

Let There Be Jazz – Rev. Doug McCusker

Miles Davis, the amazing jazz musician and composer, once wrote that “jazz is the big brother of revolution. Revolution follows it around.” That quote intrigued me, much like Miles’ trumpet improvisations. When I first encountered it, it stuck with me as a haunting presence barely above the background noise of my everyday life. I couldn’t shake it. It seemed to invite me to go deeper. To play with its nuance and to just sit with it in silence. So, I did.

That statement is a collection of metaphors pointing to something greater than their surface connotations. First off, he seems to be using jazz and revolution as ways of operating in the world rather than as music and politics respectively. How we live, what motivates us, and how we respond to things is profoundly spiritual. As individuals, we exist within a greater context influenced by our relationship with others. This can be harmonious or discordant; usually interchanging between the two.

Jazz, as a music style, is known for its free-flowing rhythm that provides a container or set of limits for innovation to flourish. Without the bass notes and repeatable patterns, the melodies would drift off like shooting stars. There is an inherent structure, which allows for experimentation and improvisation.

Whenever two or more musicians get together, they lay down the rhythmic structure and depending on what they feel like doing, they can play it tight or play it loose. *The Girl from Ipanema* and *My Favorite Things* have both been covered by countless musicians with countless arrangements. There is no single way to play them and yet they still retain their identities as recognizable songs.

I think what Miles Davis was alluding to in using the provocative word “revolution” is the creative tension inherent in jazz. A revolution is a radical and pervasive change in a social structure. The change comes from within. But it doesn’t happen willy-nilly. Revolution results from a deep listening and a critical eye to systemic forces that are out of sync to the overall functioning of the whole.

Jazz is any environment whereby each individual player is expected to collaborate, listen, respond, test and re-create while everything is moving. Sometimes a whole new rhythm or chord progression develops, when certain beats that are normally in the background are accented. We call that syncopation in music, revolution in social systems and transformation in individual people.

For this to occur in any setting, one must be fully present and at the same time able to look at things from a different perspective. This is not chaos or anarchy because the structure continues even though everything inside has changed.

As Cornell West describes, jazz is suspicious of ‘either/or’ viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies. Like Langston Hughes, we can be critical of America, understand its contradictions and flaws, its strengths and weaknesses, while still cherishing its internal structure and transformative potential.

We must become jazz freedom fighters if we ever expect Beloved Community to emerge as a new rhythm for humanity. We must become jazz freedom fighters if we ever expect to untangle ourselves from the ancient, endless chain of profit, power, and gain; of grab the land and grab the gold.

Jazz as a way of life, enables things to emerge fluidly out of the complex interactions of the constituent parts. Emergence is essential to life. In fact, life itself

emerged from the complex interactions of particles, atoms, and molecules that once upon a time found a new way of playing together to a new rhythm.

Music emerged from a complex interaction of sounds. Maybe it was the call and response of the natural world recreated to fill a void in human existence. Music is a domestication of wild sounds which comfort us from deafening silence. But as any musician knows, music emerges by pouring oneself into the silent spaces between the notes. You can learn to read music and know when to play each note, but until you can merge your whole self into the fractal moments between the notes, you aren't truly present in the music.

I am not a musician, but I have tried to follow those principles in my personal life. To be a jazz player in the song of life is to allow space for things to emerge. I can stuff my life with dogmatic beliefs, tasks, material possessions, desires, knowledge, and power. But the real living happens in the spaces when I am in the flow and able to listen outside of myself to the wild sounds all around me.

It takes practice and patience. Our jazz musicians here with us today, have put in the practice necessary to be able to step outside the notes while remaining part of the music's flow. So too, we must put in the time to practice being present to the flow of life, to listen to each other and to allow space for our true music to emerge. Let there be jazz in your life and fear not the revolution that follows along.