

Finding the Groove: Composing A Jazz-Shaped Faith **By Robert Gelinás**

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Robert Gelinás is lead pastor of Colorado Community Church, a booming multi-cultural, interdenominational mission in Denver, Colorado. Not a musician himself, he is nevertheless a long time jazz lover. His web site is www.jazztheologian.com. He is a graduate of Denver Seminary.

I am a long time jazz music fan myself. I have created and taught a course called "FaithJazz" which one day (deo volente) will be a book of the same name. So it was a joy to discover and read Gelinás's *Finding the Groove*. He definitely has found it and this is a wonderful little book whether you are a jazz fan or not. It is about the Christian life.

Gelinás describes how in college he would study at a local jazz venue --- and how "the way the musicians supported one other, casting glances to communicate, and how each instrument complemented its neighbor" . . . and how "young and old, rich and poor, country and hip-hop, black, brown, and white, surrounded me. The band had a Latin saxophonist and a young dread-locked brother on stand-up bass. On piano and drums two middle-aged men, one black and the other white, played together" (p. 13). Gelinás's descriptions throughout the book are vivid and even moving much of the time.

Jazz brings so many people together, in such a positive way, into a shared experience. Jazz is about improvising, making the music your own, expressing your own gifts while in an ensemble. Jazz is about freedom. Gelinás gives great historical insight about the origins and development of jazz out of the pain and suffering of slavery into the blues and then jazz. As an African-American he speaks of his own connectedness to this narrative and experience in a very powerful way.

Gelinás writes that there are three basic concepts in jazz: syncopation, improvisation, and call-and-response --- and not only explains the music but shows how these are powerful themes in Christian discipleship. Gelinás is brilliant as he writes about tension, contradiction, paradox, and disharmony --- and its resolution into a rich whole --- in jazz and in the Christian life. Gelinás's discussion of "jazzaneutics" (biblical hermeneutics/interpretation, jazz-style) is right on.

Two slight quibbles: first: "If I could use only one word to define the essence of jazz it would be *listening*," Gelinás writes (p. 141). But many others have argued that the essence is *dancing* --- i.e., jazz engages you and you can't stay still. You must tap your toes, snap your fingers, sway back and forth, or get up and dance. Answer: it's both. A time to dance, a time to listen, a time to do one of those, a time to do both at once. Jazz is a rich brew. Second quibble (slightly related actually): "Jazz music pre-1959 too often sought to conform to classical standards, complete with big bands modeled after orchestras" (p. 191). This is a be-bop fan's prejudice. I love Miles Davis, Bird, Coltrane, Clifford Brown and the whole post WWII tradition where audiences sat down to listen to jazz. But the get-up-and-dance celebration and joy of Twenties, Thirties, and Forties jazz is just as important a part of the heritage --- and just as important for the FaithJazz life of discipleship --- as the cool jazz that followed. (and, parenthetically, getting people out there on the floor to Charleston, foxtrot, swing, Balboa, and waltz is an infinitely healthier pastime to encourage than the obscene substitute that passes for dancing today; I'm sure Gelinás agrees with me on that).

Anyway, this is a great book for anybody who loves jazz or Jesus -- and especially for those who love both, who will relate to the author's sentiments: "The reason I keep returning to jazz is because it helps me to follow Jesus. . . I like jazz in my music but I love jazz in my faith" (p. 26). Yessir!