



Grace Notes

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Wynton Marsalis is an internationally acclaimed musician, composer, bandleader and jazz artist. Proclaimed as one of the greatest trumpeters of all time, Marsalis performs and loves classical music in addition to all forms of jazz.

In a Greenwich Village concert, Marsalis was pouring his heart into a performance, reaching the final dramatic notes just as a cell phone in the audience interrupted him with an electronic melody.

As the cell phone offender ran outside to take the call the glorious moment seemed to be lost. The entire performance seemed ready to unravel as the once silent room, focused solely on the magic of Marsalis' performance, started to fill with the sounds of shuffling of chairs and whispered conversation.

Marsalis paused, eyebrows arched. Frozen behind the microphone, Marsalis graciously replayed the cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it and began improvising on the tune.

The audience slowly came back to him. In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and then he returned to the moment in time when the sour notes of the cell phone had rudely interrupted his incomparable music. As he played the last few notes of the ballad the crowd erupted, applauding his **improvised grace notes.**

The Grace of Making Music

“The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. It has spent so much time inculcating in us the fear of making mistakes that it has made us like ill-taught piano students: we play our pieces, but we never really hear them because our main concern is

not to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in Dutch” (*Between Noon and Three*, Robert Farrar Capon, 149).

God came to us in the person of Jesus, embracing our sour notes, improvising and transforming them, by his grace.

By becoming one of us, he condescended to play the silly little tunes of our lives, taking our dissonance and graciously reconciling and reforming it.

How could he have fixed the sour notes of our lives without playing our personal tune?

How could he transform us with the magic of his melody without acknowledging our discord, gracefully playing back to us our individual bleeps, and then masterfully improvising on our sour notes, transforming them into his melodious magic?

It's called grace—*God's grace as improvisation.*

Remember the old fairy tale where a beautiful princess kisses a frog and in so doing transforms the frog into a handsome prince?

When God became one of us, the fairy tale reversed itself. The beautiful princess (Jesus) became a frog like us, so that we could be transformed. God didn't just remain aloof, conducting the orchestra and correcting its mistakes from afar—but he actually stepped off the podium and joined us:

John 1:14: *The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood* (The Message).

Religion insists that we play what it considers the “right” notes. As religion indoctrinates us, we become more concerned about not angering God than we are in soaring by his grace. God's grace frees us from the religious gravity that holds us down.

The crucifixion became the high, holy moment of improvisational grace. Jesus took the ugliest tune of all and sang it with all his heart, so that the depraved theme of human violence and hate, sin and death might not be the last note. The cacophony of the crucifixion was sung by the Creator, such that the most strident noise imaginable was transformed into the song of angels:

Revelation 5:12: *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”*

Jesus doesn't condemn our tone-deaf chorus. He joins the choir.

Look who he selected for the original choir. Peter, a brassy fisherman whose song always seemed to fall flat, was handpicked by the Lord to tune the orchestra. God transformed the Saul of religion, an insufferable music snob, into a performance artist who gave concerts of grace.

Jesus is not looking for people with perfect pitch (just another reason why the gospel really is good news!). What he is looking for is people who will invite him to sing along with them, and yield to his grace improvisations.

Listen to the squawking coming from so many of our churches! The acrimonious bellowing and griping sounds we produce are like the screech of fingernails on a chalkboard to God.

Are we so preoccupied with patting our feet to silly little religious melodies that we can't hear the music of the Master? Have we grown so weary of working in religious salt mines that we give no thought to the un-Christlike martial music religion plays for us, as we march along endlessly attempting to please God?

The Music of Our Master

And yet, the Master came to be one of us. Can you hear him? He is even now playing back the empty, soul-destroying religious dirges, improvising on them so that by grace we can become free. With Paul (Romans 8:38) I am convinced that neither squawk nor squeak, neither sour note nor tone deaf wail, nor any droning organ prelude, neither contemporary praise and worship nor Pentecostal polka, nor any gospel music in all creation, will be able to separate us from the melody of grace that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word reconciliation means to *bring back a former state of harmony*. Reconciliation between humanity and God is a done deal:

Romans 5:10-11: *“For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”*

When “God showed his love among us” (1 John 4:9) he did all that was necessary: “He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” He stepped into our lives—he made the first move:

John 1:14: *“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”* (The Message).

Condescending to Our Level

When I think of God, in Christ, moving into our neighborhood and making the first move, I recall a story about my all-time favorite president, Abraham Lincoln. While campaigning for the presidency, he received a letter from an eight-year old girl. The little girl suggested that Lincoln should grow a beard to

hide his rather homely face.

Lincoln wasn’t offended—he read the letter and sent a thank-you to the young girl. He told her that if his campaign travels ever took him close to her hometown he would like to meet her. As it happened, the young girl’s father was one of the civic leaders in their small town, so when his daughter received a letter from Abraham Lincoln promising to visit her he shared the good news with other leaders in the town.

According to the story, Abraham Lincoln informed his staff that if his campaign train was scheduled to travel through that town he wanted to stop. It turned out that his schedule did include travel through that area, so the little girl (and all of the officials in the town, through her father) heard that Abraham Lincoln was coming to town!

When the day came, the vast majority of the small town gathered at the train station. Everyone was dressed up, the band was waiting—everyone except, it seemed, the little girl to whom Lincoln had written.

Just before the train arrived at the station, it had to stop for repairs. According to the version of the story I’ve heard, because the train was so close to the station, Lincoln decided to walk into town. He walked past the train station unnoticed, and through the somewhat deserted streets of the town until he found the little girl’s house. He knocked on the door, introduced himself to the maid (who was speechless) and asked to see the little girl.

The little girl and a friend were having a pretend tea party. They invited the dignified Mr. Lincoln to join them. So he lowered himself to their level, sitting on the floor, and they poured him make-believe tea



“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew 19:14

into a little tea cup. After a while he asked the little girl if she liked his new beard, and then excused himself to walk back to his train.

When God in Christ harmonized the music of our lives to his own, he condescended to our level, so that we might know him. Remember that time when Jesus’ disciples were trying to keep little children away from Jesus because they felt Jesus was just too busy to be bothered? Jesus told the disciples, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

We can easily fall for the idea that God is so busy with important high-level, far-reaching meetings and appointments he would never have time for us. But God is available, always and forever. He seeks us out, knocks on our door and drinks pretend tea with us.

John 1:14: *“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood”* (The Message).

The Word got off the train and walked to our neighborhood. He has gone the extra mile to harmonize our sour notes into his kingdom of heaven. God in Jesus reconciled himself to all things, and by not holding our sins against us God made peace with us on a cross that bleeds eternal forgiveness. □