Jazz vespers every week in San Diego

Riffing on a prayer

by Dean Nelson

THE VIBE at Croce's restaurant had its usual jump. People were there for the food and drink, but patrons at the San Diego establishment—named for folk musician Jim Croce—knew they'd get good music too.

The performer was Archie Thompson, who played jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues on piano and saxophone. Sometimes he'd play saxophone with one hand and piano with the other. Thompson and his band, the Archtones, had the place rocking, as they had been doing every Sunday night for 13 years. The songs included Ray Charles's "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town" and Mose Allison's "Fool's Paradise," and the music blasted out onto Fifth Avenue in the city's Gaslamp Quarter.

One customer caught Thompson's attention—a man who had procured a table near the band, directly in Thompson's sight line. It was clear that he wasn't there just for dinner or drinks. He scrutinized Thompson, looking neither pleased nor displeased. Thompson remembers thinking that perhaps the man was looking down his nose at the band. "He was clearly analyzing us."

When the band took a break, the man approached Thompson. "Can we step outside and talk?"

Out on the noisy street, tourists and locals crowded the sidewalks, and pedicabs wove between the gridlocked honking cars. The man introduced himself.

"I'm Jerry Andrews, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, a few blocks from here. We're thinking about starting a jazz vespers service at our church, and I want you to lead it." The musician and the preacher talked about music, church, and Andrews's dream of bringing them together, jazz-style.

"I'll think about it," Thompson said, and ducked back into the club to play the next set.

Andrews knew what he wanted in a jazz vespers service, and he knew who he wanted. "I mentioned the jazz vespers idea to another pastor, and he gave me some great advice," Andrews recalled. "He told me that if you want to do a contemporary church service, you can get by with a garage band. But if you want to do a jazz service, you can't mess around. You have to get the best."

Andrews's church had high standards for the music in its traditional church service on Sunday mornings. Jahja Ling, the director of the San Diego Symphony, is a member of the church, and dozens of symphony members play in the morning service. For Andrews the question was, where do you find the jazz equivalent of Jahja Ling?

At Croce's on Sunday nights. Thompson was known in San Diego not only as a great musician but as one who knew other great musicians and had access to them. In addition to playing the local clubs, he booked musicians into several downtown venues.

First Presbyterian Church in San Diego started in the 1860s, when the city's downtown began to develop. The congregation grew and declined following the path of many urban churches, as people moved from the city to the suburbs. Sidewalks surrounding the church are now home to many in sleeping bags, makeshift tents, and ragged tarps. The San Diego Rescue Mission is two blocks away. Hundreds line up outside the church every Sunday afternoon for a meal provided by members through its Ladle Fellowship ministry. Every month the church delivers several tons of groceries to people on the streets and in nearby shelters.

> "No one said jazz has to be played in smoke-filled rooms."

But San Diego's downtown has seen a resurgence in recent years. Living within walking distance of the church are now 100,000 people in upscale apartments and condos as well as in government-subsidized, low-income housing and in some barely livable single rooms. They also live on the sidewalks and in local parks.

"I wanted to meet new people in an environment where they could meet Jesus," Andrews said. "Our church needed to reach out to its neighbors."

Thompson wasn't sure about Andrews's idea for jazz church. He was busy playing, booking musicians, and developing his own label and recording business.

Raised in suburban San Diego, where his family attended a United Methodist church, he remembers wanting to play the saxophone as a kid as soon as he heard the theme song from

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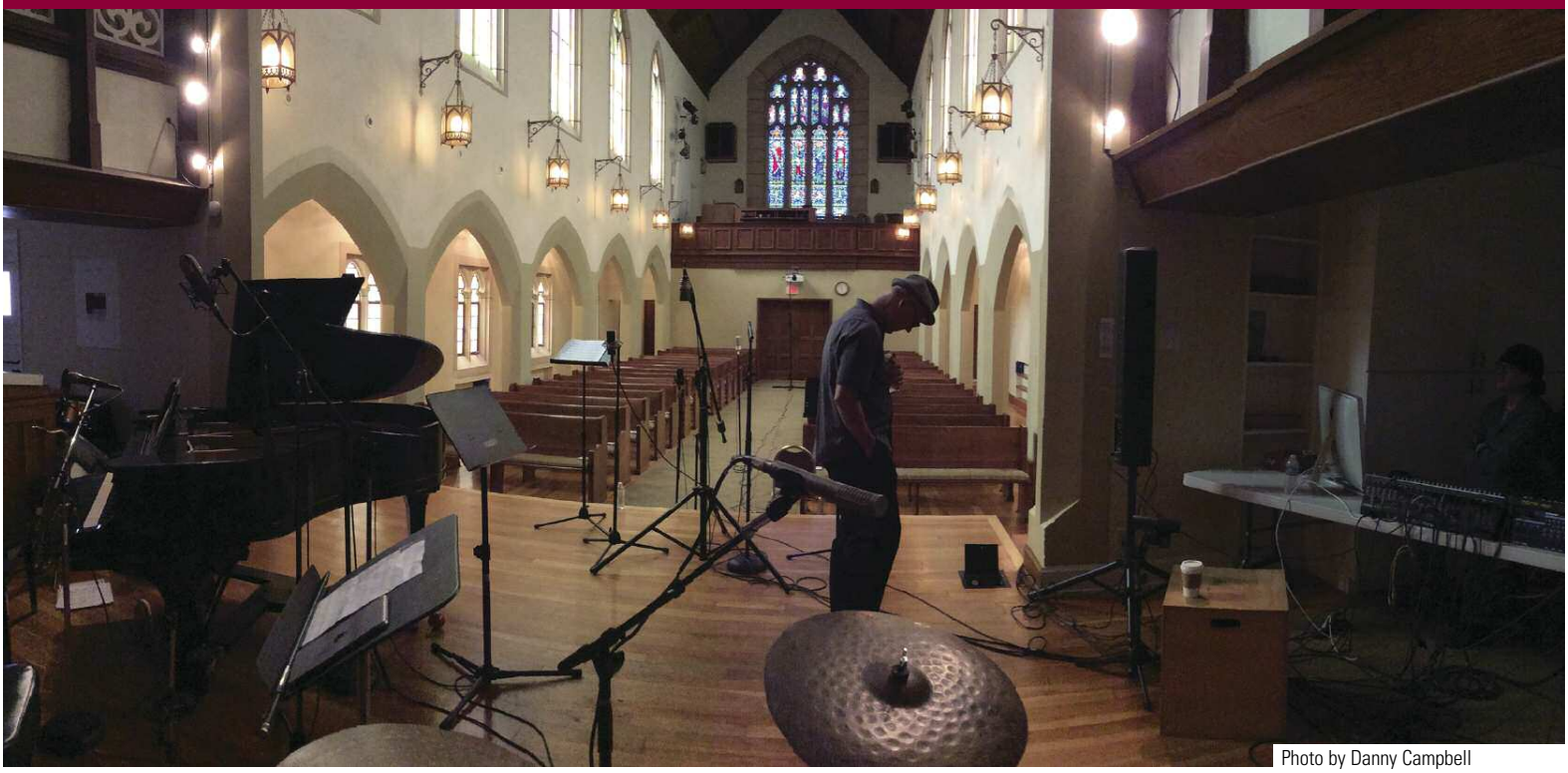

Photo by Danny Campbell

BAND LEADER: Producer and saxophonist Archie Thompson listens to the playback of a jazz vespers recording.

the television program *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* He and his buddies played at local high school dances, and he started playing clubs—on both piano and sax—in the tenth grade. As a young adult he moved to Los Angeles, spiraled out of control with alcohol abuse, quit drinking at 27, and moved back to San Diego. In addition to his performing and booking business, he writes and records music that is licensed for television programs, movies, and commercials. He has hundreds of original songs on his computer.

Thompson was intrigued, however, by Andrews's idea of bringing jazz into a long-established downtown church. A few weeks went by after his conversation on Fifth Avenue, and he still didn't know what he should do. "I'm not a minister; I'm a musician," he thought.

He remembers praying about the question and saying to God, "Show me the way and I'll try to follow." The instant he finished that prayer, Andrews called on the phone.

"I asked Jerry what his expectation was of the musicians and guest artists," Thompson recalled. "Did they have to be believers to play in the vespers service? Andrews said that he was OK with whomever I wanted as long as they didn't badmouth the church.

"And then I asked him, 'Why me? I'm just this guy who plays in a bar down the street.' And he said he wanted me *because* I was this guy who played in a bar down the street. That sealed the deal for me."

The Saturday afternoon service, now in its fifth year, is held in one of the church's side chapels rather than the main sanctuary with the million-dollar pipe organ. It has high ceilings, thick walls—perfect acoustics—and a door to the street where people walking by can hear sounds not often heard in church. Thompson and the Archtones play, but each week a guest artist also sits in—someone who will be playing at one of the clubs later that night.

On a recent Saturday I arrived early so I could hear the rehearsal, and I found the Archtones going over hymns and gospel songs with distinctly unhymnal arrangements. The guest artist that day was Ira Gonzalez, a jazz guitarist from Los Angeles.

At 4:30 people wandered into the chapel as the band kicked off with "Summer Samba (So Nice)," then the jazz classic "If I Had You," then Chet Baker's "Let's Get Lost," followed by "How High the Moon." We stood in line to receive the Eucharist while listening to "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," which struck me as a perfect soundtrack for the sacrament.

Another week the guest artist was vibraphonist Nathan Hubbard. Before Hubbard played an original composition, Thompson gave a brief biographical sketch of jazz vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, who got his start as a musician playing in church. Hubbard and the band then played a complicated song that was influenced heavily by Thelonious Monk. The congregants applauded appreciatively. They knew good jazz when they heard it.

But without a doubt the event is first of all a church service. Each evening Andrews welcomes the crowd—about 40 people of varying ages, races, and economic classes. The band plays, Andrews asks for prayer requests, and the people pray for one another out loud. Andrews gives a message, the people come forward for the bread and wine, and the band returns for some serious swing versions of songs like "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" or "This Little Light of Mine. " Depending on the mood

of the band or the chops of the guest musician, they might play "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" as swing, bossa nova, or rhythm and blues.

Andrews greets the people as they come in and when they leave. "Most of the people who come here have not met a pastor besides me," he said. "For others, it's a way to come back into church without the old crap. One old couple said what they liked was that this was the kind of service where you don't have to apologize for it."

He insists that the service needs to include—in addition to top-shelf music—times for people pray out loud together, sing together, hear a message, and participate in communion. "I want to be able to tell them 'Here's the Word. Did you hear it?'"

As an art form, jazz music is complicated. It has structure, but it thrives on improvisation. As the great jazz artist Ornette Coleman said, "Jazz is the only music in which the same note can be played night after night but differently each time." The drummer Shelly Manne described jazz musicians this way: "We never play anything the same way once."

Jazz evolved out of the blues, which evolved out of spirituals, which evolved out of music sung in the fields by enslaved Africans, which evolved out of cargo holds of slave ships headed to America. Moans in the darkness from family members separated from one another were early forms of call and response. From slave ships to fields to church to clubs. And back to church.

"Call-and-response makes listening to jazz music an adventure as you begin to hear the instruments as voices calling to each other and engaging in conversation," wrote Robert Gelinas in *Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith.*

Thompson takes it a step further, saying that the conversation isn't just among the musicians and the congregation. "When you're improvising, you're not supposed to be thinking about it," he said. "You're free in the moment. That's the Holy Spirit. When you're free, something's guiding you."

That kind of freedom also appears in the way Andrews thinks about the service. It has some structure, but he's willing to see where it leads.

Jazz in church has its own history. Duke Ellington wrote a composition on Psalm 150 for jazz musicians, taking literally the commands to "Praise him with fanfares on the trumpet" and "Praise him with the clash of cymbals." Wynton Marsalis, Dave Brubeck, Pat Metheny, and other jazz artists have participated in church events. Churches in Philadelphia, Detroit, Seattle, Kansas City, Chicago, and Los Angeles hold jazz vespers. Most of those services occur once a month, once a quarter, or once a year. First Presbyterian in San Diego is rare in offering its jazz service every week.

Pastor Jerry Andrews is drawn to jazz because of how unpredictable it is.

Kirk Byron Jones, in his book *The Jazz of Preaching,* says that jazz and church have a lot of common ground. "The story of jazz, collective and personal, is always in formation," he wrote. "Jazz forms and re-forms itself. Usually it is the deliberate intention of the jazz artist to play the old story in new ways, or play a new story in the open space of freedom, the spiritual quintessential element of jazz. This new story is informed by the collective story of triumph and tragedy, the personal story of composition and interpretation, and the artist's own trudging and soaring imaginings."

This evolving approach to worship is what appeals to Andrews. He was raised in a Pentecostal church outside Detroit, then attended a Presbyterian church. He attended Detroit Bible College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for a master's degree in divinity, Princeton Theological Seminary for a master's in theology, the University of Pittsburgh for a degree in classics, and then the University of Chicago, where he studied Homer, Virgo, and Augustine.

He figured out part of the connection during this past Lent. Thompson played John Coltrane's most famous—and spiritual—work, "A Love Supreme," while images of the crucifixion were shown on a screen. Repeated depictions of Jesus' death were juxtaposed with a saxophone's lament and praise.

"Now I'm trying to figure out how Coltrane and Calvin go together," he said.

He finds himself drawn to jazz because of how unpredictable it is. "We have a creative God, and jazz invites creativity." And when the music becomes more blues than jazz, he embraces it.

Toadstools

Born of damp and demise,
little prodigies haunt the shadows,
like conversations we live
to forget. Wild mushrooms
lift their spongy overnight ears,
and muscle aside the fallen
eye-shine of chestnuts. Among us,
the old argument crops up,
and both parties hunker down
in the woods. This is where
we get the verb mushroom:
we, who launch our ripostes, seeding
the air beyond what it can hold.
What if we can't find the truth?
The man losing his faith in speech
utters blurred shapes, like those caps
and stems, ghostly with foxfire,
savvy and sprouting, in hopes
they illumine the woodland floor.

Laurie Klein

Photo by Archie Thompson

***CALVIN AND COLTRANE:** Jazz trombonist Patrick Escalante and trumpeter Jason Hanna play from the pews at a jazz vespers service in San Diego.*

"People ask me why we play the blues in church, and I say, 'Have you read the headlines?' People of faith should be unafraid to sing the blues. The human heart breaks: that's part of the gospel."

Holly Hofmann, one of the world's great jazz flute players, has played at the jazz vespers in San Diego multiple times and performs also on one of the three jazz CDs the church has made. She has played jazz vespers in other parts of the United States but says the San Diego service is unusual.

"It's rare for the service to last as long as this one has," she said. "I also like how, during the music, the church projects images of jazz greats on the wall in front of the sanctuary. They almost all came out of the church, so it seems appropriate."

Though accustomed to playing in clubs, she was unfazed about playing in church. "No one said jazz had to be played in a smoke-filled room with lots of alcohol," she said. "Church and music go hand in hand. It's an expression of joy and pain. One enhances the other."

When the jazz vespers in San Diego was in its early years, some of the musicians who walked into the chapel for rehearsal were wary.

"One was certain that snakes were going to come out of a box," Andrews said. "Now, musicians come in and say 'Hey, Archie. I've got a song I'd like us to try.'"

The crowds for vespers haven't grown as quickly as Andrews would like, but he sees something positive happening. "I'm getting to know the people who come to the jazz vespers service better than I know those who come on Sundays. A lot of people who come to worship in a large congregation want to be anonymous. But with jazz vespers, it's all grass roots with them. They have formed a sense of community."

Jim Senescall, a former Catholic, started attending the service three years ago. As a volunteer he started greeting people at the door, and now he buys bread for communion and helps with set up when needed.

"I heard about the service, and as soon as I walked in, I loved the live music, the acoustics, the intimacy," he said.

Andrews's goal was never to encourage the jazz vespers crowd to "graduate" into the Sunday morning crowd. "Faith is nuanced and complex and takes more than hearing sermons," he said. "What's the next best conversation to have with this congregation? Do I start a Bible study after vespers? How do they become disciples? We don't instinctively know where this leads."

As Andrews talks about where jazz vespers might be headed, it's as if, like Thompson playing a sax solo, he is riffing on the main theme and improvising out loud.

"I'm old school enough to think that if you can't fill the place, then you're not successful. It's not clear to me what the next move is. We won't get a younger crowd unless we provide child care. It won't get deeper without discipleship. . . . We need to get deeper into the jazz community. Who knows what God is going to use? It's going in the right direction. We'll take it. The gospel is being preached. New people are hearing it."

He stops. It's a call, waiting for a response. CC