



**T**here is a growing chasm between Christian culture and lost people. Our vocabulary, our personalities, and certainly our values are different. Many lost people will not consider Jesus because they do not believe they are good enough or that He would like them were they to meet. *Blue Like Jazz* is a contemporary presentation of the gospel. It is a book that Christians will want to give to their lost friends to explain what they believe, and to help people understand how relevant the gospel of Jesus is. Campus Crusade for Christ is interested in passing out thousands of these books to students on college campuses all over the country.

Why is the title so vague? What does it mean? We've titled the book *Blue Like Jazz* to capture the artfulness of the book. While this is not a literary title, we want it to have a literary feel. Many lost people mistake beauty for spirituality, so we wanted to package spirituality inside of poetic beauty. It was very important for us not to use a title that sounded combatant. Specifically, *Blue Like Jazz* alludes the idea that one can enjoy Christian spirituality the way one enjoys jazz music, and that like jazz music, Christian Spirituality is something you feel in the soul. This is not a book that says Christianity is right or true; it says that Christianity is relevant and meaningful. *Blue Like Jazz* is a book that a believer can hand to a nonbeliever and not be embarrassed about the way the gospel is presented.

—Donald Miller  
March 26, 2003

*Excerpts from*

# **Blue Like Jazz**

## **Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality**

By Donald Miller

**I** never liked jazz music because jazz music doesn't resolve. But I was outside the Baghdad Theatre one night when I saw a man playing the saxophone. I stood there for fifteen minutes and he never opened his eyes.

After that I liked jazz music.

Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. It is as if they are showing you the way.

I used to not like God because God didn't resolve. But that was before any of this happened.

○ ○ ○

There were aspects of Christian spirituality I liked and aspects I thought were humdrum. I wasn't sure what to do. I felt I needed to make a decision about what I believed. I wished I could have subscribed to aspects of Christianity but not the whole thing.

I'll explain.

I associated much of Christian doctrine with children's stories because I grew up in church. My Sunday school teachers had turned Bible narrative into children's fables. They talked about Noah and the ark because the story had animals in it. They failed to mention that this was when God massacred all of humanity.

It also confused me that some people would look at parts of the Bible but not the whole thing. They ignored a lot of obvious questions. I felt as if Christianity, as a religious system, was a product that kept falling apart, and whoever was selling it would hold the broken parts behind his back trying to divert everybody's attention.

The children's story stuff was the thing I felt Christians were holding behind their back. The Garden of Eden, the fall of man, was a pretty silly story, and Noah and the ark, all of that, that seemed pretty fairy-tale too.

It took me a while to realize that these stories, while often used with children, are not at all children's stories. I think the devil has tricked us into thinking so much of biblical theology is story fit for kids. How did we come to think the story of Noah's ark is appropriate for children? Can you imagine a children's book about Noah's ark complete with paintings of people gasping in gallons of water, mothers grasping their children while their bodies go flying down white-rapid rivers, the children's tiny heads being bashed against rocks or hung up in fallen trees? I don't think a children's book like that would sell many copies.

I couldn't give myself to Christianity because it was a religion for the intellectually naive. In order to believe Christianity, you either had to reduce enormous theological absurdities into children's stories, or ignore them. The entire thing seemed very difficult for my intellect to embrace. Now none of this was quite defined; it was mostly taking place in my subconscious.

...

Help came from the most unlikely of sources. I was taking a literature course in college and we were studying the elements of story: setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.

The odd thought occurred to me while I was studying that we didn't know where the elements of story come from. I mean, we might have a guy's name who thought of them, but we don't know why they exist. I started wondering why the heart and mind responded to this specific formula when it came to telling stories. So I broke it down. Setting: That was easy; every story has a setting. My setting is America, on earth. I understand setting because I experience setting. I am sitting in a room, in a house, I have other characters living in this house with me, that sort of thing. The reason I my heart understood setting was because I experienced setting.

But then there was conflict. Every good story has conflict in it. Some conflict is internal, some is external, but if you want to write a novel that sells, you have to have conflict. We understand conflict because we experience conflict, right? But where does conflict come from? Why do we experience conflict in our lives? This helped me a great deal in accepting the idea of original sin and the birth of conflict. The rebellion against God explained why humans experienced conflict in their lives, and nobody knows of any explanation other than this. This last point was crucial. I felt like I was having an epiphany. Without the Christian explanation of original sin, the seemingly silly story about Adam and Eve and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there was no explanation of conflict. At all. Now some people process the account of original sin in the book of Genesis as metaphor, as symbolism for something else that happened; but whether you take it metaphorically or literally, this serves as an adequate explanation of the human struggle that every person experiences: loneliness, crying yourself to sleep at night, addiction, pride, war, and self-addiction. The heart responds to conflict within story, I began to think, because there is some great conflict in the universe with which we are interacting, even if it is only in the subconscious. If we were not experiencing some sort of conflict in our lives, our hearts would have no response to conflict in books or film. The idea of conflict, of having tension, suspense or an enemy, would make no sense to us. But these things do make sense. We understand these elements because we experience them. As much as I did not want to admit it, Christian spirituality explained why.

And then the element of story known as climax. Every good story has a climax. Climax is where a point of decision determines the end of the story. Now this was starting to scare me a little bit. If the human heart uses the tools of reality to create elements of story, and the human heart responds to climax in the structure of story, this means that climax, or point of decision, could very well be something that exists in the universe. What I mean is that there is a decision the human heart needs to make. The elements of story began to parallel my understanding of Christian spirituality. Christianity offered a decision, a climax. It also offered a good and a bad resolution. In part, our decisions were instrumental to the way our story turned out.

Now this was spooky because for thousands of years big-haired preachers have talked about the idea that we need to make a decision, to follow or reject Christ. They would offer

these ideas as a sort of magical solution to the dilemma of life. I had always hated hearing about it because it seemed so entirely unfashionable a thing to believe, but it did explain things. Maybe these unfashionable ideas were pointing at something mystical and true. And, perhaps, I was judging the idea, not by its merit, but by the fashionable or unfashionable delivery of the message.

...

A long time ago I went to a concert with my friend Rebecca. Rebecca can sing better than anybody I've ever heard sing. I heard this folksinger was coming to town, and I thought she might like to see him because she was a singer too. The tickets were twenty bucks, which is a lot to pay if you're not on a date. Between songs, though, he told a story that helped me resolve some things about God. The story was about his friend who is a Navy SEAL. He told it like it was true, so I guess it was true, although it could have been a lie.

The folksinger said his friend was performing a covert operation, freeing hostages from a building in some dark part of the world. His friend's team flew in by helicopter, made their way to the compound and stormed into the room where the hostages had been imprisoned for months. The room, the folksinger said, was filthy and dark. The hostages were curled up in a corner, terrified. When the SEALs entered the room they heard the gasps of the hostages. They stood at the door and called to the prisoners, telling them they were Americans. The SEALs asked the hostages to follow them, but the hostages wouldn't. They sat there on the floor and hid their eyes in fear. They were not of healthy mind and didn't believe their rescuers were really Americans.

The SEALs stood there, not knowing what to do. They couldn't possibly carry everybody out. One of the SEALs, the folksinger's friend, got an idea. He put down his weapon, took off his helmet, and curled up tightly next to the other hostages, getting so close his body was touching some of theirs. He softened the look on his face and put his arms around them. He was trying to show them he was one of them. None of the prison guards would have done this. He stayed there for a little while until some of the hostages started to look at him, finally meeting his eyes. The Navy SEAL whispered that they were Americans and were there to rescue them. Will you follow us? he said. The hero stood to his feet and one of the hostages did the same, then another, until all of them were willing to go. The story ends with all the hostages safe on an American aircraft carrier.

I never liked it when the preachers said we had to follow Jesus. Sometimes they would make Him sound angry. But I liked the story the folksinger told. I liked the idea of Jesus becoming man, so that we would be able to trust Him, and I like that he healed people and loved them and cared deeply about how people were feeling.

When I understood that the decision to follow Jesus was very much like the decision the hostages had to make to follow their rescuer, I knew then that I needed to decide whether or not I would follow Him. The decision was simple once I asked myself, Is Jesus the son of God, are we being held captive in a world run by Satan, a world filled with brokenness, and do I believe Jesus can rescue me from this condition?

If life had a climax, which it must in order for the element of climax to be mirrored in story, then Christian spirituality was offering a climax. It was offering a decision.

The last element of story is resolution. Christian spirituality offered a resolution, the resolution of forgiveness and a home in the afterlife. Again, it all sounded so very witless to me, but by this time I wanted desperately to believe it. It felt as though my soul were designed to live the story Christian spirituality was telling. I felt like my soul wanted to be forgiven. I wanted the resolution God was offering.

And there it was: setting, conflict, climax, and resolution. As silly as it seemed, it met the requirements of the heart and it matched the facts of reality. It felt more than true, it felt meaningful. I was starting to believe I was a character in a greater story, which is why the elements of story made sense in the first place.

The magical proposition of the gospel, once free from the clasps of fairy tale, was very adult to me, very gritty like something from Hemingway or Steinbeck, like something with copious amounts of sex and blood. Christian spirituality was not a children's story. It wasn't cute or neat. It was mystical and odd and clean, and it was reaching into dirty. There was wonder in it and enchantment.

○ ○ ○

Everybody at Reed was telling me something was wrong with Laura. They said she was depressed or something. I ran into her at a lecture in Vollum Lounge, which is beautiful like a museum with its tall white walls. Laura sat in front of me, and when the lecture was over

she didn't leave. Neither did I. I didn't want to bother her, but I could tell she was sad about something.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I am not good." She turned to face me. I could see in her eyes she had spent the morning crying.

"What is wrong?"

"Everything."

"Boy stuff?" I asked.

"No."

"School stuff?" I asked.

"No."

"God stuff?"

Laura just looked at me. Her eyes were sore and moist. "I guess so, Don. I don't know."

"Can you explain any of it? The way you feel."

"I feel like my life is a mess. I can't explain it. It's just a mess."

"I see," I said.

"Don, I just want to confess. I have done terrible things. Can I confess to you?"

"I don't think confessing to me is going to do you any good." As I said it Laura wiped her eyes with her fingers.

"I feel like He is after me, Don."

"Who is after you?" I asked.

"God."

"I think that is very beautiful, Laura. And I believe you. I believe God wants you."

"I feel like He is after me." She repeated.

"What do you think He wants?"

"I don't know. I can't do this, Don. You don't understand. I can't do this."

"Can't do what, Laura?"

"Be a Christian."

"Why can't you be a Christian?"

Laura didn't say anything. She just looked at me and rolled her tired eyes. She dropped her hands into her lap with a sigh. "I wish I could read you my journal," she said, looking blankly at the wall. "There is this part of me that wants to believe. I wrote about it in my journal. My family believes, Don. I feel as though I need to believe. Like I am going to die if I don't believe. But it is all so stupid. So completely stupid."

"Laura, why is it that you hang out with the Christians on campus?"

"I don't know. I guess I am just curious." She wiped her eye again. "You're not dumb, I don't think. I just don't understand how you can believe this stuff."

"I don't either, really," I told her. "But I believe in God, Laura. There is something inside me that causes me to believe. And now I believe God is after you, that God wants you to believe too."

"What do you mean?" she asked, dropping her hands in her lap and sighing once again.

"I mean the idea that you want to confess. I think that God is wanting a relationship with you and that starts by confessing directly to Him. He is offering forgiveness."

"You are not making this easy, Don. I don't exactly believe I need a God to forgive me of anything."

"I know. But that is what I believe is happening. Perhaps you can see it as an act of social justice. The entire world is falling apart because nobody will admit they are wrong. But by asking God to forgive you, you are willing to own your own crap."

Laura sat silent for a while. She sort of mumbled under her breath. "I can't, Don. It isn't a decision. It isn't something you decide."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't get there. I can't just say it without meaning it." She was getting very frustrated. "I can't do it. It would be like, say, trying to fall in love with somebody, or trying to convince yourself that your favorite food is pancakes. You don't decide those things, they just happen to you. If God is real, He needs to happen to me."

"That is true. But don't panic. It's okay. God brought you this far, Laura; He will bring you the rest of the way. It may take time."

"But this hurts," she said. "I want to believe, but I can't. I hate this!"

○ ○ ○

I crawled out of bed a few days later and cracked open the Bible on my desk. I didn't feel like reading, honestly, so I turned on my computer and fidgeted with a Sim City town I had been working on. I checked my e-mail and noticed one from Laura. She had sent it in the early hours of the morning. The subject read: *So, anyway, about all of that stuff* . . .

Dearest Friend Don,

I read through the book of Matthew this evening. I was up all night. I couldn't stop reading so I read through Mark. This Jesus of yours is either a madman or the Son of God. Somewhere in the middle of Mark I realized He was the Son of God. I suppose this makes me a Christian. I feel much better now. Come to campus tonight and let's get coffee.

Much love,

Laura

○ ○ ○

When I moved downtown to attend Imago-Dei, the church Rick started, he was pretty serious about loving people regardless of whether they considered Jesus the Son of God or not, and Rick wanted to love them because they were either hungry, thirsty, or lonely. The human struggle bothered Rick, as if something was broken in the world and we were supposed to hold our palms against the wound. He didn't really see evangelism, or whatever you want to call it, as a target on a wall in which the goal is to get people to agree with us about the meaning of life. He saw evangelism as reaching a felt need. I thought this was beautiful and frightening. I thought it was beautiful because I had this same need; I mean, I really knew I needed Jesus like I need water or food, and yet it was frightening because Christianity is so stupid to so much of our culture, and I absolutely hate bothering people about this stuff.

So much of me believes strongly in letting everybody live their own lives, and when I share my faith I feel like a network marketing guy trying to build my down line.

Some of my friends who aren't Christians think that Christians are insistent and demanding and intruding, but that isn't the case. Those folks are the squeaky wheel. Most Christians have enormous respect for the space and freedom of others; it is only that they have found a joy in Jesus they want to share. There is the tension.

In a recent radio interview I was sternly asked by the host, who did not consider himself a Christian, to defend Christianity. I told him that I couldn't do it, and moreover, that I didn't want to do defend the term. He asked me if I was a Christian and I told him yes. "Then why don't you want to defend Christianity?" he asked, confused. I told him I no longer knew what the term meant. Of the hundreds of thousands of people listening to his show that day, some of them had terrible experiences with Christianity, they may have been yelled at by a teacher in a Christian school, abused by a minister, or browbeaten by a Christian parent. To them, the term *Christianity* meant something that no Christian I know would defend. By fortifying the term, I am only making them more and more angry. I won't do it. Stop ten people on the street and ask them what they think of when they hear the word *Christianity* and they will give you ten different answers. How can I defend a term that means ten different things to ten different people? I told the radio show host that I would rather talk about Jesus and how I came to believe that Jesus exists and that he likes me. The host looked back at me with tears in his eyes. When we were done, he asked me if we could go get lunch together. He told me how much he didn't like Christianity but how he had always wanted to believe Jesus was the son of God.



After I got Laura's e-mail in which she told me she had become a Christian, I just about lost it with excitement. I felt like a South African the day they let Mandela out of prison. I called her and asked her to coffee at Palio. I picked her up in Eliot Circle at Reed and she was smiling and full of energy. She said we had much to talk about, very much to talk about. At Palio, we sat in the booth at the back, and even though Laura had been my close friend, I felt like I had never met this woman. She squirmed in her seat as she talked with confidence

about her love for Jesus. I sat there amazed because it is true. People do come to know Jesus. This crazy thing really happens. It isn't just me.

...

I was watching BET one night and they were interviewing a man about jazz music. He said jazz music was invented by the first generation out of slavery. I thought that was beautiful because, while it is music, it is very hard to put on paper; it is so much more a language of the soul. It is as if the soul is saying something, something about freedom. I think Christian spirituality is like jazz music. I think loving Jesus is something you feel. I think it is something very difficult to get on paper. But it is no less real, no less meaningful, no less beautiful.

The first generation out of slavery invented jazz music. It is a music birthed out of freedom. And that is the closest thing I know to Christian spirituality. A music birthed out of freedom. Everybody sings their song the way they feel it, everybody closes their eyes and lifts up their hands.

...

I want Jesus to happen to you the way He happened to Laura at Reed, the way He happened to Penny in France, the way He happened to me in Texas. I want you to know Jesus too. This book is about the songs my friends and I are singing. This is what God is doing in our lives. But what song will you sing when your soul gets set free? I think it will be something true and beautiful. If you haven't done it in a while, pray and talk to Jesus. Ask Him to become real to you. Ask Him to forgive you of self-addiction, ask Him to put a song in your heart. I can't think of anything better that could happen to you than this. Much love to you and thanks for listening to us sing.