

SONG OF LIFE: MERTON, MUSIC AND JAZZ

IN THE FLURRY OF LAST MINUTE preparations for the Asia trip, Merton presented his friend of over a decade, Ron Seitz, with a stack of records 'mostly jazz' as a parting gift.² These records have since disappeared but we can speculate about titles based on Merton's documented conversations.

Certainly John Coltrane's *OM* had pride of place with other selections from the tenorman's so-called 'late' or 'spiritual' period.³ We would find albums by the Kansas City Stride pianist Mary Lou Williams.⁴ Also included would be traditional blues artists such as Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins. More popular fare would include Bob Dylan⁵ and Joan Baez.⁶ We would also find albums by Wes Montgomery; other performers may have included Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong whose recordings Merton collected in his youth.⁷

It is interesting to speculate what would not have been in the stack. Discussion with Merton's friend Dick Sisto⁸ indicates that his Jazz knowledge would have been spotty. Access to recordings and live venues was limited. So while aware of Coltrane he seems ignorant of Sonny Rollins or Miles Davis. While he justifiably praises Mary Lou Williams he knows nothing of Bill Evans or Thelonious Monk.

The stack of records functions as a *Desert Island Discs* indicator of taste, priority and personality. We see Jazz as a recurring theme in his life. He is both keen to participate in it and yet aware of its hold on him.⁹ Through such enquiry we can see Merton in a new way, as one connecting with popular culture as he encountered it. Such an approach stands alongside studies of Merton and Art¹⁰ or Merton and Jack Kerouac.¹¹ Had

he lived longer, there would have been time for publication of his intended study of the Blues.¹² It would have been wonderful to hear him on Billie Holiday or Nina Simone.

Beyond Jazz itself, attention to musical themes in Merton's writing and teaching demonstrates not only his considered use of musical image and metaphor but also a remarkable ingenuity in linking faith and spirit with music. One example from the recorded addresses to Novices at Gethsemani illustrates my point.

Merton asks the novices to distinguish between poetry and song, even popular song. What can a song say that other forms such as poetry cannot express? If a song is a poem that can be sung, this implies music where the listener hears something with a rhythmic pattern expressed over time. This is something different from hearing continuous prose; even noise (such as a moving train), which can become rhythmic, even satisfying.

Song...reaches much deeper into the heart of your being. It appeals to a deeper activity, which itself is love. [There is] an inseparable relationship between singing and love... Where there is deep love for God there has to be song. It is inevitable. Song is an expression of life; listen to the birds; they are singing all over the place; people tend to sing; in the solitary life you can sing all you want without bothering everybody.¹³

In conversation with Ron Seitz, Merton goes further.

'[W]e would die without these songs which make us persons and not things...'¹⁴

So why would we die if we lacked certain songs to, literally, enliven us? How do songs personalize us in the humanistic sense? For Merton, music is part of an individuation-like process leading toward discovery of the true

self. He would have appreciated tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins' religious commitment to improvisation and performance:

Sonny's single most important requirement for his band [is that] it should never hamper his own freedom, never interfere with his playing at the transcendent level that is the greatest experience of his life—"better than sex," he says. He has a single agenda when he plays: creating "music that is truly Sonny Rollins, the music that comes out of who and what I really am... When I am playing, I would say it is a spiritual thing, in that the concentration is very similar to yoga. Because when I really concentrate while I am playing, I lose myself. Sometimes I feel like I am a whirling dervish, twirling around and getting into a certain state. It is truly an altered consciousness. That is what happens when I am really playing. You concentrate up to a point, and then you don't have to concentrate. Then the other part comes in."¹⁵

There are few differences between the creative production of visual art and musical improvisation. As Merton appreciates Blake's poem 'The Sunflower'¹⁶ with his novices he describes a relationship between the artist and the created object which is easily extended to include the viewer or listener:

When you talk to the sunflower, one enters an inter-subjective relationship between poet and sunflower... Such poetry attends its affect by a higher relationship between created beings, an inter-subjectivity between all creatures. Poetry creates a spiritual world, even more than that, but you are introduced into a realm that is real. A poem not only describes such a realm but introduces you into that very reality ... Man's (sic) role is to invite all creation in praise of God and to invite all creation into a union which praises God.¹⁷

It is not difficult for me to transfer elements of such a poetic inter-subjectivity to the musical realm. In a recent interview with Ron Seitz¹⁸ this is why I asked about the importance of a much-discussed event at a Louisville

Jazz Club shortly after Merton's 53rd birthday:¹⁹

Standing now, I watched the back of Tom's head move up and down with the bassman's fingers—his eyes become worn calloused skin running thump thump tha thump the taut thick strings, his head bobbing to the time-pause thumb-pluck of sound the same as the caught-breath blank-space phrasing of silence on the page in poetry ... Tom had been completely swept away, borne off with the music—jazz, the pure sound of it. He crouched with eyes and face raised to the sight of it ... nodding his head yes, yes—a shoulder hunched, urging on of the bassman to new highs with "Give it! Give ... Here! Here! ... now Take it!" —pumping notes one to one, artist to artist—the sweet sweat eye-bond holding them both on that one wave tiding out and over ... gone with it.²⁰

In Ron's view, Merton

'became the music, he became the calloused thumbs of the bass player. I experienced it first hand when it happened. I had done that myself too but sometimes you don't tell anybody because they think you're crazy.'²¹

Here is inter-subjectivity *par exemplar*. For Merton, music appreciation was no mere spectator sport, where tunes and texts, riffs and repetitions are commodities to be consumed. The sound of music was an embodiment of creation. Humanity participates in the art as a co-creator, whether artist or audience. Humanity is however free to refuse the creative invitation as many in Merton's party did as his own version of the same event makes clear:

The power and seriousness of the jazz was what I noticed, as if [the musicians] were playing for their own sake, and for the sound's sake but had no relationship to the people around them. Here was the one place in Louisville where something important was being done and said.²²

If indeed this was the one place in Louisville where important things were done, other important work was done at the Gethsemani hermitage; but what a contrast in environment. 'The quiet of the hermitage was good. The sound of the jazz was good.'²³

With a clock ticking in the background, Merton brings these two separate worlds together on an unpublished audio tape as he records an intimate New Year's Eve party 'of one' at the close of 1967.

I am going to sit around and play some records... with Mary Lou Williams, a Kansas City Pianist, something I myself dearly love, the kind of music that strikes all sorts of responses in my heart ... I am an addict of Kansas City Jazz, esp. boogie woogie... This takes me back to my days in Greenwich Village... I remember a couple of boogie woogie pianists around the corner from where I lived, Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons... It's a very simple almost naïve kind of jazz with a great deal of beat and bump and good rhythm and so forth...I don't know why I like it but it makes great sense to me.²⁴

While he confuses terminology, he well describes a stride piano style where a rock steady left hand frees up the right hand for improvisation. While solitary, the experience is Edenic.

'It is snowing outside and we're here with this lovely music totally isolated from the world.'²⁵

As the cut concludes, he comments

'that gives you an idea of what Kansas City Jazz was like, among the most beautiful kind of things that I can think of, I certainly enjoy it anyway... It has a kind of paradise character and a certain purity of its own and I guess that's why it's so attractive and peaceful and so pleasant up here in the solitude of the woods.'²⁶

After playing a piece by Wes Montgomery, he ominously tells his unidentified listener 'lets hope that 1968 will be very happy for everybody.' If only...

These notes represent a very preliminary sketch of my research intentions based on a only few weeks' study. It is not however premature to suggest some avenues of future investigation.

1) Musically what attracted Merton to Jazz? Was it, for instance, intoxicating rhythm, raw energy, boundary breaking, pathos in the blues,

connections with dance? A combination of these or other factors? His preferences tell only part of the story; the variety included in the range of styles between Mary Lou Williams and John Coltrane is vast. Other clues emerge in a variety of other discussions. He seems entranced by the communal interaction of ensemble jazz performers. What did he understand or appreciate about improvisation?

2) How are these cultural elements represented in his writings? What place do images and metaphors of music have in his spiritual talks? While the references are scattered and slight, there is enough language throughout the *oeuvre* to indicate significant personal musical experience that gave him the ability to offer profound insights into faith and spirituality.

3) Through a quick reading of *New Seeds of Contemplation* and listening to some of the addresses to novices, I find elements such as spontaneity, risk, dialogue, the priority of the present moment, tradition, freedom and liberty are effectively applied to the spiritual life. Themes such as singing, harmony, and joy function as metaphors for human vocation. While these images gathered together cannot constitute a systematic theology but they may provide a timely combination of themes and resources for spiritual direction.

4) From my perspective as an Anglican priest in relationship with men, women and children who never knew or experienced Merton in the flesh, I wonder how Merton's legacy can help us recover aspects of our own faith tradition such as the quest for the authentic self, creativity, spontaneity, risk, and attentiveness to all of creation which have been purged from our consciousness, discipline and memory. Can this quest be accompanied by an appreciation of those creative

jazz musicians who have kept these practices alive, first in the Speakeasies of Harlem and Chicago—where such lively music was received as entertainment but rendered with, at times, breathtaking skill and creativity?²⁷ As jazz progresses beyond its roots in the clubs and finds itself in concert halls and the professional institutions of North America and Europe, as people seek meaning and vocation and spirit in what was once considered highly unlikely places, will the churches be ready to integrate such abundant resources into our mission and ministry in this post-Christian age?

I close with some words by Hazrat Inayat Khan, the Father of Western Sufism,²⁸ himself a musician from a family of musicians, one for whom music, spirit and life belong together.

Therefore, for the most illuminated souls who have ever lived in this world—their whole life was music. From the miniature music which we understand, they expanded themselves to the whole universe of music, and in that way they were able to inspire. The one who finds the key to the music of the whole working of life—it is (s)he who becomes intuitive; it is he to whom revelations manifest, for then...language becomes music.²⁹

1. This paper was written while on Sabbatical during 2004, a project sponsored in part by the Louisville Institute for Ministry (A Lilly Endowment Program) and the Fellowship of the Maple Leaf (www.mapleleaf.org.uk), to whom the author expresses profound thanks and gratitude.

2. Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody*, Triumph Books, Liguori, MI, 1993. p. 158.

3. Emmett G. Price, III, <http://www-mcnair.berkeley.edu/95journal/EmmettPrice.html> 'The Development of John Coltrane's Concept of Spirituality and Its Expression in Music.' 'John Coltrane's suite "A Love Supreme" ended his search and began a new phase for musicians and music listeners. Coltrane's spirituality has influenced many musicians and non-musicians to re-think their stand on spirituality, to re-consider the effects of religion or spirituality in

their life, and finally, to encourage all to give praise to God. Coltrane's music can no longer be described as "unique," although it is "innovative." Some people will continue to claim it is "weird" or "angry," which it is not. The best phrase describing the music of this highly spiritual man, is "praises to God."

4. Born Mary Elfrieda Scruggs (1910-1981) Mary Lou Williams had a long and productive career despite a constant struggle against sexism. Her styles included Stride, Post-Bop, Swing, Bop. It is her Stride playing which delights Merton.

5. I have yet to consider the work of John Albert 'Ace of Songs'—Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan, *American Benedictine Review* 37/1 + 37/2.

6. Baez visited the hermitage in December of 1966 when she challenged Merton on the language of violence in some of his favourite protest songs. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Sheldon Press, London, 1984. pp. 463-4.

7. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 55; in London during 1930, Merton 'spent hours at Levy's Record Shop in Regent Street listening to Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, or the Hot Club de France, and coming out with several new records for his collection.'

8. Interview with the author at the Seelbach Jazz Bar in Louisville on Feb 19th 2004.

9. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 345.

10. Suzanne M. Schreiber, 'Thomas Merton: Man of Contemplation and Creativity,' Master's Thesis (Mundelein College, Chicago, Illinois, 1976).

11. Angus Stuart, 'Visions Of Tom - Jack Kerouac's Monastic Elder Brother.' *The Merton Journal* Vol. 8 (1), 2001, pp.40-46 See also: <http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/kerouac.htm>

12. Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody*, p. 103.

13. 'Poetry of Paradise' [sound recording] / Thomas Merton. Credence Cassettes: National Catholic Reporter Pub., 1988.

14. "Thomas Merton the Man" [sound recording] / with Ron Seitz, New Dimensions Foundation, 1997.

15. Sonny Rollins, quoted by Eric Nisenson in *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and his world of Improvisation*, Da Capo Press, 2000, pgs. 8,13.

16. Ah Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime

Where the traveller's journey is done;
Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sunflower wishes to go!

17. "Poetry of Paradise" [sound recording] / Thomas Merton. Credence Cassettes: National Catholic Reporter Pub., 1988.

18. Interview with the author on Thursday, February 19th, 2004.

19. The event is variously described, in Seitz, *Song For Nobody*, p.112-115 and Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 510.

20. The venue was Eddie's Place, 118 Washington Street.

21. Interview with the author on Thursday, February 19th, 2004.

22. See the entry for February 20th, 1968 in *The Other*

Side of the Mountain. The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 7 (ed. Patrick Hart, OSCO). Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1998. p. 56.

23. *ibid.*

24. Unpublished recording in the possession of Paul Pearson at the Thomas Merton Centre, Louisville.

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*

27. If you can find it, listen to the Duke Ellington Band's rendition of 'Braggin' In Brass' 2/25/1938.

28. Merton often asked Ron Seitz to help him connect with Sufi teachers, a request which Ron found hard to accommodate as 'it wasn't that easy to find Sufis in Louisville in 1960.'

29. Hazrat Inayat Khan 1882-1920, quoted in the preface to *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and his world of Improvisation*.
