

A quarter century in the making, Jazz Mass ready for premiere

By Gene Fadness
Editor

Kevin Kirk, a well-known Boise pianist, recording artist and composer has been creating music for 48 years. And on each of his solo albums or those he created with his band, *Onomatopoeia*, at least one song was composed for eventual use as part of his most passionate project: a Jazz Mass. After 25 years, this Jazz Mass is now complete. He is calling it, "Sacred Music - A Jazz Prayer."

He performed parts of the Mass during Boise Music Week two weeks ago, but the premiere performance of the entire Mass is Sunday, June 2, at 4 p.m. at the Nazareth Retreat Center. While there is no charge for the Mass to be celebrated by Father Bruno Segatta, a later social is a fund-raiser to support the work of the retreat center. Tickets to cover the cost for street tacos and no-host bar and to raise money for the retreat center are \$25.

Music for the Mass got its start with Kirk's composition and *Onomatopoeia*'s release of "Lord, Have Mercy," which was voted as one of the top two songs of the year in 2004 by what Kirk calls the "picky listeners" of the nationwide broadcast of "All Songs Considered," on National Public Radio.

After that, at least one song on each of his six album releases was intended for a future Jazz Mass.

"It took an embarrassingly long time for me to understand that music can make a difference and change the world, and to see myself as someone who could be even a small part of this process," Kirk said. "John Lennon sang and other thinkers have observed that life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans!"

Kirk, a parishioner at St. Mary's Parish in Boise, emphasizes what he calls his "small part."

"I believe the Holy Spirit is the musician of the Trinity. I sit down at the piano and keep my antenna in working order," he said. "Most of these compositions can only be seen as gifts from upstairs. I deserve credit only for not ignoring them and for not getting in their way. For me, praying in the moment and making music in the moment are totally linked."



Kevin Kirk started his career in social work, but music soon took over. (Courtesy photo/Kevin Kirk)

A Mass in jazz might seem peculiar to some, but not to Kirk who places jazz as one of America's greatest artistic gift to the world. Communicating complex, deep emotions while simultaneously creating in the moment makes improvisational music especially authentic and undeniably effective in worship. "It makes it real," he said. "Giving praise with this interpretation of music involves being inventive and collective, but never passive, complacent or tuned-out."

Music has always been an integral and arguably inseparable part of the liturgy, Kirk said. He hopes his music for this Mass "will add an inspiring hue and special living reality to standard liturgical music."

Kirk moved to Boise from Denver with his family when he was 2. He attended St. Joseph's and Sacred Heart schools in Boise and then five years at Mount Angel Seminary back in the days when there was high school seminary. He also attended Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., and it was there that he thought he had found his life's work as a social worker.

Returning to Boise, he worked at Ada County's first crisis shelter for youth, started by Father William Dodgson, a teacher at Bishop Kelly High School. At the same time, Kirk's brother, Dennis, a student at Boise State organized a band and recruited his brother. "So, I was running a group home during day and playing music at night," Kirk said. He played electric piano for those in the group home. "Music is extraordinarily transformative if you play in a group home, a hospital or a retirement facility," Kirk said. "You just watch people become transported to another place."

The band was successful, playing continually for 18 months at Vic Haus Food and Drink, a popular Boise nightspot that's now a library in the Hillcrest Shopping Center.

After his band's successful start, Kirk spent years performing at prestigious jazz venues in many East Coast cities and Washington, D.C. before returning to Idaho with his wife, Ginger, to raise their children.

"What's truly funny about my life is that in my 20s I started out as a social worker running a crisis shelter facility for youth and only accidentally ended up as a professional musician," Kirk said. "I thought that playing the piano was somewhat whimsical, almost a luxury. It seemed self-serving compared to the type of servant leadership mission to which my peers and I were dedicating our lives," as social workers, he said.

It was only later that he learned that his music, just like his social work, could be used to lift and inspire the souls of others.

Over the years, while keeping a full time playing schedule in virtually all of Idaho's finest listening rooms and performing at major events, Kirk recorded and produced

Music has always been an integral part of the Church liturgy. Kevin Kirk, well-known pianist, recording artist and composer, has spent 25 years creating this Spiritually inspired Jazz Mass. "Sacred Music - A Jazz Prayer" is ready to be shared and experienced.

"Sacred Music - A Jazz Prayer"

A Mass and Benefit Concert performed by Kevin Kirk of Onomatopoeia & Friends:

JON BYNEMAN • MIKE SEIFRIT • GREG PERKINS • GREG BISHOP • MATTHEW SHORT
ELLIE SHAW • LUKE CARTER • BOB PARSLEY • JOEY HAAS • PATTY GABICA

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more than 20 studio projects. Critically acclaimed albums from *Kevin Kirk & Onomatopoeia* included "Some Assembly Required," which made the final 10 for a Grammy Award in the category of Best Contemporary Jazz Album of the year.

He and the band's television show, "*Kevin Kirk & Onomatopoeia Live In Concert*," produced by Idaho Public TV, won IPTV three top industry awards including a first place PBS NETA award for best musical production of the year. This program is still being broadcast internationally. Kirk's song "Salsa To The Walls a la Telemann" was chosen by the New York City Center as its theme song for its daily broadcast to eight million New Yorkers.

Kirk also produced and arranged the music for two albums by Sally Tibbs (with whom he has performed since the beginning of his career) and also for an album of Celtic music for Irish vocalist Eileen Alana Steiner. He composed the theme for the PBS network coverage of the 1988 presidential election. He composed the music and played every instrument for a 13-hour centennial television series "Proceeding On Through A Beautiful Country - A Television History of Idaho."

Kirk and his various ensembles were featured at jazz festivals in the Pacific Northwest and Southern California. A familiar presence on the Boise music scene, Kirk has performed before the beginning of the summer series plays at the Idaho Shakespeare Festival for the last six years. He was instrumental in starting Chandler's music program, still thriving 12 years later. From this project, Kirk moved on

to help establish a music program for The Riverside Hotel, which has multiple highly successful venues, including The Sandbar, BAR365 and Boise's world-class jazz venue The Sapphire Room.

But it is the sacred music that has perhaps been the most challenging and rewarding for the musician. "Part of that 25 years (composing the Jazz Mass) was spent convincing myself I had any right whatsoever to write sacred music. But then one day at church, I was listening to a verse from St. Paul that said Jesus didn't hire the greatest intellectuals and the most successful brilliant people. Instead he chose everyday people and people with faults to start His Church."

Eventually, Kirk hopes to compile the text from the Mass into a book. He's planning to perform, "Sacred Music - A Jazz Prayer," at his home parish of St. Mary's later this year.

He's also gratified that the premiere of the full Mass will promote the work of the Nazareth Retreat Center.

Kirk planned the event with, among others, Suzanna Tillotson, the sister of the late Jazz musician Paul Tillotson, and their mother Mildred Tillotson. "To have two of the organizers come from such a tremendous lineage of jazz has been a real blessing," Kirk said.

Performing with Kirk will be Jon Byneman, Mike Seifrit, Greg Perkins, Greg Bishop, Matthew Short, Ellie Shaw, Luke Carter, Bob Parsley, Joey Haas and Patty Gabica.

Attendees are asked to arrive early and to carpool because parking spaces are limited. Because the Mass is outdoors, those attending are encouraging to bring lawn chairs with low backs.