

When You Want to Throw Something at the Band

1 Samuel 18:6-16

Jazz Communion

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⁶As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. ⁷And the women sang to one another as they made merry, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

⁸Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?" ⁹So Saul eyed David from that day on.

¹⁰The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; ¹¹and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

¹²Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul. ¹³So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand; and David marched out and came in, leading the army.

¹⁴David had success in all his undertakings; for the LORD was with him. ¹⁵When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him. ¹⁶But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.

The scriptures affirm David as the first great musician of the Bible. He was the shepherd boy who was taken from the fields to the palace. His musical skills brought comfort and delight. Every day, the air in the royal city was filled with his melodies. Almost half of the musical prayers in the Bible are called "the psalms of David." He was a great musician.

If David was the first great musician of the Bible, that means King Saul was the first great music critic. As David was playing his strings one day, Saul took his spear and threw it at him. Not once, but twice. Saul tried to pin him to the wall.

If you are a musician, this won't surprise you. Criticism comes, whether you've earned it or not. Sometimes people want to throw something at you.

Like that scene in the movie when the Blues Brothers get a gig at Bob's Country Bunker. Elwood asks, "What kind of music do you have around here?" The wife of the owner says, "We have both kinds: country and western." This could be trouble: all the Blue Brothers know are two country songs: the "Theme to Rawhide" and "Stand By Your Man." So that's what they play, over and over, protected by chicken wire as the bottles come flying.

It's a hard life being a musician. Everybody is a critic, especially those who can't play. People throw words at you. Ever hear of Jim Denny? He was the manager of the Grand Old Opry in Nashville. One night he fired a guitar player after his first performance. He said, "You ain't goin' nowhere, son. Go back to driving a truck." The musician's name was Elvis Presly.

If you ever tried to be a musician, you know about criticism. One reason why some people don't sing is because a junior high teacher once told them that they had lousy voices.

If you ever tried to learn a musical instrument, the odds are almost insurmountable. I heard about a young boy who brought home a trumpet from school and started to play it. Outwardly his parents were encouraging. But privately they said, “He sounds like a bull moose in heat.” My mom and dad are here today, and they will confirm this.

Certainly David heard his share of criticism. He had seven older brothers, after all. They were out working the fields and getting their hands dirty, while Little David was playing his guitar. Yet he must have been pretty good. When the king’s servants were looking for a musician for the palace, they came running to Bethlehem to offer David the job. They wanted him to come and play something comforting. You know - something quiet and peaceful. Not too loud, you understand, because people might want to talk.

Back in the late ‘70’s, when I wore a blue ruffled tuxedo on Friday and Saturday nights, we called it “music to chew by.” Sometimes a bride and groom would hire somebody like Joe Roma to play for their wedding. He would show up with his drums and the band would start playing the Carpenters’ Greatest Hits. The mother of the bride would complain and say, “Keep it down! We’re trying to talk.” To which Joe would say, “So why did you hire a band?”

A lot of people want music in the background. They don’t want it to disturb them. They don’t want it to demand anything from them. Just something quiet, almost out of earshot, like the music in an elevator. It’s there to cover the noise of the machinery. That is its only function. And some people get offended when they hear Wynton Marsalis say, “The reason why I play the trumpet is in order to be heard.”

These days, you can buy music for dining, or music for cuddling, or music to welcome you home after a tough day at the office. Demanding music won’t do, and silence is terrifying. Everything has to be soft so that you can cover the terrible demands of life. And so they say to David, “The king has had a tough day. He’s feeling down. Could you play something on your peaceful harp?” That’s how David ends up in the palace. That’s chapter 16 of the book of 1 Samuel, just two chapters before the king tries to perforate him with a spear.

So what happens? Well, chapter 17, for one thing. That’s the story of David and Goliath. It seems that King Saul was having a lot of tough days, especially against a Philistine giant named Goliath. And on the day that young David went out to the battle scene to deliver lunch boxes to his brothers, he took a slingshot and whipped a stone into the giant’s forehead. Then David ran up, grabbed Goliath’s sword, and whacked off the giant’s head.

Now it’s chapter 18. David is being carried back to the palace on the shoulders of Saul’s army. Everybody is rejoicing, and the women are singing a song: “Saul has killed thousands, but David his ten thousands. Saul has killed thousands, but David his ten thousands. Saul has killed thousands, but David his ten thousands.” Up in the palace, the king hears this, and covers his ears with his hands. That song is driving him out of his mind. From that day on, says the storyteller, King Saul set his eye on David. And he began to sharpen his spear.

One reason why people become music critics is because they are jealous. In the words of Fred Craddock, “The girl who can’t dance says the band can’t play.” Sad King Saul is not able to dance: he is a failure on the battlefield and a fumbler on the throne - - a dark cloud is heavy upon his soul, and it smothers any sense of the presence of God. And then Saul sees successful David, strumming his strings, and his dark cloud just seems to get heavier.

But I think there’s another reason why Saul chucks his spear. It’s because David the musician doesn’t play it safe.

Now I’ll bet that you thought, as I did, that David was employed by the palace to comfort the king by his music. And that’s true, as far as it goes. Back in chapter 16, it says, “Whenever he played his music for Saul, David drove the demons away.”

But we know from elsewhere in the Bible that some of David’s psalms could be quite disturbing. They are disturbing because they are honest. According to tradition, five of David’s songs were composed while he was on the run from Saul. Like Psalm 59: “Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up against me.”

And then there are songs like Psalm 6, which we heard a few minutes ago. David sings, “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of all my foes.” Now imagine you’re the king, and that’s the song that your well-paid entertainer sings to you. So much for the easy listening format! Just add a dog and a railroad train, and you have a blues.

I think it’s quite possible that, beyond whatever jealousy was brewing inside the king, just maybe there was something in some of David’s songs that struck a little too close to home. You see, the psalms do not back away from hurt and disappointment. If anything, they give a musical voice to our pain. And it’s a lot of hard work to sit and listen to such music, because it means that we will have to work through our own unfinished business. That’s not easy.

During some time off this summer, I picked up a biography on trumpeter Chet Baker. I didn’t get very far. There are a lot of sad stories in jazz, and Baker’s is one of the most painful. He had the good looks of a James Dean, yet could not help but destroy every one of his relationships. He had a beautiful trumpet sound and a lot of promise, but ultimately he was done in by his own self-destructive tendencies. One music critic wrote, “When you listen to Chet Baker’s horn, with its voice of fragile vulnerability, you can’t help but think about your own broken places.”

That’s the power of a music like jazz, and that’s the power of those songs that David wrote down in our Bible. It’s the power of honesty. The music stands before us like a mirror, and we cannot escape our own reflection. There was plenty for Saul to dislike about David, but there was even more that Saul came to despise about himself. David would strum the strings, aglow with the shining power of God’s Spirit. Saul could see it, and it was a painful reminder of the spiritual power that had trickled away from him.

Unfortunately for King Saul, it's all down hill from here. He fears losing the kingdom, and it's only a matter of time before he does. He cannot process the painful truth about himself. He doesn't have the courage. Sure, David will have his own ups and downs, but at least he has a way to lay his life before God: that is, he makes music.

I don't know what kind of music you have in your collection. But I encourage you to listen to a wide range of it; not only to the quiet tune but to the demanding symphony. Music is a heavenly gift that expresses our human situation. You hear it, not only in the soft harp but in the fiery saxophone. You hear it in the well-tuned choir and the heartfelt song of a child. And you can hear it, as I did this summer, among poor peat farmers on a bleak island as they gather each Sunday to sing the psalms. In the words of bebop musician Charlie Parker, "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."

And if you do live it, you can express all of it before the Lord.

And that's why jazz belongs in the church from time to time: to allow the depth of our lives to be spoken in uneven rhythms and thick harmonies. Jazz is one more way to give voice to the great range of human experience, both in its joy and its disappointment. Jazz is not afraid of sad songs, and neither is the church that bears the cross. And in moments when our souls soar toward the heavens, maybe the best and only language for it is music. For whether we are high or low, we are completely alive.

One of my favorite scenes of this comes from a movie. It's now an old movie. In fact, it's the very first Muppet Movie. Maybe you saw it: Kermit the Frog and Fozzie Bear come upon this run-down church. To their surprise, there's a band inside and they are rocking out. The organ is swirling, the guitar is screaming, the sax is wailing, the drums are pounding away. The band is Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem. There are only five of them, but the air of that old sanctuary is completely alive.

As they enter to hear the musicians jamming away, Fozzie turns to Kermit and speaks the immortal line, "They don't look like Presbyterians to me."

Oh, I don't know about that. Maybe they are.