing encounter with the living God...<sup>7</sup>

Inherent in the dynamic of the Holy Spirit is a revitalizing power that both democratizes and strengthens community through worship. The Holy Spirit is a power beyond human control or authoritative cooption. It empowers individuals through a faith community to engage in authentic worship, praising not the creature but the Creator.

Where does this relativizing power manifest itself in jazz music? Musicologist and composer Gunther Schuller, in *Early Jazz* (1968), suggests that the decisive element in jazz is the *democratization* of the beat:

By the 'democratization' of rhythmic values ... in jazz so-called weak beats (or weak parts of rhythmic units) are *not* underplayed as in 'classical' music. Instead they are brought up to the level of the strong beats, and very often even emphasized *beyond* the strong beat ....

... the average jazz musician will count 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 but snap his fingers on 2 and 4, thus putting greater emphasis on these ordinarily weak beats than on 1 and 3. (What a far cry from the 'HUT 2 - 3 - 4, HUT 2 - 3 - 4' of military marches!)<sup>8</sup>

Henry Pleasants in *Serious Music—And All that Jazz* reiterates the

observations of Gunther Schuller and goes one step further. He attempts to describe the process of rhythmic dynamism in jazz:

When the Serious musician deviates rhythmically, he takes the beat with him. When the jazz musician deviates, the beat remains where he left it, an *explicit point of reference*; and his deviation becomes a source of structural tension.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis added)

Through the 'democratization of the beat' by its 'explicit point of reference', jazz creates a community-forming dynamic that can sustain extemporaneous musical conversation. The horizontal connection of all participants pivots on the source of power that cannot be co-opted by one at the expense of another.

Paul Hanson expresses this dynamic democratization theme through the biblical concept of *shalom*:

Although richly diverse and multifaceted in its unfolding, the entire history of the biblical notion of community points to *the same transcendent referent*—the God who creates out of nothing, delivers the enslaved, defends the vulnerable, nurtures the weak, and enlists in a universal purpose of *shalom* all those responsive to the divine call.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis added)

James Luther Adams, in his essay 'Music as a Means of Grace' reminds us of the prophetic character of authentic music:

The music that rouses to a new sense of promise and to new resolve serves as a judgment upon the actualities of the present and at the same time as a contemplation, a harbinger, of future fulfillment.... With a special sense of immediacy and inwardness, authentic music redefines, illumines, refreshes .... It is not escape from reality; it is rather the rediscovery of a center of meaning... ultimately not a human achievement but a gift of grace.<sup>11</sup>

A recent issue of the *New York Times* announced, 'Jazz for Church Services Makes Measured Progress.' What does this mean? How has this 'sinful' music of the bars and bawdy houses snuck into the synagogues and churches? According to the *New York Times*:

Many churches across the country now feature jazz in their churches year round, ranging from the Four Square Gospel Church in Kirkland, Washington, to Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral in St. Louis to St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

... While jazz set to liturgy is primarily used in Christian churches, some of the earliest examples were commissioned by New York's Park Avenue Synagogue. ... Among the composers were Leonard Bernstein, Morton Gould and

David Amran ... Mr. Amran recalls Charles Mingus watching Sonny Rollins as they all played a gig in Greenwich Village. 'Mingus said,' Mr. Amran recalls, ' "When you step on the bandstand, you're in church. Listen to him preach." '12

The late jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams would undoubtedly attest to the prophetic voice of jazz in American culture. At her funeral at St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1975, the Rev. Peter O'Brien called to remembrance her saying, 'Jazz should be in the bars, the pool rooms, the streets, and the churches.'

Metaphorically speaking, the history of jazz is a contemporary example of the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit's work in the world, calling up the lowly and casting down the proud. Perhaps 'the stone which the builders rejected' (in a new musical sense) may indeed become 'the head of the corner'.

- 1 'Jazz for Church Services Makes Measured Progress', *New York Times*, April 19, 1987, pp. 21—22.
- 2 Barry Ulanov, *A History of Jazz in America* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1958), p.5.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 4 Mark S. Harvey, 'Imagining a New World', *The Christian Century*. December 24—31, 1986, pp. 1168—69.
- 5 André Hodeir, *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, Eng. tr. David Noakes (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1979), pp. 40—41.
- 6 Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 190.
- 7 Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 437.
- 8 Quoted by Henry Pleasants, *Serious Music—And All That Jazz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 68.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 10 *The People Called*, p. 5.
- 11 James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), p. 154.
- 12 *New York Times*, April 19, 1987, pp. 21—22.