Book Review

Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion

Jason C. Bivins
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Reviewed by Lauren Michelle Levesque

Introduction

Jason Bivins's book *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion* is an important contribution to the fields of jazz and religious studies. The book is a skillfully crafted study, demonstrating the potential of examining the multiple resonances between 'jazz' and American 'religion.' Bivins's skill and craftsmanship arise out of a love for this music, a love that is palpable throughout the book. On the first page of the Acknowledgments, he queries: "What leads me to this exploration of jazz and American religions, a music I love and which is so deeply written into the fabric of American religions?" (ix). His answer is twofold: the need for the field of religious studies to engage responsibly with this music and because " . . . the sounds have led me here, echoing continually in my memory" (ix).

This focus on responsible engagement with music and sound is one reason *Spirits Rejoice!* is such a compelling read. Bivins's response signals that responsible engagement involves 'following' the interwoven stories of jazz and religion (5), revealing "the multiplicity of American religious sound" (114). Recognizing multiplicity is a significant undercurrent in the book. With this recognition, the author shows the value of listening to what is aesthetically, musically, politically, and religiously beyond conventional understandings of what constitutes 'jazz' and 'religion' in the United States. Bivins writes: "The more you listen, the more clearly do the two articulate in harmony, together forming a powerful interval, and the more suggestively do they intertwine throughout American history (and possibly beyond), playing in cultural space like a polyrhythm" (13). He asks readers, therefore, to approach this topic as one would an improvisation: with a willingness to listen and be present to multiple possibilities.

Main Argument and Structure

One of the principal arguments in *Spirits Rejoice!* is to go beyond conventional ways of writing about jazz and religion (13-15). Going beyond these "conventional writing pathways" is needed for several reasons. This includes the recognition that 'jazz' and 'religion' are contested terms (9-12). By acknowledging this contested status, Bivins questions the capacity of language to contain expressions and experiences, sonic and religious, that are abstract, elusive, and ephemeral (5-7). He argues that sound and spirits, "spill beyond whatever formulation we can momentarily give them, carried away on the breadth—the in-spiration—that creates and steals them both as soon as, as sure as they're born" (7-8). This 'spilling over' or 'surplus' (21) exposes the limits of conventional linguistic categories and calls for 'fresh thinking' (24).

In particular, 'fresh thinking' is needed to complicate understandings that equate the shared stories of jazz and religion, for example, with a single influence or source such as Christianity or the Black church (38). These stories resonate with diverse musical and religious goals, lineages, and orientations (118). Bivins discusses, for instance, the influence of Buddhism on musicians such as Herbie Hancock (43-47) and of the Baha'i faith on Dizzy Gillespie (47-50). Thus, another central premise of *Spirits Rejoice!* is that conventional categories can obscure the multiple identities, imaginings, narratives, and traditions that express and constitute the religiosity of jazz and vice versa. These categories can also contribute to "the reality of the sweating brow" (11), a term identified by the author to acknowledge the "religio-racial expectations" that have historically constrained the creativity and generative possibilities of African American musicians, their works, and religiosities.

With these possibilities in mind, *Spirits Rejoice!* is not an exhaustive study of jazz and religion but "a kind of archive" based in "the words, stories and self-understandings" of the musicians that Bivins engages with throughout his book (16). By building this 'archive' (267), the author suggests he is framing "a cultural history of American religions told in the tones and tales of jazz" (17). Following the argument of going beyond convention, most of the examples discussed in *Spirits Rejoice!* arise from the period between the 1960s and the present (19). The author explains that these examples are not arranged chronologically nor are they understood from the perspective of musicology (18).

Rather, Bivins improvises with these examples, modeling what he asks of his readers: to listen and be present to multiplicity (20-21).

The book is divided into two sections and is structured according to themes. What follows is a very brief and far from comprehensive description of these sections and themes. The first section, consisting of chapters 1-4, addresses themes Bivins considers more obviously 'religious' such as tradition, identity, and community (16). Chapter 1, titled "First Meditations," is an introduction to his approach and main arguments. Of particular interest is the author's choice to use the gerund "spirits rejoicing" in lieu of terms such as 'religion' or 'spirituality' (15). He explains that the gerund signifies his intention to go beyond convention as well as musicians' understandings of doing the same. Bivins suggests, therefore, that spirits rejoicing can provide 'data' that "facilitates new imaginings in and of religion" (24).

Chapter 2, "Procession of the Great Ancestry: Traditions Jazz and Religious," examines the ways in which musicians have been influenced by various religious traditions. In this chapter, Bivins underscores that the musicians discussed improvised on these traditions, fusing them with their own understandings of 'jazz' and 'religion.' This discussion leads into chapter 3, "Shadows on a Wall: Jazz Narrates American Religion." This chapter explores how 'jazz' has contributed to the creation and performance of alternative narratives of African American sacred histories. Chapter 4, titled "Urban Magic: Jazz Communitarianism," profiles the development of 'counter institutions' such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) that have used music and religiosity to refuse, resist, and imagine different possibilities for African American communities in cities across the United States (113).

The second section, comprising chapters 5-8, shifts the reader's attention to what Bivins calls "a more phenomenological or experiential focus" (153). With this focus, the author continues to explore the ways in which musicians complicate perceptions of 'jazz' and 'religion' (157). In chapter 5, "The Magic of Juju: Improvising Ritual," he discusses understandings of improvised music as embodied ritual and how these expand the spiritual possibilities of sound and spirits rejoicing. Chapter 6, "The Tao of Mad Phat: Jazz Meditation and Mysticism," details the mutual shaping of meditation and improvisation, conceptualized as bodily experiences that transform musicians into 'vessels' open to "mystical dissolution" (210). In chapter 7, "Other Planes of There: Jazz Cosmologies and Metaphysics," Bivins examines metaphysical-musical systems and concepts that are conceptualized by musicians to create alternative worlds and reveal cosmic-truths (222).

In the final chapter, "Spirits Rejoice! Beyond 'Religion,'" Bivins returns to the "reality of the sweating brow" or RSB (258-264). He maintains that jazz and religion are "continually becoming" (269). In other words, their resistance to containment and closure undermine the narrow expectations represented by RSB: black music and religiosity as wild, excessive, emotional, and innate (259). Bivins writes: "We know now that jazz has been experienced religiously (by both players and audiences), but in response to the RSB these religiosities take shape in protest, satire, and counter-representations" (258). These responses foreground the risks of reducing the surplus of possibilities that characterize improvised music and spirits rejoicing in American cultural history. By calling attention to this surplus, Bivins persuasively argues for the need to listen to multiplicity and to be present to "what we are failing to hear" in the stories of jazz and American religions (263).

Strengths

Spirits Rejoice! is an extremely well written book. Bivins's prose is evocative. You can hear the music and imagine the spirits rejoicing in and through his descriptions. This is a particular strength of the study. The evocative quality of the writing is important because of the author's focus on the self-understandings and self-articulations of the musicians discussed. The reader is provided with vivid accounts and analyses. This vividness reveals the dynamic ways in which sound and spirit have shaped identities, traditions, and worldviews and expanded what constitutes performance and performance space. With his writing, Bivins affirms that there is much left to know about 'jazz' and American religions, and that creative approaches are particularly useful in facilitating this knowing.

As mentioned in the introduction to the review, Bivins's engagement with these topics emerges from a deep love for the music. As a touring musician, critic, and religious studies scholar, he has a profound understanding not only of 'jazz' but also of the myriad religious trajectories that are possible in and through its performance. The author admits that the book was twenty years in the making (18). The depth of understanding that is built out of this love and dedication gives the book itself a sense of surplus. Given this sense, some prior knowledge of jazz and religion may be needed to appreciate the originality of Bivins's ideas. The addition of a chapter-by-chapter playlist available online is helpful in this regard (xvi). These playlists are an essential accompaniment that affirms the depth of Bivins's engagement. The question remains whether the content of the work as well as the music will be accessible to audiences without some background in jazz or religious studies.

Conclusion

Spirits Rejoice! is an important contribution because of its creativity and craftsmanship. It is not simply a well-written book. It is a statement about the insights that emerge when conventional pathways are exchanged for what is new and/or unexpected. The book demonstrates that improvising on the slipperiness and smokiness (25) of categories such as 'jazz' and 'religion' can be revelatory. Bivins affirms:

So I have tried, in the conceptual to and fro I have written from throughout this book, to propose in language the conceptual balance of writing simultaneously about language's limits *and* writing about bodies working and experiencing in sound. In this, I find that spirits rejoicing confronts us with what we do in the study of religion, striving audaciously to propose in writing an experience we know eludes us. (271)

In pursuing the improvisatory dynamics at play in spirits rejoicing, Bivins reveals that these dynamics are a part of the study of religion itself. This revealing reminds readers that what we know and how we know is not fixed and certain. Rather, the author suggests that the search to know is a flow, based in listening and presence, and always improvised. *Spirits Rejoice!* is a must read for senior undergraduate and graduate students in both jazz and religious studies programs.