

# Sacred Concerts: Jazz Vespers with Dwight Andrews

—By Kenneth Rollins

The typical jazz venue is usually a night club, maybe even a restaurant with a bar, where a classic combo performs well into the night. Yet, on a particular spring night in downtown Atlanta, the jazz venue took on an entirely different look. At First Congregational Church on Courtland Street, the rhythms of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday," Stanley Turrentine's "I Told Jesus" and Horace Silver's "The Preacher" rose from vocalist Jean Carne, a jazz quintet and a chorus as they inaugurated the first in a series of vespers devoted to jazz music.



Dwight Andrews

"My feeling is that jazz has a spiritual basis," says Dwight Andrews, the architect of the event. "So the vesper was a way of trying to present that in performance. It is another way of bringing the music out. Music needs to say something, not just to the head but to the heart."

Andrews possesses a deep appreciation for these concepts—for not only is he an accomplished jazz musician, composer and arranger, he is also associate minister at First Congregational. So, for him, the evening of jazz among the pews fit like hand-in-glove.

On September 17, he again explores the ecclesiastical dimensions of the music at the next jazz vesper, where he will play soprano and tenor saxophones. He is featured on these instruments as well as the baritone clarinet on a new album "In the Spirit," with the late drummer Ed Blackwell, released on Muse Records.

While he is compelled to orchestrate a host of divergent identities—minister, musician, composer, bandleader, teacher, director, even student (he's also a doctoral candidate at Yale University)—around the normal 24-hour day, he wants to perform more.

"Because of my other activities, I am not always playing," Andrews explains. I like the immediacy of trying to say something and having an audience there to be with you when you said it, when you were reaching for it, missing it, or

whatever. I love the challenge of that. I like the risks that are involved musically, in a large concert situation."

His musical education began in his native Detroit, Michigan, where he studied at Cass Tech, a performing arts high school that was a musical boot camp for artists like Geri Allen, Ron Carter, and Donald Byrd.

Yale University, where he acquired undergraduate and divinity degrees, proved to be another fertile musical habitat. Being only a stone's throw away from New York City, he was a participant in the vibrant "loft jazz scene" during the mid-'70s, jamming with Oliver Lake, Michael Gregory Jackson, and Andrew Cyrille. "I was lucky enough to be there when a lot of cats were creating a lot of interesting music and sharing it," he recounts.

At Yale, he met the theatrical team of playwright August Wilson and director Lloyd Richards. Immediately, a mutual appreciation developed, which resulted in Andrews's serving as musical director for Wilson's powerhouse plays—"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson." He also met Nat Adderley there and together they started the band *Deja Vu*, which performed in New Haven and New York. They also worked together with percussionist Nana Vasconcelos on Andrews's 1979 album *Mmorisa—The Little People* (Otic Records 1007).

Later musical engagements would take Andrews throughout Western Europe, hitting the many jazz festivals in Italy, France, Germany, Norway and Switzerland.

Closer to home, he relates a story about his work with Branford Marsalis on his 1992 Grammy-winning *I Heard You Twice the First Time*, where Andrews arranged a blues work song, "Berta, Berta," for the album.

"Branford wanted to have this railroad song that I had created for August Wilson's play, 'The Piano Lesson.' Branford heard that while the play was running in New York. So he called me one day and said, 'I want you to do this thing for me on my record because I just heard this song that was so powerful.'"

Last October, he debuted original compositions at Emory University's Glenn Memorial Auditorium in Atlanta. He was backed by a stellar cast of musicians: pianist Geri Allen, drummer Pheeroan akLaff, vibraphonist Jay Hoggard and bassist Mark Helias.

Currently, Andrews teaches in Emory's music department. He also participates on a music advisory panel attached to the 1996 Cultural Olympiad.

However, much of his time has been devoted to his Yale doctoral dissertation on the classical composer Igor Stravinsky, whose work he admires. "His work called 'The Rite of Spring' was really a radical, creative statement for concert music," says Andrews. "I could also hear in him a certain kind of rhythmic practice that is not that far removed from what I hear in a lot of jazz. So I was really interested in studying how he developed his musical language. There are all kinds of overlaps," he adds.

Andrews thinks that jazz music should assume a prominent place in educational curricula. "My hope is that in the near future jazz will be a much more integrated aspect of performance art. But the real challenge is getting the music taught in the schools with any level of broad coverage."