

# NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER

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## A Catholic jazz artist explores sacred music

By Retta Blaney

Music

NEW YORK -- Mary Magdalene has meant different things to people throughout the ages. For Deanna Witkowski, she was the inspiration for the title track of her new CD of sacred jazz, "From This Place."

When she was scheduled to perform for Easter vespers two years ago at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, commonly known as "the jazz church," in midtown Manhattan, Witkowski wanted to write an original piece appropriate for the service. She meditated on the assigned scripture passage about Mary Magdalene going to Jesus' tomb and finding it empty, trying to put herself in the story and imagining more.

"Mary Magdalene probably has all these other things she wants to say," and so Witkowski let her say them.

*Early, I wake in the dark,  
shell-shocked dreaming awake...*

...to go to the tomb, only to find it empty with two angels who ask her why she weeps.

*And I wonder if they want to hear the story of my life,  
the deadness that I carried before I met this Christ.*

In scripture Mary says little, but in Witkowski's song she is heard.

"Performing it, I feel I go on a journey with Mary," she says. "It's something to do with finding joy, coming to the place where Christ speaks my name. It's something to dwell on."

Witkowski recalled her own journey recently sitting in the choir room at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church on Manhattan's Upper West Side. With her

long, honey-blond curls piled up on the back of her head and wearing no makeup, she looks at least a decade younger than her 37 years. She has walked up from her apartment in midtown, but her trek to this church has been a lot longer than the mile she just traveled.

Baptized into the Episcopal tradition, she went from church to church as she moved with her family 11 times as a child. Many of the congregations were evangelical, nondenominational or whatever was closest if her mother didn't have a car. But the Episcopal tradition was to have a large impact on her life after she took a job in New York in the late 1990s as music director of All Angels' Church in Manhattan.

One of the appeals of All Angels' Church was its practice of having its music directors compose Masses of their own. Witkowski, a singer, pianist and composer, took to the high church liturgical music. More than a third of the works on the new CD are from this time, including the "Kyrie," "Gloria," "Sanctus" and "Agnus Dei." She re-imagined and arranged for the church's gospel choir, which was made up largely of homeless people.

As with the Mary Magdalene song, she had tried to relate to the ancient hymns of the Mass. For the "Kyrie" she made a list of things she wanted God to have mercy on, both for herself and the world. "Doing that work helped me be in the text more."

"From This Place," her fourth CD, features Witkowski as vocalist and pianist, with Donny McCaslin on saxophones, John Patitucci on bass, Scott Latzky on drums, and guest vocalists Laila Biali, Kate McGarry and Peter Elderidge. It is also available as sheet music from her Web site.

"Music can be one big unifying factor in the church," she says. And she expects it to be with the CD, for the Catholics and Episcopalians at home with the music from the Mass and for Protestants relating to 19th-century hymns like "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," "Pass Me Not" and "Take My Life and Let It Be."

Besides going in a new direction musically, her faith journey also changed course as she began reading books on contemplative prayer. She said just "to sit and enjoy God's presence and not have to have it be all that talking" was inspirational for her. She delved into reading mystics like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. "I realized all these people were Catholic."

She began worshiping at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in the West Village and then wanted to explore becoming a Catholic, but the RCIA classes there and at most churches were on Sundays, and Sundays for her meant leading choirs and performing in churches. She called the archdiocese and found out St. Paul the Apostle's RCIA course was on Wednesday. That proved to be a good fit.

At Easter Vigil this year she was received into the Catholic tradition at St. Paul's where she now directs the young adult choir and accompanies them at the Sunday evening Mass.

"It's been coming a long time, although I don't think I always knew it was coming," she said.

Witkowski has toured extensively, performing in such far-flung spots as Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at the Tel Aviv Opera House in Israel, and three times at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. With "From This Place," she is presenting herself in a new way.

"One interesting thing in terms of all the different kinds of interviews I've been doing is it's forcing me to think about how I present my faith," she said. "With this CD, I hope if people don't identify themselves as Christians they can find something that touches them in some way."

Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life through the Eyes of Actors*. Her blog is Life Upon the Sacred Stage ([uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com](http://uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com)).



May 28, 2009 broadcast available at [interfaithradio.org/node/883](http://interfaithradio.org/node/883)

## **Sacred Jazz**

Interview with Laura Kwerel

Jazz great Mary Lou Williams believed that jazz and prayer were "twin mates of spiritual expression." She developed a style known as "sacred jazz," which went on to inspire Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. Catholic jazz artist Deanna Witkowski introduces us to this little-known genre, and shares her new album, which sets Christians prayers, hymns and psalms to music for a jazz quartet.



August 17, 2009

**Busted: Deanna Witkowski**

Busted Halo talks with the jazz pianist-composer-vocalist about music and faith  
(*excerpt- the entire interview is available at [bustedhalo.com](http://bustedhalo.com)*)

By Bill McGarvey

*BH: We talk a lot at Busted Halo about making the connection between the sacred and the secular. Can you talk about why you don't see a great wall between the sacred and the secular in terms of your own faith?*

DW: I think that for me, my experience with God comes from music-- and it's not necessarily music with any text in it. It can be when I'm sitting down and trying to compose something but more so when I'm playing with my trio or quartet and there is such intense listening going on since we have played together for years and years. That sort of sets the stage for moments when you are outside yourself. People don't necessarily articulate that this is God's presence coming through, but for me, it is – it's being in community and working for one common thing: to present music as purely as we can. For me it is similar to prayer when I am just trying to sit and listen to God. I think it is also because one thing that I have found more and more lately is that I love the guys in my band – we are a community. So it is very much like church in a way.

*BH: I'm sure it's near impossible to articulate, but can you try to talk a little bit about those moments?*

DW: This might not be a transcendent thing. but I remember back in February my trio did a concert at my alma mater (Wheaton College). Some nights I'll count off tempos that are totally, seemingly wrong, because I'm either tired or feeling adrenaline or whatever. That night we played the first cut on my CD and it was so slow that I thought it was going to fall apart. But what ended up happening was it was a completely different feel and it ended up making us stretch in different ways musically. After the concert my drummer said, "I felt like I was playing like [drummer] Elvin Jones," because we just all had to go in different directions. It opened the piece up so that certain things happened that would not normally happen.

Sometimes I feel the bassist or the drummer are being so supportive and I can go wherever I want and yet sometimes they do something that makes me do something and then all of a sudden we wind up with this “thing” that I could have never imagined. It is hard to describe and it doesn’t really last, and that’s the thing about music as opposed to painting: you can’t stand there and stare at it as time goes by.

*BH: Can you talk about the parallels between moments like that on your spiritual journey and what brought you into the Catholic Church?*

DW: Well, for myself, it’s all related to prayer. I’m about to go on a weeklong silent retreat. I notice when I go on these retreats that I usually feel like I am experiencing God’s love in an intense way and almost in a physical way. This is part of the reason I became Catholic, because I never felt this growing up. I think it was just a divide between my brain and my soul. I knew that God loved me and wanted the best for me (and of course, I still struggle with these things) but now, when I am in moments of prayer, I can look back and remember certain moments. The second time I went on a silent retreat, the group of people I was with had a person who had drawn a chalk labyrinth. I walked it a few times. One particular day when I was walking it on the way in, I felt like I should raise my hands. But my first thought was, “I am going to look stupid,” but then I thought, “everyone is here for the same thing,” so I just put my hands out and opened them. I then had this thought or heard this thought that said, “Thank you, Deanna: I will fill your hands” - and then I started crying. Moments like that for me are just moments and don’t last that long, but I know that they are real and I know they are happening. They are intense and meaningful, and hopefully the challenge is to not have them be isolated incidents, but to be influences on how I live and think.



By Tim Mooney

June 4, 2009

Pianist, composer, and vocalist Deanna Witkowski has gained a reputation as "one of the best of the new generation of jazz pianists" (Jazz Journal International) through her unique expressions of jazz, Brazilian, and Afro-Cuban influences on display in her first three CD releases, "Having to Ask" (2000), "Wide Open Window" (2003), and "Length of Days" (2005).

Ms. Witkowski won the Great American Jazz Piano Competition in 2002, has appeared on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition Sunday" and "Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz," and since 2006 has been the pianist in the BMI/New York Jazz Composers Orchestra, led by Jim McNeely. Her latest CD, *From This Place*, is an overt expression of the faith and spirituality that have been integral to her life and behind all of her music.

*Deanna, you describe your new CD as "Sacred Jazz." How is that different than your other music?*

I really don't see it as different. I called it Sacred Jazz to help those who are familiar with my work to know this CD has a little different focus, but I don't see the world divided that way.

*How do you see the world?*

Wow, that's a big question! I was raised in a tradition that saw itself as a small Christian minority set over against the world, and it tended to be a bit enclosed and defensive. But now I see that God is present in all things and we are invited to be Christ-like in our everyday lives. So I'm more at home in the world, because it's God's world.

*How do you intertwine your spirituality and your jazz?*

If I can say it this way, jazz fits inside my spirituality. I recently found a quote from Mary Lou Williams that I'd never heard before (and I hope I get this right!): "Jazz and prayer are twin mates of spiritual expression." For me,

playing jazz is an intense form of listening, just like prayer. Making music is a willingness to receive and to give.

As an artist I find that painting for me is a form of prayer, though in a very non-linear way. Is music that way for you?

Playing is definitely a form of prayer practice for me. I find that I become unselfconscious and feel quite safe. Prayer feels that way to me. I'm able to be myself sitting in God's presence, and that same joy is often present while I'm playing jazz.

On your website Martin Marty is quoted as saying, "Improvisation is a metaphor for God's acts towards creation." What has jazz revealed to you about God and your faith?

Since much of the music I play is with others, it has to do with playing and interacting with other people. I've played with one of my band members for eleven years and another two for eight. It's taught me to trust other people, and it's teaching me to trust God, particularly with practical things. I experience joy when I play this way with others and it's a reminder that God wants me to experience joy and be myself. I can let my guard down and be who I am.

*Faith can often be seen as holding eternal truths, yet music, and jazz in particular, is all about improvisation and the new. Is there a tension there for you?*

I'm not sure what I believe about this. The mystical tradition points to the love of God as the essential thing that underlies everything else. And I believe God is always creating new things and teaching us new things. In our limited way as human beings we can only know God to a small extent, but that small extent is huge for us. The love of God is the thing I'm most sure of, and it seems to be the most important thing in all religions. I've had the pleasure of playing jazz in all kinds of liturgical settings and theological contexts and it's made me think more broadly about what I believe. What I can say is that I've had a deep connection with and experience of God's love in all these different settings.

*How would you ask people to approach your music?*

First, to be open. My music is not necessarily traditional or does it go places that are expected harmonically, compositionally, etc. And I know that sometimes terms, such as "sacred" or "jazz," can get in the way and prevent people from really being open to the music itself. I hope that people will just be open to what happens to them and how it makes them feel. Most of the sacred jazz I do is around scriptural texts and that is often listened to differently. The jazz on From This Place is more easily accessible than what I

usually do and my hope is that the text does not get in the way of people's experience.

*What have I not asked that you would like to answer?*

I'd like people to know that my faith informs all my music, not just this latest CD. I'm creating a body of work; this sacred jazz is just part of a larger whole, and is not meant to be exclusive or divisive in any way. I hope this music can bring people together. I hope they see this as part of who I am and what I want to offer to others. All of this is done because I need to do it; it's who I am. I never really had a choice about becoming a musician because it was something that I just always knew I wanted to do. It's what I'm supposed to do.



## **A Chanteuse of Sacred Jazz**

Combining a diversity of styles, pianist and singer Deanna Witkowski brings jazz to church and church to jazz.

By Edward Gilbreath

April 10, 2009

"We live in a global community where we have access to many different styles of music, and we should take advantage of that," says pianist/singer Deanna Witkowski, whose music crosses many genres and cultures.

Congregational worship music has plenty of variety these days. Depending on the church, you could hear traditional hymns, a gospel choir, or arena rock. What's harder to find on a typical Sunday morning is a jazz quartet. For many of us, jazz music is reserved for smoky nightclubs or public-radio broadcasts. That's why pianist/singer Deanna Witkowski is something of an anomaly. She's a musician who feels as much at home in a secular club as an evangelical sanctuary.

Witkowski, 37, is a graduate of Wheaton College who left Chicago in 1997 to pursue her musical dreams in the Big Apple. While working at various New York churches, where she composed original hymns and directed gospel choirs, she has built a career as one of jazz music's most exciting young talents. With *From This Place*, her fourth major album, Witkowski combines her love of jazz with her love for God to create something she calls "sacred jazz." We spoke to her as she prepared to celebrate Resurrection Sunday.

URBANFAITH: What is sacred jazz, and how is it different from regular jazz music?

WITKOWSKI: "Sacred jazz" is a term that I use for lack of a better one. I call the music on *From This Place* "sacred jazz" because it takes sacred texts -- from the Mass, scripture, and nineteenth-century hymn texts -- and sets them in the medium of jazz.

To be honest, I don't see my music as being either "sacred" or "secular" -- in fact, I write in the liner notes to *From This Place* that "I view all music as sacred, if it is made with intent to heal, uplift, and rejuvenate spirits." So, in a sense, I'm using the term "sacred jazz" solely as a way for listeners to have a heads up that there is a bit of a different focus with this new recording in contrast to my previous recordings, which don't have the sacred text aspect.

*Who are some of the most significant sacred jazz artists?*

Again, many of the musicians who have done "sacred jazz" have had that as only one aspect of their larger work. I'm thinking of Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck; also, Ike Sturm, Bill Carter, Chuck Marohnic. These last three players are currently very active in their churches, either as pastors or music directors, and actively compose new music for liturgy.

*How did your latest album come together?*

It's a culmination of years of work. The genesis of several of the pieces came from my time as music director at All Angels' Church in New York, where I served from 1997 to 2000. I came to All Angels' knowing that the church wanted to fill that position with a composer and pianist who could write and play in many different styles.

After I left All Angels', I started wondering if other churches might be able to use the music I'd written for their own congregations. I started booking concerts and services in various churches when I'd travel, and this eventually led to being asked to write several of the other pieces on the album. Three of

the pieces -- "Let My Prayer Rise," "Christ the Light," and "Song of Simeon" -- were commissioned for use in a jazz hymnal and have texts that are used at evening prayer services.

One thing that was very different for me in preparing for this particular recording was the amount of time that I spent with all of the texts. I sing more on *From This Place* than on any of my earlier three recordings, and because of the nature of the texts themselves I devoted a lot of energy to meditating on praying through the various texts. For instance, with my setting of the "Kyrie," where the text is basically just "Lord, have mercy" and "Christ, have mercy," I made a list of specific images or situations where I wanted to ask God to have mercy. All of this, I think, influenced how I sang the text. Doing this recording gave me the privilege of going back and really experiencing what these texts and musical settings mean for me on a deeper level.

*From This Place* is also the title of a track on the album. Can you talk about the significance of that song?

The title track was written for an Easter jazz vespers that my quartet played two years ago at Saint Peter's Church in New York. I wanted to compose something new for Easter, and so I meditated on one of the passages for the day, which tells the story of Mary Magdalene going to Christ's tomb three days after his crucifixion. She finds the tomb empty and thinks that Christ's body has been stolen, and asks a gardener what has happened with the body. The gardener replies by speaking Mary's name, and Mary recognizes that the gardener is the risen Christ.

As an act of reflection, I started imagining what Mary might have felt like from the moment she woke on this particular morning until the moment where she recognized Christ. In writing the words, I wanted to give a sense of what must have been an overwhelming emotional journey for Mary on this particular day. Before recording this piece, I told my band about the overall dynamic movement and sense of what is going on in the text and music: the piece basically has a slow build into the section where Mary is asked by two angels why she is weeping. At that point, her mind races:

*I wonder if they want to hear the story of my life/ the deadness that I'd carried before I met this Christ/ my aloneness in hiding from the hurts that I'd received/ my fearfulness in not knowing now in whom I could believe/ but even as my mind is racing now I sense behind/ I turn around to find a man is standing by my side/ he asks me why I weep and who I'm looking for inside/ I ask him if he's taken the body of my Christ/ he answers me by speaking my name...*

At that point, Mary experiences a moment of heaven breaking open and knows that she has seen the Lord. She runs "from this place" to tell the world that Christ is alive. I didn't have a title for this piece for about a year -- I just called it the "Mary Magdalene song." But as I began to think about the whole recording, I liked the idea that I am coming "from this place" -- "this place" meaning a focus right now on this sacred jazz, on being a strong musician and a committed Christian, and on just being who I am and not caring so much what others think.

*What kind of reactions have you received so far as you've been promoting the album?*

Because of the nature of this project, it doesn't fit neatly into an established genre. The jazz publicists have said that they love the music but don't know what to do with it. I understand for radio formatting that not everyone is going to want to air a religious song in a regular jazz show. They might decide to air it on the Sunday morning gospel show, but I'm not sure this music even fits with a gospel show. It's a different kind of project, and I've realized there are very few people who are doing this kind of thing.

*And let's face it, there aren't that many opportunities on the radio to hear regular jazz anymore, let alone a faith-based jazz.*

To be honest, my album isn't even just jazz -- the record crosses a bunch of musical genres. So if the term "jazz" gets in the way of having someone check it out, then I'm all for dropping that moniker. I don't sit down at the piano and say, "Today I'm going to write some jazz." Unless I'm commissioned for something specific, I'm just writing music. And with my background in both classical and jazz, and as someone who plays a lot of Brazilian and Latin styles, what comes out of my pen is often all over the map.

*As I was describing some of your music to an acquaintance, that person said to me, "I just can't worship with a saxophone in the song." Her comment wasn't meant as a judgment or anything, but I think it's representative of how a lot of Christians look at certain styles of music. Many probably struggle with fitting jazz, and other styles that you don't usually hear on a Sunday morning, into their conception of what constitutes "worship music."*

First, I'd ask your friend to just sit down and listen to the music. God wants to use anything -- even saxophones -- to reach people in any way He can. I think people can sometimes set up mental roadblocks to experiencing something new. God created the saxophone, and He created musicians who worship Him with the saxophone who are sensitive to the environment in which they're

playing. My saxophonist, Donny McCaslin, actually helps to accentuate some of the text by how he weaves around my singing, or leaves silence, or harmonizes with me. His playing itself is so expressive and emotional. I would encourage your friend -- or anyone -- to listen first before dismissing it.

*Sounds like you've dealt with these kinds of criticisms before.*

Sure, and I realize that everyone has different musical tastes. But the problem is when we attach moral judgments to our tastes. For instance, I once had someone come up to me after a service where I'd played part of an original mass setting, and this person told me that she couldn't worship with my setting. The implication was that my music was somehow inappropriate or not worshipful enough. (She prefaced this by saying that she'd prayed about whether or not to tell me this). I told her as diplomatically as I could that I'm not responsible for her personal worship experience during a service, and that there may be certain pieces that she just isn't drawn to musically. She could choose to sing or to silently pray the text, but to make a judgment that the music is not good because it's not serving someone's particular musical tastes -- that's just wrong. Church is not supposed to be a shopping mall experience where we search until we find exactly what we want -- or fight until we get it. We are in community, so there will be some things that we like and some things we dislike. That goes for musical styles as much as for anything else.

*So, from your perspective, what makes music worshipful?*

I'd say that it's similar to what makes washing dishes worshipful, or being a lawyer worshipful, or being a mom worshipful; it's the intent behind the action. If my intent in playing and singing is to glorify God, it's going to be worshipful for me. I can't judge what someone else will find worshipful.

That's not to say, though, that I'm not sensitive to others when I'm in the role of worship leader. There needs to be a particular sensitivity involved in leading people in congregational singing. My intent is still to worship God, but I may have to change how I approach playing or singing a piece to fit that particular congregation or the needs of occasion. It's about being sensitive to the environment. Any good musician is going to understand her or his function -- whether that function be to take a solo, to have interplay within a group, to lay down a groove, or to serve a congregation's song in playing in a way that reinforces the text or the mood at any specific point of the service.

*Your music has always drawn from different cultural styles. How did you develop a love and curiosity for other cultures?*

I was recently on a panel at Wheaton College with [bassist] John Patitucci, who played on my album. One thing that John emphasized that day that I really like is that we live in one world. We don't live in a Christian world some of the time and the secular world the rest of the time. One of the things I like about Catholicism is its emphasis on seeing God in all things. If God is present in all things, then He's present in the joyful feel of a samba, in the depth of a jazz ballad, in reggae, in Latin jazz, in salsa.

For two years, I worked as a music director at a church that had one of its services in Spanish. If I had come into that situation and played straight-sounding hymns, the majority of folks wouldn't have been able to relate to the music. But since I play a lot of Latin and Brazilian jazz, I was able to take some hymns and add a salsa feel, or a cha-cha, or a samba. The people loved it. It's funny to me sometimes to think about how I was the white girl leading a large congregation that was primarily Ecuadorian, Colombian, and other Latin cultures. But I also think that people appreciate when you show respect to their culture, when you eat their food, when you learn their language, or play their music. In a sense, you're welcoming them into your life and they have a chance to welcome you into theirs.

*Why don't we see more of that kind of musical diversity in our American evangelical churches?*

In white America, we tend to separate music from our everyday lives. I like how African and Latin American cultures don't do that. They know how to express the height and depth of emotions in music, in dance, in community. Isn't the church supposed to be about celebrating community? We live in a global community where we have access to many different styles of music, and we should take advantage of that.

*How can churches use their music to encourage diversity and bridge cultural divides?*

I wish that in general there was more openness among music leaders in learning from different cultures and traditions. For instance, I now attend a Catholic church where there is an interim music director who formerly served in Episcopalian churches. Right away I noticed how some of the "Protestant hymnody" outside of the usual Catholic hymns were incorporated into the service. And that's fine. I would hope that churches could learn from each other -- if music directors were actually given several Sundays off per year where they were asked to do research -- perhaps by attending a church of a different denomination or ethnic group -- they might find more resources for their own congregations.

Also, I do think that there is a wealth of great hymnody, as well as some hymns where perhaps the words are great and the music isn't, or vice versa. The challenge can be to take some of these pieces and arrange them in such a way where their meaning can be opened up. That's one thing that I really like on *From This Place* -- that I'm taking familiar text like "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior" and writing new music that allows a new experience of the text. It's just like in jazz: there has to be reverence for tradition, but also a bringing in of new ideas so that we're not simply venerating the past. We're supposed to be living the tradition, which means that we are living it in present time. There are so many musical styles available to us today other than worship choruses, hymns, and pop music -- I would hope that the church's thinking would expand in regard to useable musical styles -- maybe there could even be saxophones!

Edward Gilbreath is editor of [UrbanFaith.com](http://UrbanFaith.com) and the author of *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*.



## **Podcast interview with Christy Tennant at InternationalArtsMovement.org**

**I am IAM: Jazz Musician Deanna Witkowski**

April 9, 2009

Deanna Witkowski discusses her latest CD, "From This Place," (now available from <http://www.deannajazz.com/>), her upcoming performances on NPR and at the Kennedy Center, sacred jazz, and her conversion to Catholicism.

## **Weekly Psalm podcast at IsaacEverett.com**

**Psalm 84 - Deanna Witkowski**

August 18, 2009

Jazz pianist, vocalist, and composer Deanna Witkowski talks about Psalm 84, journeys, and pious bee hives. This podcast includes her song, "Let My Prayer Rise," from her new album, "From This Place."

-Isaac Everett is the author of *The Emergent Psalter* (Church Publishing).