



Maurice Chestnut

Culture

MUSIC, ART & LITERATURE

Worshipping the Lord to the Sounds of Jazz

By Jean Nash Wells

When Rev. M. William Howard became the pastor of Newark's Bethany Baptist Church in October of 2000, he brought with him a wealth of knowledge, experience and new ideas. His tenure began with addressing concrete challenges facing the congregation and the community, among them a successful elementary school—University Heights Charter School, a community development corporation—Bethany Cares, Inc., which supported the operation of a Children's Defense Fund affiliated "Freedom School," and a program that helped prepare soon-to-be-released, incarcerated young men for productive roles in society. He also introduced one of Bethany's most popular and swinging programs—Jazz Vespers. Each first Saturday at 6 p.m. from October through June, world-renowned jazz greats like Randy Westin, Junior Mance, Yvette Glover, Hilton Ruiz, Cyrus Chestnut, Jimmy Heath, Earl May, Lizz Wright, David 'Fathead' Newman, Mulgrew Miller, Slide Hampton, Sonny Fortune and Houston Person can be found performing at Bethany's Jazz Vespers and other special events. Now in its twelfth season, Jazz Vespers—initially a curious novelty—has become a rich setting for genuine worship. Jazz in a church? Dr. Howard had this to say:

Duke Ellington's Come Sunday, Mary Lou Williams' Mary Lou's Mass, John Coltrane's A Love Supreme, Pharaoh Sanders' A Creator Has A Master Plan, Geri Allen's A Child Is Born, among others, are all musical compositions and arrangements by so-called jazz musicians that will never be heard (or heard of) in some houses of worship, although they were inspired by religious faith.

With the passive compliance of the public, record companies, popular media, even academics have been guilty of "segmenting music" and targeting it to certain audiences for mainly commercial purposes. This has resulted in cir-



Lizz Wright



Geri Allen

cumscribing the range and depth of deeply moving, spiritually enriching musical sounds that can stir human hope in the very places where people come for healing and renewal.

Of all places, the sanctuary of God should not be party to the balkanization of music; any music, which appeals to the sacred sensibilities that lie deep within each of us, should be welcomed. We must be open to any sounds that open us to belief and to moral and ethical living.

On December 17, 2011 at a special Christmas concert, pianist Geri Allen launched her first Christmas CD, *A Child is Born*. According to Ms. Allen, her experience during another performance at Bethany was the genesis of the CD. "It found its genesis in the church at Bethany," she told blogger Angelika Beener of nextbop.com. "We did a concert there two years ago, and the choir embraced the idea of doing this music, and I was so embraced by the church, you know? I felt like I had to come back . . . and I did come back. I felt so very grateful to be a part of it. So the music really did grow out of that...it has its foundation there."

Jazz vocalist Liz Wright and tapdancer Maurice Chestnut joined Ms. Allen and her band for the concert. ■