

In New Orleans, a Jazz Musician Sings Through the Psalms

By Caleb Maglaya Galaraga



Matt Lemmler

On the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Psalm 52 is read throughout the Episcopal Church as part of the lectionary. The passage was written by King David after he discovered that Doeg the Edomite committed mass murder against Ahimelech the priest and his family, who gave David refuge while he was on the run from Saul and his army.

The nine-verse song is filled with lamentations and punctuated by an expression of steadfast devotion. “I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever,” says the Psalm’s penultimate verse, which some congregations treat as a refrain.

In at least two parishes in the Diocese of Louisiana—St. Mark’s in Harvey and Christ Church, about an hour away in Covington—Psalm 52 was not read this year. It was sung.

Matt Lemmler, who serves as music director at St. Mark’s and as pianist and vocalist for both parishes, has been producing a jazz track for every psalm selection in the three-year Sunday lectionary for over two years. He performs each track live every Sunday morning on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram in a program called *Psalm Sundays: Live from New Orleans*.

He typically shares the video on the morning the psalm is read. “Then, I said, maybe people might want to see them a week before?” Lemmler told TLC. He started posting the psalms a week in advance. His three-and-a-half-minute video of Psalm 52 was uploaded on July 14. Viewers will see Lemmler solo at the piano, his sooth-

ing vocals and jazz melody bringing to life a 3,000-year-old piece by a man described being “as after God’s own heart.”

“I’m fortunate that both parishes I work at on Sundays have allowed me to sing those psalms,” he said. He mentioned seeing a small uptick in attendance since he began singing them. “It’s just been very positive,” Lemmler said of the response to his project.

Lemmler, born and raised in New Orleans, says his interest in jazz came from his father, who was a musician. The genre, he said, “was just kind of always in the houses and in the streets.” Growing up, he lived near the home of musical icon Fats Domino, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by Billy Joel.

Lemmler’s website says his father, Richard, and his brothers, Richard Jr. and Michael, would play jazz and classical piano around the clock at home. Michael is a professional musician described as a “fixture on the Crescent City music scene.”

Lemmler honed his musical chops at Loyola University in the city, where he now teaches as a jazz piano professor. He completed a master’s program at the Manhattan School of Music and toured with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Phantom of the Opera* for several years, among other notable projects. He eventually returned to the Big Easy to work in his hometown, but two major events brought him first to the Episcopal Church and then to his project exploring the Psalms.

When the Levees Broke

Much of metropolitan New Orleans is below sea level, and when Hurricane Katrina made landfall, federal officials initially thought the city had been spared. But the levees holding back the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne soon failed, overwhelmed by 10 inches of rain and a massive storm surge. On August 29, 2005, about 20 percent of New Orleans was underwater.

“I was evacuated to Woodland, Texas, and I didn’t come home for five years,” Lemmler said. He also went through a divorce during that period. Around that time, he began working for Trinity Church in Houston, which has a jazz Eucharist. “They would jazz up the hymns and allow me to rearrange them,” he said. As best as he remembers, he started working for the parish around 2007 and then for other parishes in New Orleans when he returned to the city in 2010.

“I don’t think you could have spirituality or faith without music,” Lemmler said. “The healing aspect of the sound of

harmonies, and then with regards to psalms ... the harmony and the music underneath just kind of bring them to life in a totally different way.”

Chip Hammond, a Presbyterian minister and jazz drummer, also highlights the healing aspect of music. He explored the spiritual roots of jazz in his performance, *Jazz: Spirituality in a Minor Key*. Hammond told TLC that part of the healing power of music comes from its calming effect, as “certain tones go together ... music creates both a natural kind of tension, but also a natural anticipation.”

Hammond, who faced the sudden death of his daughter four years ago, said that for about two years since then, “the only time the pain ever completely went away was when I was playing music.”

By far, Lemmler’s favorite psalm is Psalm 23. He dedicated his jazz interpretation of it to an uncle who had died. “It’s constantly being requested at funerals,” he said, “and I’m happy to bring that song back to life, to have people hear it in a new context.”

Bella and the Psalms

Lemmler’s daughter Bella is now 21 and, as her father describes, “She’s living her life now, all healthy.” But for two and a half years, he and Bella were in and out of the hospital for her to take chemotherapy. Bella was diagnosed with leukemia at 18.

While in the hospital one day, he was reminded of music’s healing power. “And that’s my gift. That’s

when I decided to [use it] to get through the process,” he said. He had already been exposed to the psalms through his work at Episcopal parishes. “The psalms were originally meant to be sung. It was original music lost throughout the ages.”

So his project began—each week, near the time Bella began her chemotherapy, he created music for each psalm. “I just wanted to bring those songs back to life, and singing those songs and working [through] those songs in the house,” Lemmler said, served as a “means to heal my family.”

The jazz musician’s hope now is to travel the world to play his music—not just at festivals but also in churches—showcasing this collection of ancient Hebrew poems, songs, and prayers in a form today’s world can understand and find resonant.

Lemmler said he has about 30 psalms left to compose. “My mission is to just kind of complete the whole Book of Psalms.”

