

# “You Blows Who You Is”: The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist

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I never studied an instrument long enough to master it. Clarinet. Piano. Voice lessons. Saxophone. Drums. I tried it, but it didn't “take.” So, like most people, I am banished to the peasantry class of spectators, gazing up at the artistic monarchs of jazz like Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Shirley Horn, John Coltrane, and others. Their musical inflections and pivots drift from office speakers filling the air with my Spotify playlists. My college-bound daughter swears the improvisational acrobats of jazz sound richer wafting through the house from our old-school record player. Regardless of the platform from which it sounds, my household follows Ralph Ellison's lead and listens to a variety of “music worth living with.” But among the different genres we play, jazz is a constant “in the swift whirl of time” of our household routines and semester-by-semester calendar streams. We mark time with jazz. It reminds “us of what we were and of that toward which we aspire.” As Ellison reflects, “Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.”<sup>1</sup>

And then, I enter a biblical studies classroom where I teach Greek, a survey of the New Testament and early Christian history, global approaches to biblical studies, and advanced exegesis and hermeneutics courses. In each instance, I discover something: I have not left the monarchs behind in my office and home spaces. The music that orients my household and inspires our comings and goings with meaning and dignity follows me into my graduate seminars. Except I am not just listening to Nina Simone or Billie Holiday in those spaces. I am no hobbyist of jazz in the classroom. Rather, I transform into the artist I never became in the traditional sense of a master of strings, horns, or voice. As a teacher in today's institutions of theology and departments of religion, I often bend learning spaces with intellectual improvisations, and those spaces bend me right back. My teaching environments emulate the fluid style of jazz. Activities flow from one rhythmic tone into another, introducing new tempos, keys, and moods to melodic patterns of discussion

that are constantly on the move as the class transitions from one thought experiment to the next while eyeing biblical texts, contexts, and interpreters. In such classroom currents, I am not just a conductor, directing students to play their parts, listen to what I say, and take notes to prepare for the final exam. No, I am a player, and my students are players, too!

And what are our instruments, if not the tools of thought that we bring with us and the ideas that come upon us in the theater of the learning environment? Reflecting on the “jazzmen[women]” of the mid-twentieth century, Ellison says their discipline and technical mastery of instruments sprung from their “desire to express an affirmative way of life” in which each artist “must learn the best of the past and add to it his[her] personal vision.”<sup>2</sup> The blending of the past, the present, individual personality, and group interaction in the biblical classroom means no teaching session is the same as the one before it. And I do not want it to be! If the teaching life is efficacious and alive, then Louis Armstrong supplies us with clarifying insight when he instructs us:

**Never play anything the same way twice.**  
-Louis Armstrong

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Whenever I lose sight of what I mean by my self-identifying role as “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist,” I watch Armstrong's [1951 performance on \*The Ed Sullivan Show\*](#). Armstrong's showmanship is a visible and audible reminder of what the best of the teaching life produces. The learning environment can be an enactment for both teachers and students to affirm that “[Now You Has Jazz!](#)”

Just watch Armstrong's interactive musical play! As soon as the camera turns to him, Armstrong quickly identifies others with

whom he shares the stage. This jazz artist is no lone player in the syndicated performance. Cue the laughter. He introduces his onstage company while addressing his audience. Those opening moments tune the band while calibrating viewers for the musical moment ahead.

Pitch.

Rhythm.

Cadence.

Mood.

Volume.

Movement.

Armstrong strikes the delicate balance between strong individual personality and group relations. Ellison calls such dynamics “a marvel of social organization.”<sup>3</sup> Others may miss the genius of Armstrong's tactics, convinced he is just engaging in entertainment for entertainment's sake. But he is doing more than entertaining in this performance. Armstrong leaves little to chance. He sets the guidelines for interactive play between him and the other players—be they the instrumentalists or the audience.

It puts me in mind of how I begin each semester course reviewing the Forum for Theological Education (FTE)'s Conversation Covenants, adapted from The Center for Courage and Renewal's Circles of Trust Retreat principles. The one-page document lists eight commitments to building healthy conversation in community, but my two favorite commitments are the following: #3: “Stay curious about each other”; and #7: “Embrace constructive conflict.” Implicit in both commitments is the expectation that diverse perspectives can coexist and collide into each other constructively, as opposed to destructively. They suggest that mutual investment in the gifts and soundings of one another can create unimagined resonances that embrace “what's at stake for all.” Such conversation covenants gesture toward the orientation of jazz artists, who listen to and accommodate each other in streams that flow in and out of other melodic forms and instrumental sounds. Armstrong's stage presence intentionally cultivates both curiosity and a symbiosis among performers and viewers that creates sounds that are expected and surprising, familiar and fresh.

More laughter ensues on *The Ed Sullivan* show performance. Jokes and lightness are sprinkled throughout Armstrong's presentation, building rapport with the viewers. It reminds me that even humor can be an effective instrument in the learning environment of biblical studies. It can set a tone that disrupts the unyielding frameworks that keep students and professors siloed in their respective epistemological patterns. Armstrong wields laughter as an unseen instrument, which he strums in tandem

with blowing his horn and singing his song. Humor can open us up to receive the gifts of charitable listening and cooperative play. As such, the performance transforms from mere entertainment to an invitation for full participation.

Armstrong also utilizes the fullness of the performance space. He strolls back and forth across the stage, addressing various players while viewers do more than merely spectate. They laugh, tap their feet, sing along, and even pretend to play the instruments from their living rooms. Though defined by sound, the musical journey Armstrong facilitates involves movement, touch, and feelings. A viewer's entire sensory board is activated while watching this performance. Without even noticing, it easy to find oneself, even in the next century, keeping time with the drums, trying to learn the names of the other players, instruments, and speakers on stage. You are caught!

Howard Washington Thurman, the twentieth-century mystic theologian, dean, and “pastor” of the Civil Rights Movement, described teaching as the art of “catching.” Reflecting on one of the first courses he taught at Boston University's Graduate



School of Theology in 1953, Thurman shifts the aim of the learning environment: “The fundamental aim of the course, as I saw it, was to help men and women who were going into the ministry to acquaint themselves with their own inner life. I felt that the idea could be caught, but I did not think it could be taught.”<sup>4</sup> Catching as the aim of teaching is not as concrete as the memorization of facts, or the execution of a lecture outline and its three major points.

Teaching as catching attends to the spirit of wonder and insight. It is a lyrical pattern of learning defined by courageous probing of thoughts in conversation with oneself and others. Instead of



the traditional trickle-down exchange of knowledge, Thurman casts the teaching of religion, theology, and spirituality as the work of cultivating an atmosphere for discovery. A classroom oriented to catch ideas and juggle multiple perspectives necessitates a more unscripted responsiveness to the teaching moment for which the jazz monarchs are instructive. Describing the disciplined skill of the jazzmen[women] of 1955, among whom Armstrong earns honorable mention, Ellison says, “Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments (which, incidentally, some of them wore as a priest wears the cross) and the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone, and imagination demanded of group improvisation.”<sup>5</sup>

The characteristics of jazz showmanship Ellison rehearses epitomize much of what I hope to realize as a biblical professor in the classroom. To create a timbre in class cadences and intellectual encounters that encourages students to articulate personal ideas and experiences in conversation with biblical history, to advance students’ mastery of critical biblical tools and discourses—this is the music of the biblical classroom I hope to play. Seeding students’ biblical imaginations with new ideas and alternative possibilities—the biblical classroom can quickly become an impressive jazz group improvisation show!

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What happens when the classroom is not defined by a podium and a lecturer’s performance but by the accoutrements of “thought instruments” performed by different “thought players”? I will tell you

what happens: the classroom changes from an intellectual exchange that is static and fixed to creating music that has uncharted possibilities. The goals of the biblical classroom shift from a set number of verses, topics, and learning objectives to education that arises from shared performance space. Choreographing academic study of the Bible as a musical experience that is more than a repeat of the top hits in introductory courses—be it Jesus, Mary, David and Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Paul and Peter, the Catholic Letters, or theology—transforms traditional biblical studies classrooms. Everything sounds different in the class staged as a jazz improvisation session.

In that venue, I am not teaching my students but teaching *among* them. What happens when we see our preparation as biblical professors as not another sage on the stage, or other teacher-centered model, but as a jazz artist involved in a group performance? The expert is no longer the professor alone. Yes, the professor curates and facilitates the learning moment, but the entire class is resourced. Teaching biblical studies becomes an art form inspired by a contagion of wonder, encounter, and experimentation—all ingredients that can make the classroom a transformative space.

To this end, one of the first jazz-type activities I choreograph in biblical courses to cover a particular writing or concept is to present the class with a passage to serve as our discussion text. I often provide students a copy of the passage from Burton H. Throckmorton’s *Gospel Parallels* or Walter T. Wilson’s *Pauline Parallels*. Before they analyze the passage aloud, noting details that catch our attention. I ask question like, What surprised you in this passage? What appeared to be a normal response or event and what appeared unusual to you? What are some of the important people, places, events,

and terms in this passage and what do you think they mean? It is not I, but my students, who articulate the possibilities of the class’s interpretive play. Together, we build our potential playlist of details to account for and explore further.

Thurman is helpful here too. He talks about the significant failure of those of us dedicated to the life of the mind to account for the full range of human experience that informs all ways of knowing (epistemologies).

*It is a misreading of the role of feelings to separate them from the function of the mind at work! No matter how clear and penetrating and detached may be the vast reaches of creative thoughts at their best, they are but lifeless forms until they are energized by the continuum of emotion that is always present and antedates the emergence of mind. After all, it may be true that what is called “thought” is a function of feeling, reduced to slow motion.*<sup>6</sup>

We can ask our students what the text makes them feel or puts them in mind of as much as we ask them what they notice is present or absent in a passage. Resourcing the full range of knowledge and experiences our students have at their disposal while helping them to deconstruct and recontextualize that knowledge is part of the jazz experience in the classroom. Our preparation for the learning moment can shape a performance forged from the thoughts, questions, and concerns our students carry into the learning space. We, in turn, can enact a new version of Herbie Hancock’s “[Maiden Voyage](#)” with our students in a New Testament jazz key. Like Hancock, we can touch the instruments to listen for new sounds. We build up the students’ expectations only to take an unexpected turn in an otherwise familiar song. After all, this is jazz improvisation, not orchestra sheet music we are playing here. The songs we title the Synoptic Problem, Petrine tradition, Paul’s letters, canonical formation, and more can sound different this time. And perhaps they should. For we too, as intellectual teacher-artists, are ever changing even as we interact with music that we have spent a lifetime mastering and producing.

For example, conversations about pseudepigraphy and New Testament studies change when reframed by how nineteenth-century African American women writers attached alternative pen names to their literary Christian responses against America’s patterns of enslavement, segregation, unequal rights, and under-resourced educational opportunities. Pseudonymity for African American women biblical interpreters was not a tactic intended to deceive but a strategy to communicate the social imperatives of Christianity and its demands on those in society who claim to read the Bible and subscribe to its faith commitments. The blend of cultural-identity markers of *African American, woman, Christian, and citizen* meant they deployed names of other respected figures or invented new ones so they could be heard, and their perspectives considered valid, even helpful to their reading communities and the larger society. For example, the renowned journalist and sociologist Ida B. Wells invented her pseudonym “Iola,”<sup>7</sup> saying, “But I had observed and thought much about conditions as I had seen them in the country schools and churches....So in weekly letters to the *Living Way*, I wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which concerned our people....I signed these articles ‘Iola.’”

Keeping Ida B. Wells’ social strategy of fictive naming and persona-making in mind shifts questions about pseudonymity in New Testament studies from concerns about “what is it?” to “why is it?” The histories of interpretation we tell in the biblical classrooms are a slowing down of time that can spotlight some places while leaving others darkened by our lack of attentiveness. We do not have to consent to only making the great leap to antiquity with our exegetical flashlights beaming while rendering invisible other moments and places in the many lives of the biblical texts lived among people, communities, and global societies. We do not have to leap in the dark. Instead, the biblical professor turned jazz artist plucks the multiple strings of time, sounding the different dimensions of biblical texts, religious histories, and interpretive communities available to us as players of interpretation and history on “this side of history.”<sup>8</sup>

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“[I Got Rhythm](#)”<sup>9</sup> when I donned the mantle of New Testament professor. Guided by Sarah Vaughan’s 1964 Stockholm, Sweden performance, I unclasped the imposter’s straitjacket and ascended the performer’s stage. I brought with me my skills, knowledge, and comfort with the classroom stage. And I accented that knowledge with my style of presence, presentation, and passion. Before jazz taught me how to teach, I wrestled with my professorial identity. There were few models of what it means to play scholar-teacher or teacher-artist of the New Testament in my embodiment and with my set of research expertise and interests—Petrine studies, epistolary studies, diaspora studies, Howard Thurman, nineteenth-century African American women, and Second Temple Jewish texts like Philo’s *On the Embassy to Gaius* or the *Letter of Aristean*. The biblical classrooms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which dominated the theological academy’s imagination, did not imagine me (and, unfortunately, in some sectors, it still does not imagine me).

Yet, Paulo Freire wisely counsels us in moments of our emerging teaching identities when he says, “*looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.*”<sup>10</sup> Future building in the biblical classroom required me to articulate the question impeding the evolution of my scholar-teacher identity—namely, what does the biblical classroom expect from someone like me *now*?

Working with graduate students, especially doctoral students, I often hear versions of this same question: Who am I as a professor and scholar? The identity question plagues anyone trying to authentically live out a vocation of teaching, advising, and mentoring, and it can ripple through others’ lives and communities. Yet Freire instructs us that the answer to the question of who we are as a teacher is likely not found in the past among the old stereotypes of the professor. It probably does not even reside in our current models of teaching—be it our advisors or other teaching colleagues. The answer is in our heads, hearts, and hands, and the work of teaching (one hopes) to contribute to the current moment.

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Who am I as a professor and scholar? I answer that question when I enter the classroom by transforming into my version of the famed piano jazz player Thelonious Monk. I strike the chords of biblical in-

terpretation in my unique and eclectic way while tuning this mantra:

***I say, play your own way. Don't play what the public wants. You play what you want and let the public pick up on what you're doing—even if it does take them fifteen, twenty years.***  
— **Thelonious Monk**

So, I play “[Brilliant Corners](#)” every time I shift topics from the Pauline letters to the Catholic letters, with the Hebrews homily as my inflection point in my canonical turn. I become a performer of “[Round Midnight](#)” when I take on the matter of the apocalyptic expectation threaded through the New Testament in places like [Matthew 25:6](#) and [Mark 13:35](#), or even the midnight songs sounding forth from Paul and Silas as prisoners of an empire that would displace, rather than liberate them in [Acts 16:25](#).

Finding our genuine sound as teachers is an identity-defining act. Such actions take courage, curiosity, and community. We are formed as academics to probe our study subjects in our proverbial library carrels alone. We need to remember how to think as co-learners among other thinking bodies. We quickly get out of practice cultivating curiosity and inviting others to perform. Naming ourselves as teachers and scholars and identifying the metaphors that remind us what we are up to in the classroom supplies the venue for us to enact our rendition of the “Hymn to Freedom” performed by Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones in 2004. There is something liberating about naming the markers of one’s teaching identity alongside others. Our shared understanding can be based on what we do as teachers in our current contexts and not what we were taught to do in the past. Freedom—it warrants a hymnodic exhale....

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What do I love about teaching? What inspires me in the classroom? The First Lady of Jazz, Ella Fitzgerald, lays these questions at my feet whenever I play her classic song, “[I Can't Give You Anything but Love](#).” While designing my course syllabi for the upcoming semester, Fitzgerald’s eurhythmic reflections remind me that love for the art of teaching is as important as insight into the subject matter. Her honey-sweet, silver tones also guide my content selections. I cannot expect students to be excited about topics that do not animate me. What are the questions I enjoy asking of the material? What notes and in what keys do I masterfully strike that awaken inquisitiveness and alert students to other options in interpretation?

***Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong.***  
— **Ella Fitzgerald**

A teaching identity that leverages the art of jazz in its approach, practice, and preparation for the learning environment makes room for the students we encounter in our classrooms today—some whom we imagined but many whom we could not. The latter—the students my teachers did not expect—require me to reach for other models to shape my identity and pedagogical style as a professor

in today’s classroom. Those old models do not easily overlay my stories and experiences, but they also seldom connect well with the students enrolled in our institutions today.

To see the trend, one need only look at the “[Annual Data Tables](#)” published on the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) website. More and more students enroll in one- and two-year master’s programs instead of the traditional three-year master of divinity degree. Many graduate school or college students take biblical classes while enrolled in a second professional degree program like social work, education, or even law. The sound of the classroom is new because different questions and communities inform students’ theological imaginations and reasons for critical studies in Bible, theology, ethics, spirituality, and so on.

Consequently, I have left the banking system of teaching behind and embraced the theater. The classroom becomes a shared ownership space and not one defined by an individual personality and preference. It is a learning environment characterized by the give-and-take of co-learners sharing center stage. We can impress upon our students that biblical interpretation is a collaborative enterprise involving multiple actors and various actions. Such endeavors can be our acts of joining John Coltrane’s quartet performance with Eric Dolphy as they play “Impressions.” What impression of biblical studies do you want to leave with your students? What areas of significance do you love that you want to impart to them? Inviting students into our centers of passion is a pedagogical strategy because what we want them to hear and carry forward about our field and its relevance matters.

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In a 1949 Downbeat interview, the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker talked about jazz performance as a blend between musical art, lived experience, and technique:

***Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art.***  
— **Charlie Parker**<sup>12</sup>

What kind of music do you want to make in your classroom today? That is a different question to ask in preparation for the teaching moment than what is your lecture’s topical outline. What instruments will lead? What will be the mood exchange and the journey of experimentation you try to instigate? At what point will you slow down and step aside so your students can try out a new thought, like a melodic line that all other instruments soften to hear played by a solo instrument? You cannot predict what students will play and what it will finally sound like, but you step aside and decrease your volume, so others take the lead on what is played, heard, and seen.

One of the ways I step aside in the biblical classroom is by heightening students’ awareness that they are already involved in interpretive processes. They are already on the proverbial jazz stage of interpretation, but they don’t realize it yet. The Harlem Renaissance

silhouette artist Aaron Douglas offers some beautiful pieces that can generate good classroom insights into the interpretive cycle and its aims. My favorite is his 1934 mural titled [Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction](#). I post the image on the classroom screen. However, I do not show the original, but a photo of an [enlarged recreation](#) located on an outside park wall in Topeka, Kansas (by Dave Loewenstein, dedicated 2005). “What do you see?” My opening question is intended for the students to resource their perspective and initial encounter with the image. I give them no details but ask more questions like, “What are we looking at? What do you notice? What is happening in the painting? How does the image feel?” I critique nothing in this process. All their perceptions are possibilities, and once the energy begins to plateau, I compel students to make an experimental interpretation using my formula, “This picture is about x because of y.” The y-variable must be at least two concrete details they can demonstrate from the image. The experience is eye opening to students because they generate the interpretation from the visual text, not me. Moreover, they hear alternative possibilities articulated by other members of our community of interpreters—again, not me, but their classmates.

Also, as Parker states, they realize there is “no boundary line” to the art of interpretation. And that’s what I want them to catch—namely, that the interpretive life is boundless and interactive. Critical biblical interpretation has approaches, reference tools, sources of information, and concerns. Still, we cannot escape our first resource in the practice of interpretation, which is our own experiences, thoughts, and viewpoints. We use ourselves to begin the process even if our original insight changes by the end because we have acquired more information about context, content, modes of presentation, authorial aim, or the history of reception. Such turns typically occur after I provide the “great reveal” and tell students the origin story of Douglas’s mural. Once students hear Douglas painted the mural decades before the Civil Rights Movement and that it is a hindsight artistic rendering of African American history in the changing moments from the Civil War and Reconstruction, they often want to adjudicate the different interpretive possibilities we conjured and abandon those perspectives that seem far from the original intention and context of Douglas’s creation.

I can pull out the metaphor of jazz at this point in the activity to divest students of the notions that the interpretive process is static and unchanging. Students grapple with literary or visual texts not being autonomous and fixed, regardless of the author’s intention. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, “The ‘world’ of the text may explode the world of the author,” and I want that explosion to be loud in my class. It should [clang, jolt, screech, and surprise like the most remarkable jazz improvisers](#) sometimes do. And the text may transcend its own origination and thereby open “itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions.” By catching the spirit of jazz’s flowing improvisations and movements, student interpreters can move across various histories of a text, considering its origination while not being entirely accountable to it. We can flow from ancient contextual readings into analyzing how later communities of interpretation have received and understood the text. Generative interpretive engagement is a form of jazz art.

Jazz is not predictable—at least not the improvisation jazz that makes room for sound experiments. To master strings, horns, and voice in the jazz art form means embracing the possible differentiation from one artist to another. Parker’s quote signals that teaching can be an art form of being, not just knowing. Who you are in the classroom today is as important as what you will teach. Exploring “[All the Things You Are](#)” and all the possible meanings a text can generate has a Charlie Parker sound and purpose. What parts of your experience, thinking, and discernment do you resource as an epistemological framework alongside the assigned readings, the essay papers, the annotated bibliographies, the quizzes, and so on? The model of the jazz artist involves a different way of being a biblical professor, and it creates spaces to play differently in the classroom than those who preceded me. It may even mean the media used in the classroom conversation is different. Rather than a biblical passage, I use an image from the dean of African American painters, Aaron Douglass. Rather than flipping the pages of the Bible, my students post large sheets of butcher paper on the classroom walls to map the rhetorical structure and thematic shifts in a particular passage.

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In the classroom, I become the Dr. Shively Smith version (substitute your name here to catch my meaning) of the jazz bassist and vocalist Esperanza Spalding in her 2009 Austin City Limits concerts. Spalding takes the stage and begins her show by setting the audience’s expectations about what her masterful performance produces instead of what they may expect. She demonstrates her knowledge—even mastery of the old jazz models one may expect—while supplying quick samples of her reinventions and innovations into something wholly her own because “Jazz Ain’t Nothin but Soul.” One of Spalding’s more famous quotes states,

***Jazz music just resonates with the frequency of me.***  
— **Esperanza Spalding**

What is my frequency? As an African American woman New Testament scholar, I am a different kind of biblical jazz player. The rising tides of biblical studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not envision me playing jazz in its classrooms. Still, I am playing on the classroom stage to the unexpected, hopeful, and fearful students populating our institutions today. There is no boundary line for who can teach in the biblical classroom and how to play the instruments of our craft within it. Life experiences and encounters as biblical readers, writers, and historians should sound from our horns and lull our students into fresh wonders and connections that forge new meanings and significance for them and our shared communities.

I play the biblical bass in my classroom and discover something else about myself. I increasingly become less and less like my *doktorvaters* and *doktormutters*, whom I appreciate but never was. Like Spalding, I can pay homage to what preceded me in the biblical classroom while not being imprisoned by it. The jazz swirls around me in performance with my students, and we increasingly produce our unique and pronounced melodic mix of biblical discovery. In

those moments, I see myself more clearly than before, as if I am watching myself pass by in a centering moment.<sup>13</sup> My jazzy biblical studies approach becomes an anchor and not a liability in the classroom.

What does taking up your own distinct space in the classroom mean? One wonders if many teachers, young and old, are playing the instrument of preference or formation. Are our reading selections the ones we want to play in style, or are these readings, scholars, and conversations the ones our teachers designated “proper” and “necessary” for rigorous engagement in the field because they took up their distinct space in the classroom? Armstrong says, “*You blows who you is.*” When I blow, whose “is-ness” is sounding from me? I find jazz a liberating metaphor for thinking about my identity in the classroom because it invites me to experiment without penalty. It asks me to search for my “is-ness” while I blow, and it permits me to name long-standing trends while inventing new ones for the current audiences I stand among.

As a jazz artist, the biblical professor recognizes no dominant model in content or performance exists. We can listen for the sound and the directions the learning moments take us, and there is no predetermined learning trajectory. Yes, I am teaching the same twenty-seven writings of the New Testament my other colleagues are teaching worldwide that year, but we are teaching it in different ways. I do not even have to teach it the way I presented it last semester or yesterday. As a jazz artist, the Bible professor can always be a “becoming” teacher even if we imitate Spalding by naming what preceded us to open the space for what might occur after us.

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In the classroom, I become the Duke Ellington of biblical history, replaying the chord that says,

***I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues.***  
- Duke Ellington

What does it sound like to use the “poutings” from previous class experiences to create new forms in the current experience? While Ellington reminds me that I can repurpose frustrations about the erasures that remain in the historical record of biblical studies, Nina Simone teaches me how to do it. From her 1968 tribute to Martin Luther King Jr in the song “[Why the King of Love Is Dead](#)” to the voicing of the oppressed and segregated of the South in her 1960s declaration, “[Mississippi Goddamn](#).” Simone’s jazz form exudes the beauty of combining various genres like jazz, blues, and classical music with her interpretive commentary on “the texts” of her communities. She teaches us that jazz performance can correct the social record and express the perspectives of those unseen and unheard. But her jazz model symbolizes the power of being an artist who inspires. One cannot ignore the inspirational nature that rings from Simone’s song, “[To Be Young, Gifted and Black](#).” Like Spalding, Simone identifies herself as a participant in a stream of artistic creation and declaration that predates her and will continue beyond her. Simone tells the story of how she came to create the song “[To Be Young, Gifted, and Black](#),” crediting Lorraine Hansberry as her point of inspiration and predecessor in celebrating the resilience and beauty of African American genius and identity. Yet Simone participates in that current of historic artistry by bringing her set of jazz skills, style, and education to the task of retelling. Highlighting the stories of disinheritance, misrecognition, and omission, Simone teaches the “Biblical Professor Turned Jazz

Artist” that classroom pedagogy is not just performance and tasks. Pedagogy can be an identity-forming act that updates the historical record with stories and affirmations of those communities overlooked and silenced.

***Jazz is not just music, it’s a way of life, it’s a way of being, a way of thinking.***  
- Nina Simone

Rehearsing the histories of those who inspired and inform our interpretive questions and approaches in the classroom is an important strategy in the biblical classroom. Highlighting formal scholars of the Bible who have produced commentaries, topical books, and essays, and spotlighting the interpretive giants from my respective faith and cultural traditions like Jarena Lee or Henry McNeil Turner (both expository biblical interpreters and forebearers in my ecclesial tradition of African Methodism) broadens the biblical record for me and makes room for the histories of global Christianity and other faiths. In so doing, “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist” amplifies the interpretive reverberations already sounding in the classroom space unbeknownst to students.

Sometimes, I post three scholarly perspectives on the same passage on a visual-audio screen. The three academic perspectives differ in terms of approach, social location, cultural and faith communities, and even the questions they are asking of the same passage. Again, students read those sample passages aloud (yes, we do a lot of reading aloud in my classes—it’s jazz, remember?!). We parse what we hear and read, noting what each scholar highlights as crucial in the passage, the respective scholar’s distinct configuration of biblical methods, and the sources of information emphasized. I typically take time to stage this engagement well, giving each scholar their slide with a photo and picture of one of their books alongside the sample paragraph of their perspective.

The point is to help students see that we are not dictating the meaning of biblical texts in a vacuum. A chorus of perspectives and meaning potential exists for any passage. Showcasing various scholars encourages students to invite other voices into their interpretive process. It normalizes the experience of actively seeking to hear the same songs played by other jazz artists in biblical studies. Students, in turn, are invited to drop the facade that they must hide the fingerprints of other interpreters or, worst of all, avoid engaging anyone that reads the text differently from them. Taking the time to name where you, as a teacher-interpreter, derive insight is an essential step in empowering students to do the same. It is a component of the journey through jazz in the biblical classroom and builds students’ familiarity with other conversation partners and potential players in their future interpretive acts. As a result, we can fill the biblical interpretation and history stage with diverse instrumentalists, and we help our students envision that as a necessity of critical biblical interpretation.

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Teaching is not an act. It is a way of life, which means one is constantly growing from one point of knowing to another point of unknowing. The teaching life is involved in a constant cycle of comfort and discomfort. Miles Davis teaches,

***You should never be comfortable, man. Being comfortable fouled up a lot of musicians.***  
Miles Davis



Comfort has been the enemy of the life of the mind played in the biblical academy. Many scholars have forgotten the Bible does not merely belong to them—be it their scholarly circles or religious communities. Comfort can obscure the teacher’s vision and conceal the tracks of the journey. Jazz playing in the classroom reminds us we are yet learners, not teachers. And learning means leaving the lovely nests created by those who mentored, formed, and guided us. We do not have to leave the nest for good. We can always come back. But we must, at least, have the courage to explore another chord in an unusual way.

I cannot help but appreciate the courage it required for Billie Holiday to sing “[Strange Fruit](#)” in 1939 at the height of unchecked American lynching culture with the opening lyrics: “Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.” Holiday’s act of performance is also a teaching model. It reminds us of the need for teaching performance to address the question, “So what? Why does this matter?” And the question of “[So What?](#)” has a sound played through the jazz horn of Miles Davis.

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**Wynton Marsalis characterizes jazz music as the power of now. There is no script. It’s conversation. The emotion is given to you by musicians as they make split-second decisions to fulfil what they feel the moment requires.**  
- Wynton Marsalis

Marsalis supplies a formula for the reclamation of the teaching life. His statement can be “played” with an exchange of variables. Instead of “jazz music,” I substitute it with phrases like “the biblical classroom.” Instead of “musicians,” I use the words “teachers and students.” And ta-dah! The statement becomes my own:

**The biblical classroom is the power of now. There is no script. It’s conversation. The emotion is given to you by teachers and students as they make split-second decisions to fulfill what they feel the moment requires.**

**Shively Smith  
(adapted from quotation of Wynton Marsalis)**



I am a jazz artist in biblical studies, history, translations, and hermeneutics. I play many instruments—from the pages of Christian Bibles, Jewish Bibles, and the Qur’an to the accounts of African American women like Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Maria Stewart. My friends join me on stage sometimes. Rarely does a performance pass in which Howard Washington Thurman doesn’t make a cameo appearance, and the interpretive antics of Paul Ricoeur and Hans Gadamer do not take form. The silhouette murals of Aaron Douglass and the poetic creations of James Weldon Johnson blend into the soundings of my beloved [Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) when I play as a New Testament biblical scholar-teacher. And with the smiling joy of Shirley Horn, I invite my students to “[Come Dance with Me](#)” in the classroom as we spin our learning sets together. “The Bible Professor Turned Jazz Artist” instigates encounters, guides exploratory excursions into other worlds, and makes interpretive music. In so doing, I ascend the jazz ranks, stepping up and out of the beholder class to she who plays....



#### About the Author

**Shively T. J. Smith**, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Boston University School of Theology, focuses on early Christian letter forms and histories, Howard Thurman, and nineteenth-century African American women’s literature. A summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Fisk University, she earned a master’s degree from Emory University’s Candler School of Theology and Columbia Theological Seminary and her Ph.D. in New Testament studies from Emory University. Smith has authored numerous essays and two books, *Strangers to Family: Diaspora and 1 Peter’s Invention of God’s Household* and *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*. Smith is a sought after teacher in the study of the Bible, Howard Thurman, practices in Africana biblical interpretation and histories, and online teaching pedagogies in research and writing.

#### Notes & Bibliography

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1 Ralph Ellison, “*Living with Music*” (1955), in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 236.

2 Ellison, “*Living with Music*,” 229.

3 Ellison, “*Living with Music*,” 229.

4 Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1979), 178.

5 Ellison, “*Living with Music*,” 229.

6 Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 226.

7 Quoted in Shively T. J. Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings* (Atlanta: SBLPress, 2023), 116.

8 Shively T. J. Smith, “*Witnessing Jesus Hang: Reading Mary Magdalene’s View of Crucifixion through Ida B. Wells’s Chronicles of Lynching*,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder, 30th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2021), 299.

9 Charlie Parker, “*I Got Rhythm*” (Live at Embassy Auditorium, Los Angeles, 1946), Universal Music Group video, 12:57, August 14, 2018, <https://youtu.be/PnddPVKVpu8>.

10 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 64.

11 The transcript of the 1949 interview can be found here: “Charlie Parker—the Downbeat Interview,” interview by Michael Levin and John S. Wilson, Sept. 9, 1949, *JazzProfiles* (blog), May 19, 2019, <https://jazzprofiles.blogspot.com/2019/05/charlie-parker-1949-downbeat-interview.html>. The quote for Charlie Parker is also found in Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Dover, 1955). Many of the quotes from this essay can be found at Jazzfuel: <https://jazzfuel.com/jazz-quotes/>.

12 Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 139; cf. 91, 108, 203; quoted in Merold Westphal, “The Philosophical/Theological View,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 77.

13 Howard Thurman, “How Good to Center Down!,” in *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1953), 12–13.