

Spirits Rejoice!: Jazz and American Religion. By Jason C. Bivins. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 392 pp. \$31.95.

Review by Braxton D. Shelley

In *Spirits Rejoice: Jazz and American Religion*, Jason C. Bivins uses the “co-emergence in sound of jazz and religion” to offer a “new approach” to studying American religion (8). Over the course of eight chapters and 275 pages excluding notes and back matter, Bivins supplants a formalized notion of religion with the phrase, “spirits rejoicing.” The phrase’s final gerund is meant to highlight the elusiveness of jazz and religion, two categories of experience whose frequent concomitance leads the author to ask, could “the very abstraction of [jazz], its elusiveness in terms both commercial and aesthetic, be conducive to the sorts of self-realization, collective purpose, or sense of being-in-the-world linked with religions?” (4) Bivins engages jazz and religion with an interest in the terms’ “limits,” or “their inability to contain that which they hope to express” (19). The resulting “framework for a cultural history of American religions told in the tones and tales of jazz,” is predicated on the emergent and processual qualities of both religion and jazz (17).

We get a good sense of Bivins’s general approach in his discussion of the interpenetration of jazz and religion found in Charles Mingus’s oeuvre. Bivins begins by noting the profound effect Mingus’s exposure to religious music in the Black Pentecostal church had on his musical production. Mingus’s *Pithecanthropus Erectus* then becomes an example of the musician’s resistance to categories, both musical and religious. By interpreting the statement that “all music is one” as a sign that Mingus’s improvisation was meant to model the movement of the spirit, Bivins argues for the inexhaustible indeterminacy of the musical text. As such, Mingus’s work resists those who would define jazz as a strictly modern medium, just as previous writers have “narrowed” the content of Mingus’s oeuvre by limiting him to overtly religious references. Bivins makes the same argument about interpretations that use compositions like “Fables of Faubus” to limit Mingus’s muse to a civil-rights focused social critique. The variety of interpretations that Mingus’s music can support points, in Bivins’ account, to the artist’s prevailing “ambivalences and multiple personas,” a musical restlessness that resonates with the religious syncretism evident in his engagement with devotional practices ranging from Christianity to Hinduism (73).

The book’s fifth chapter, entitled “The Magic of Juju,” puts jazz and ritual in conversation, commenting on a set of experiences that are exemplars of “spirits rejoicing.” In this chapter, Bivins offers vignettes on towering figures in jazz including, Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, Steve Coleman, and Milford

Graves, among others. Bivins uses the controversies that attended Duke Ellington's sacred concerts to point at once to the investment many have in preserving sacred/secular dichotomies and to the tendency of artists to blend influences from both of these zones of reference. Likewise, Mary Lou Williams's "sacred" works, including her masses, are interpreted as evidence of her own complex journey through "several emotional and religious crises" (160). Each sacred piece, then, became both "a source of healing and a liturgical vehicle," with which she could reach other musicians. Bivins contends that Steve Coleman's engagement with religion stretches outside the context of Christianity and extends throughout the African Diaspora where he has sought to understand the relationship between musical organization, especially rhythmic and temporal organization, and nature. In Coleman's practice, the cycles and patterns that shape nature's function call for musical analogues through which nature's healing powers might be ritually summoned. Bivins also shows that Milford Graves had a professional interest in healing, working as he did as a "medical technologist" (179). Music and healing were imbricated by musicians who could summon, model, and modify the body's own rhythms. As he developed a substantial body of knowledge about physiological processes, he began using recordings of heartbeats and other bodily phenomena to create tones and rhythms that can be used to shape therapeutic music. Graves' combination of a range of religious practices, musical performance, and medical research points to the malleability that underlies Bivins's notion of spirits rejoicing.

Although Bivins conceptualizes this book as "a provocation to the ways we study religion," he relegates most of his engagement with secondary literature to the book's lengthy section of notes (20). That he has engaged the work of a wide range of scholars is clear, but at both the level of argument and local readings, relevant scholarship is missing. For example, Travis Jackson's work that develops an understanding of jazz as ritualized performance would provide some important theoretical grounding for the notion of "spirits rejoicing." But Bivins admits that he "avoids musicology," choosing to study jazz as a "form of human cultural communication that can be 'heard' meaningfully within its contexts, histories, and according to the self-understandings of those involved in the music" (18). If the book falls short of its goal to change the way we understand religious sound, it is because it rests on such caricatures of musicology and ethnomusicology. How can one "complicate" and "wring...new possibilities" from scholarly debates without substantial in-text discussion (21)?

Moreover, while the project succeeds at pointing out the flaws in static conceptions of both jazz and religion, Bivins's illustration of his terms' polysemy invests the two with the ability to elude his own methods of analysis. While his disdain for boundaries—between jazz and other genres, and between notions of

the sacred and the secular—is both admirable and clear in the literature and music, even the most volatile substance requires some kind of frame if it is going to be studied. While he suggests that religion “may also effectively constitute very little as an interpretive category,” I think we have to agree with one of Bivins’ sources, Jonathan Z. Smith, who recognizes the category of religion as an essential scholarly abstraction, one necessary to grasp and study any aspect of human experience (23).

Nevertheless, this book demonstrates that Bivins has a magisterial command of jazz repertory across sub-genres and historical periods. Indeed, his command of the musical literature is among the book’s greatest strengths, and his willingness to offer a fresh approach to two much-studied subjects must also be applauded. Most importantly, Bivins’s prose is at once virtuosic and accessible; it makes the book a pleasure to read. Without once wavering from the conviction that sound exceeds our formal categories for describing it, *Spirits Rejoice* surprises at every turn and is, in its way, persuasive.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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