

**Diversity and the Parable of Jazz**  
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The Gospel of Luke quotes Jesus of Nazareth, “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper,<sup>2</sup> I ask, “What is diversity like, and to what shall I compare it?” My answer, “It is like jazz music.” I will explore the history and characteristics of jazz music as concepts that perceptive listeners can apply in their own ways towards an understanding of the desired components and contours of diversity.

This exercise is an opportunity to explore diversity through the musical phenomenon called jazz. It is simply my own reflection on listening to live and recorded jazz and thinking about it for over fifty years as well as recalling my wonderful conversations about jazz with friends and colleagues, reading widely about the art form, and sharing these things in the context of university classes.

Jazz: Diversity in Origin

Jazz music was conceived and born within a collection of various ethnic and cultural groups of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a relatively marginal part of the adolescent United States of America. The groups included African slaves, Caucasians of European origin, Hispanics, Caribbean immigrants, and mixtures of all of these. The place was New Orleans, Louisiana. The time was a period before and after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, about half a century after France sold the Louisiana territory to the United States.

The ethnic and cultural diversity of New Orleans in this period made it the most seething and creative melting pot in not only the United States but also in the world. It’s political and social history established the basic contours of this diversity. After founding New Orleans in 1718, the French ceded it to Spain in 1764, reclaimed it in 1800, and sold the whole territory to the United States in 1803. This gave the region not only distinct European characteristics but also a predominantly Latin-Catholic culture in contrast to the prevailing national English-Protestant ethos. The city was thus more progressive and tolerant of unorthodox social hybrids than the rest of the United States. Into this *mélange* of French and Spanish culture came immigrants from other parts of Europe and especially Blacks—slaves from Africa, native-born Americans, and people from the Caribbean, particularly Cuba.

Although New Orleans in this period was uniquely diverse in all the world—a cultural gumbo, it was the African-Americans, especially the slaves, who brought the most creative energies. This was likely because they could carry only their culture from their homeland, most importantly their music and folk traditions. Exhibiting progressive thinking for the time, the New Orleans City Council in 1817 established a site for the slaves to perform their indigenous African dances and music. In his autobiography, the great, early jazz musician, Sidney Bechet, recounted the experience of his grandfather: “Sundays when the slaves would meet—that was their free day—

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<sup>1</sup> 13:18-19a; cf. Mark 4:30-31a.

<sup>2</sup> I presented this paper online, under the title “To What Shall I Compare Diversity in the Church?” to the West Coast Religion Teachers’ Conference on 2 April 2021.

he beat out rhythms on the drums at the square—Congo Square they called it. . . . He was a musician. No one had to explain notes of feeling or rhythm to him. It was all inside him, something he was always sure of.”<sup>3</sup> Early accounts described the circular dances, called ring shouts, and the various percussion and string instruments. These events represented the first stages of the Americanization of African music and the earliest conceptions of what would become jazz. It laid down the basics of complex rhythms, call and response, improvisation, dance, instruments that emulate the human voice, and the social integration of music.

The rest of the diverse cultures of New Orleans absorbed and added to this African foundation over time to create a new musical form. The Black Church provided echoes of many of these same elements along with unique tunes and soul. The transplanted French and Spanish cultures and traditions brought classical music composition scales and norms. Caribbean people, especially the Cubans, added their own unique compositional styles and particularly their distinctive rhythms. Rural locals brought the structures and scales of the Blues. The ubiquitous marching bands provided tunes, musical structures, and especially an array of instruments.

When all this came together after the Civil War, the result was not yet jazz. But the foundation was laid, and most of the formative elements were in place. It would take the creative genius of composers and performers over the next half century like Buddy Bolden and his band and Scott Joplin to build on this formative foundation and elements. However, without these earliest developments that were wholly dependent of the unique diversity of New Orleans, jazz would not have been born.

### Jazz: Diversity in Practice

From its full-blown emergence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, jazz music and the jazz community have exhibited diversity in numerous ways. The music itself is diverse. Jazz has evolved through numerous styles and periods of music. The Jazz Age began in New Orleans and spread from there up the Mississippi to St. Louis, to Chicago, and to New York City. The traditional music morphed into Swing with Benny Goodman and Big Band dance music with Duke Ellington. This was paralleled by Black Bebop ensemble groups. Cool Jazz with Miles Davis and West Coast Jazz with Dave Brubeck emerged in the late 40s and 50s. What followed was Postbop, Hardbop, and Free Jazz. While most of these styles continue today, the structure and ensemble nature of Bebop is the most common—trios, quartets, and quintets playing straight tunes with improvisations by the various soloists.

Throughout its history, jazz has intersected with many musical traditions and styles. As we have seen, European classical music was one of the original, 19<sup>th</sup> century ingredients of jazz, especially contributing music theory norms and chordal conventions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there developed a two-way connection between jazz and classical music. On one hand, people, like George Gershwin, wrote classical music in a jazz style, e.g., his “Rhapsody in Blue” and “Concerto in F.” Conversely, jazz musicians began improvising on classical music, e.g., Jacques

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

Loussier on the music of J. S. Bach<sup>4</sup> and Bill Mays on Dvorak. Indian classical performers have created some amazing Jazz Fusion music like that of tabla master Zakir Hussain and Rakesh Chaurasia on the bansuri, a bamboo flute. Other crossovers involve Latin music and religious music. The latter includes religious music written in a jazz style, like John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" and Dave Brubeck's "The Light in the Wilderness" and his mass "To Hope! A Celebration." Musicians also commonly perform standard religious music in a jazz style, including hymns, gospel songs, and carols. Cyrus Chestnut's "What a Fellowship" is a notable example.

The instrumentation of jazz is diverse. In addition to female, male, and ensemble vocals, the range of jazz instruments is extensive. Besides the standard instruments in jazz—piano, double-bass, drums, tenor saxophone, and trumpet—there are many other instruments employed: trombone, clarinet, types of guitars, other saxophones, flugelhorn, cornet, tuba, vibraphone, banjo, sousaphone, Hammond organ, harmonica, flute, violin, French horn, cello, sitar, tabla, bansuri, bagpipes, ukulele, harp, accordion, and bassoon. Some, particularly pianists, perform solo. Most work in ensembles, including duos (e.g., piano and bass), trios (e.g., piano, bass, drums), quartets (e.g., piano, bass, drums, and tenor saxophone), and quintets. Miles Davis once had a nonet—a nine-member group that included the standard instruments plus trombone, French horn, tuba, and baritone saxophone.

The performance of jazz is diverse. Its basic elements exhibit diversity in compositional styles and ingredients drawn from various types of music, tunes incorporated from different sources of society and national traditions, various scales and structures, different tempos, etc. But the most important performance characteristic of jazz is improvisation—the practice of soloists in particular producing on-the-spot modifications to a tune that creatively alter its tempo, melodic line, key structure, or other characteristics. But all this must be done within the basic structure of the tune and its underlying rhythm as established by others in the group. This calls for a recognition and practice of freedom within restraints. It is a dialogue between the improvising soloist and the rest of the performers. It is a creative blend of individuality and community. Done properly, it is not chaotic. The result is harmonious, not cacophonous. Each soloist also has a limited number of bars in which to improvise. Regarding the music itself, this is the ultimate display of diversity. Jazz music is always a dialogue between the present performance and all past performances of the same tunes by the group or others. Every performance is both unique and tied in some way to the past.

### Jazz: Diversity in Performers

Jazz performers come in all ages, genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and physical conditions. Here are some examples. Acclaimed alto saxophone players in the 1960s included Charlie "Yardbird/Bird" Parker, a Black Bebop musician from Kansas City and Paul Desmond, a White Cool Jazz player from San Francisco. Top tenor saxophone players in the same period included the Black Bebop genius, John Coltrane and the White Cool Jazz performer, Stan Getz, who

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<sup>4</sup> "Jacques Loussier," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques\\_Loussier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Loussier). Besides Bach, the trio recorded interpretations of compositions by Handel, Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Satie, Debussy, Ravel, and Schumann.

introduced the Brazilians Astrud Gilberto and her then husband João to North America. Two of the all-time great guitarists were Jean “Django” Reinhardt, a White Belgian-Gipsy player and Wes Montgomery, a Black American performer who could not read music. Great jazz violinists included Stephane Grappelli, a White Frenchman, and Regina Carter, a Black American woman. The wide age differences are represented by Bucky Pizzarelli, a White American guitarist who finally retired at age 92 and Joey Alexander, a piano prodigy from Indonesia who played for Herbie Hancock at age 8. While some, like Pizzarelli, lived a long time, others died far too young, like Clifford Brown (25), Charlie Parker (34), and John Coltrane (40). Formative cornet/trumpet players in Chicago in the 1920s included Louis Armstrong, a young Black man from New Orleans and Bix Beiderbecke, a White guy from Davenport, IA. The best scat singers were probably Ella Fitzgerald, a Black woman and Mel Tormé, a White man. Renowned Hammond B3 organ players included the pioneer, self-taught Black soul organist Jimmy Smith and the child prodigy and White disciple of Smith, Joey DeFrancesco. Universally included among the best jazz pianists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Art Tatum, a Black American, Oscar Peterson, a Black Canadian, and Bill Evans, a White American. In the late 1960s, Jamaican saxophonist Joe Harriott teamed with Calcutta composer and violinist John Mayer for a series of East-meets-West hybrids. For years, I listened to African-American bassist Henry “The Skipper” Franklin and Japanese-American pianist Gary Matsumoto play in the Presidential Lounge of the Mission Inn. When a colleague and I started Pierce Street Jazz in 2009, a series of performances on the La Sierra campus, we invited Franklin to obtain the musicians. For many years, he was part of a resident trio that included Theo Saunders, a White American pianist, and Ramon Banda, a Hispanic-American drummer. After Banda’s death in 2019, Yayo Morales, a Bolivian-Spanish drummer, joined the group.

Although most jazz musicians are able-bodied, some were significantly disabled, like Sir George Shearing, the blind White British pianist; Art Tatum, the visually impaired Black American pianist; Lennie Tristano, a blind White American pianist; Django Reinhardt, the Belgian-Romani guitarist who lost the use of his two fingers on his left hand; Horace Parlan, who, although paralyzed on the right side, had a 30-year career as an American Bebop pianist.

While most seem to have been heterosexuals, there are some notable examples of gay performers. These include early jazz musicians like Tony Jackson and Bessie Smith, blues performers like Lucille Bogan and Ma Rainey, and more recent giants like Stephane Grappelli, Billy Strayhorn, and Ethel Waters.

Some musicians have been part of jazz-performing families. For example, Lil Hardin Armstrong, second wife of the great Satchmo, was a jazz pianist, composer, arranger, singer, and bandleader. John Coltrane’s second wife was pianist and harpist Alice Coltrane. The couple had three children: John Jr., a bassist; Ravi, a saxophonist; and Oran, also a saxophonist. Another example of related jazz performers are Indian sitar master, Ravi Shankar, a friend of Coltrane’s and crossover Jazz pioneer, and his daughter, Norah Jones, Billboard’s top jazz artist of the decade of the 2000’s. The most famous group of related jazz musicians is the Marsalis family of New Orleans. Last year father Ellis, Jr. (pianist and professor) died of coronavirus, leaving four jazz-playing sons—Brandford (saxophonist), Wynton (trumpeter), Delfeayo (trombonist), and Jason (percussionist).

Various jazz performers tackled the issues of racism and social injustice head on, like vocalist Billie Holiday in 1939 and afterwards performing Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit" that protested the lynching of Black Americans. This certainly helped to launch the civil rights movement.

Even well-known people from other parts of society sometimes perform jazz. Examples include actor Woody Allen (clarinetist and band leader) and former US president Bill Clinton (saxophonist). Some of you may have heard then Harvard theologian Harvey Cox play tenor saxophone with a jazz band at the Boston AAR/SBL meetings in 1987.

The community of jazz performers and aficionados is not perfect and never was. Nascent jazz in New Orleans had some association with the brothels. Especially in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some jazz performers were plagued by drugs, including heroin. One of them, Miles Davis declared, "There was a lot of dope around the music scene and a lot of musicians were deep into drug[s], especially heroin."<sup>5</sup> Davis proceeded to name many of them, both Black and White. Some spent time in prison for various offenses. Despite the presence of notable people who were homosexuals, a recent publication opined, "The jazz world is one of the last cultural frontiers of old-fashioned macho, and in it, homophobia runs rampant."<sup>6</sup>

### Jazz: Stories of Diversity

I would like to tell you two relevant stories. The first is about Eugene Wright, an African-American jazz bassist.

Known as "The Senator," Eugene Wright was born in Chicago to a musical family in 1923. After initially playing cornet in high school, he taught himself the double upright bass until receiving formal instruction in his 30s. During the Swing Era, Wright performed with Count Basie, Erroll Garner, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker and later moved into Bebop and Latin Jazz.

But Wright is best known for his membership in the most famous incarnation of the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Brubeck formed the all-White group in 1951 with longtime friend Paul Desmond on alto saxophone. When Brubeck needed to replace the bass player in 1958, Joe Morello, who had become the drummer in 1956, suggested Eugene Wright, an African-American. Despite a less than perfect audition, Brubeck hired him on the spot because he was impressed with Wright's ability to recover and adapt.

Eugene went on to perform with the quartet all over the world and record more than thirty albums until 1968, when the group disbanded. Brubeck considered Wright indispensable in keeping the group "grounded," especially enabling them "to play other tempos and do polyrhythmic things" while developing tunes like "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maxim W. Furek, "Heroin and the Age of Jazz," The Sober World, October 1, 2018, <https://www.thesoberworld.com/2018/10/01/heroin-age-jazz/>.

<sup>6</sup> James Gavin, "Homophobia in Jazz," JazzTimes, September 16, 2020, <https://jazztimes.com/features/profiles/homophobia-in-jazz/>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Sandomir, "Eugene Wright, Longtime Brubeck Quartet Bassist, Dies at 97," The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/arts/music/eugene-wright-dead.html>.

During these early years of the Civil Rights Movement, the Brubeck Quartet was one of the few racially integrated groups. This resulted in confrontations between Brubeck, as staunch opponent of segregation, and some concert promoters and campus officers.

An early example occurred on February 5, 1958 on the campus of what is now East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. With the band onstage for a soundcheck before the performance, the dean of students demanded to know why Wright was there, because the school did not permit Black people to perform onstage. Brubeck responded, “If Eugene can’t play, we won’t play.”<sup>8</sup> The dean reported the standoff to the president, John Messick, who called the office of Governor Luther Hodges for advice. So Messick told Brubeck: The quartet can go on, but with Wright in the background. But Brubeck subverted the deal and told Eugene that his microphone in the back was broken and he would have to use the one at the front of the stage. Years later, Wright recalled that after they were delayed for 60 to 90 minutes but encouraged by the audience, that knew what had happened, the quartet proceeded to give a “smokin’ performance.”

A life sketch in the *New York Times* after Eugene Wright’s death in Los Angeles on December 30, 2020 at age 97, recalled Dave Brubeck’s commitment to racial integration in general and the support of his friend and colleague in particular: “In 1960, Mr. Brubeck refused to play 23 dates at Southern colleges and universities because he would not replace Mr. Wright with a White bassist. And in 1964, the quartet defied picketing and threats of violence by the Ku Klux Klan and performed before an integrated audience at the University of Alabama’s Foster Auditorium in Tuscaloosa.”<sup>9</sup>

The second story introduces Marian McPartland, a White British-American jazz pianist and broadcaster.

A piano prodigy at age 3, Marian McPartland was born Margaret Marian Turner in 1918 in Slough, England and grew up in Windsor. She later attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. In 1944 while performing for troops in Belgium, she met the GI trumpeter Jimmy McPartland. They married and the next year moved to the United States, where she shifted her musical focus to jazz. She was especially influenced by her Black friend, Mary Lou Williams, the most influential female jazz pianist at the time.

In 1952, McPartland formed a trio that included drummer Joe Morello of later fame with Dave Brubeck. In 1955, she began to introduce jazz to schoolchildren, including Black students, in Washington, DC. In the 60s, Marian started her parallel radio broadcasting career featuring jazz music and guests. She also launched her own publishing label, Halcyon Records and returned to performing jazz on tour, in clubs, and through workshops. She and Jimmy divorced in 1970 but remained friends and co-performers.

June 1978 saw the launch of “Marian McPartland’s Piano Jazz” on NPR, a radio show that she hosted until 2011, just two years before she died at age 95. Throughout that long run, she introduced many young jazz performers, particularly pianists, and their music to the world,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

interviewed and featured many seasoned performers, and regularly shared her own exquisite musical interpretations.

In 2000, the National Endowment for the Arts named McPartland a “Jazz Master.” She was also honored with a Grammy in 2004 and received the Order of the British Empire in 2010.

### Conclusion

So, what is diversity like, and to what shall I compare it? It is like jazz music. As with the parables, similitudes, and metaphors of Jesus of Nazareth, jazz is a figurative understanding of a particular, real life phenomenon. In this case, I am applying it to diversity. But like all his figurative language, this is not so much a description of diversity as it actually exists in the society. Rather, it offers an aspirational challenge and a set of broadly-based ideals, in the setting of the real, flawed world, that can help us grow in our understanding, appreciation, acceptance, celebration, and defense of each other and our individual stories, all in the context of community. To echo Jesus again, “Let the one who has ears to hear *listen*.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 14:35.