

# Boise musician ready to debut jazz Mass 25 years in the making

BY KATHERINE JONES  
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He's volunteered his time and talent to play piano at nursing homes and cancer care centers. He makes his living playing in restaurants and bars, on stage and in recording studios. Kevin Kirk is an accomplished Boise jazz musician, perhaps best known as founder, composer and piano player with the band Onomatopoeia.

But on Sunday, he will be part of a performance that takes a different focus: a musical Mass that he has spent decades composing. The Mass is a way to express his faith, in the language he speaks best — jazz, of course.

"If I were an electrician and I could rewire the church, I would want to do that," he said. "But I'm a piano player. So I just thought, why am I not sharing that?"

Kirk has been working on the Mass, or some version of the idea, for 25 years. Onomatopoeia's first album featured a song called "Lord, Have Mercy," which was chosen as one of the top two best songs of 2004 by National Public Radio's "All Songs Considered." With that success, each subsequent album that Onomatopoeia or Kirk did intentionally included a song that could be part of the Mass project.

"We didn't make a big deal out of it, but they're there. They kind of stood out; there was something about them that was different," Kirk said. "So then I



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did the plunge into the deep end and thought, let's get serious about it. ...

"The block was — and I'll say hell — who in the hell thinks I was qualified to write a jazz Mass of sacred music?"

Kirk found his answer in the apostles and early Christian leaders, even in founders of other religions. "It wasn't the intelligentsia of the society, it wasn't the wealthiest or most powerful people — it was everyday people that started it. ... Very simple people with problems and faults. ... That's a message, right? ...

"I thought, yeah, why not? Somebody will let me know if I'm not pulling it off. It's a little scary to put it out there."

Part of the Mass was performed during Boise Music Week's Church Night, and Sunday is the premier performance of the Mass in its entirety, which Kirk calls "Sacred Music — a Jazz Prayer." The Mass features 10 musicians and vocalists, including five members of Onomatopoeia (which plays together only unofficially anymore), and about a dozen of Kirk's compositions.

The Mass is outdoors at the Nazareth Retreat Center amphitheater and is free to attend. A dinner and concert afterward are a fundraiser for the cen-

ter.

While the Mass is Catholic, jazz makes it bigger than one religion, Kirk said.

"Jazz is America's greatest contribution to work in terms of arts — it's inclusive, collaborative and free," said Kirk. "It's very collective — but never complacent. It has to be created in the moment."

Kind of like a prayer — in the moment and present. "Jazz can support that," he said. "Praying in the moment and making music in the moment are totally linked," he wrote in a press release.

"(Jazz) parallels other ethical and moral decisions you try to make in life," he said. "To be honest, to be real, to give, to do your part. To collect the great things about life — and the really tough things, the really hard things, to share them with people."

Kirk said that many of his friends find their church in Idaho's Sawtooth mountains. He does, too. But there's something very powerful when people gather together to share their spiritual experiences.

"The difference is when you check on that 94-year old parishioner every Sunday, or somebody who's really lonely or disabled, and you can

(say), 'How are you doing?' And they look at you (and say), 'How are you doing?' ... Coming together as a community and sharing the experience that is created every time Mass takes place."

That's like the give-and-take of musicians, responding to each other. And when old masters in jazz played a really great solo, Kirks says, people would say, "You just told the truth."

That's what he is striving for. "It's not, 'Well, I'm going to play these scales I've been waiting to play for three months.' I'm going to tell the truth. ...

"What I hope happens on Sunday — and this is important to me — is that people aren't saying, 'Boy, those musicians are really hot.' ... (or) 'Kevin Kirk is playing beautiful piano.' I want them to be gone somewhere.

"This isn't entertainment. It's not a musical performance."

Transformative is a word he uses, and reverence. "That (the music) takes you away from the space you're in — all your worries and everything else — and launches you to some other place. ... something spiritual."

And at the same time, he circles back to the word "complacent." He intends that his songs are

Kevin Kirk, founder of jazz group Onomatopoeia, leads a group of musicians in rehearsal for a Mass that he has composed. The premier performance, a fundraiser for the Nazareth Retreat Center, will be Sunday at 4 p.m.

## 'Sacred Music — a Jazz Prayer'

- 4-7 p.m. Sunday, June 2, at Nazareth Retreat Center, 4450 N. Five Mile Road. Mass is free.
- After the Mass is a fundraiser jazz concert and social gathering that benefits the center. Tickets for the social gathering are \$25 per person, which includes Street Tacos, and may be purchased at the door.
- Bring a low-back lawn chair.
- For more information, call Nazareth at 208-375-2932.

an antidote to complacency, to checking "gone to church" off the list.

Jazz goes right up to the edge of what's legal, he says metaphorically. "If that music pushes you a little bit and opens up a little intrigue or interest — that's a passion of mine. I've seen that work effectively playing jazz concerts, so why shouldn't I share it on a spiritual level?"

After a rehearsal, Kirk reflected in an email: "I'm finally letting myself believe that the music is powerful, exciting and (I hope) meaningful.

"On many compositions it's different than anything I have ever done. ... I've felt like a painter having to use invisible oils for a long time to build layer after layer in order to create a work (as I composed by myself) and then, suddenly (with the musicians), the whole pallet is there in its vibrant, exciting colors."

As he was composing, some of the songs just came to him. "I can tell you for a fact, they didn't come from me. ... It's like a gift. A huge part of it is gratitude. ...

"One of the reasons I wanted to do the jazz Mass is to say, 'Thank you.'"

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