

April 26, 2026  
Fourth Sunday After Easter  
Psalm 116: 1-4, 12-19

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*The Four-Letter Word for God*

Let me say from the start that I know nothing about jazz but was raised in a household infatuated with it. During the first world war my grandparents in northern England took in American soldiers as many families did. Into the dour landscape of a country at war, woefully bereft of young men as they'd all been sent to the front, arrived young American men. My father who was at the time between six and ten years-old, fell for them, for their country and for the music they whistled in the bath. His infatuation with jazz lasted his whole life.

My father was a reporter; among other things, he was the Chief American Correspondent for the *Guardian* for twenty-five years and also had a weekly radio broadcast called *Letter From America* that ran for 58 years. *Letter From America* remains the world's longest running radio program in history. It was broadcast to more than 50 countries but not to the US, naturally. We joked, he and I, that since both of us were doing weekly talks, we ought to share. This morning I'm doing just that.

But rather than paraphrase some of the stories he told, in a moment I'll just read a couple of them in his own words, as he tells them better than I ever could. Though he's been gone 22 years, I can imagine all too vividly he's reprove if I get it wrong.

The connection between church and faith and jazz was pretty hard-wired from the beginning. So many of the great early jazz musicians got their musical start in church, among them Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

As an article in *Christianity Today* noted, "For Louis Armstrong, the connection was there from the very beginning, when he learned to sing in his mother's Sanctified church. 'The whole 'Congregation would be "Wailing—'Singing like 'mad and 'sound so 'beautiful,'" he wrote with his characteristic expressive, idiosyncratic punctuation. 'I'd have myself a 'Ball in 'Church, *especially* when those 'Sisters 'would get 'So 'Carried away while 'Rev' would be 'right in the 'Middle of his 'Sermon. 'Man those 'Church 'Sisters would 'begin 'Shouting 'So—until their 'petticoats would 'falloff. ... My heart went into every hymn I sang,' he added. 'I am still a great believer and I go to church whenever I get the chance.'" *Christianity Today*, May 2024.

Here is a story my father told from a time when he was in college.

“A few years ago – maybe five, ten – anyway it was in the summer of 1931, I ordered a record from the local gramophone shop and it took an awful long time to be delivered. When at last it did arrive, I hustled it on to the turntable. My mother was intrigued by its title, which she thought odd, not to say gruesome. It was called the “St James Infirmary.” It began with a shattering chord and a trumpet taking off, like a supersonic jet.

Long before it was over I took it off the machine, because I saw that my mother was sitting there, in tears. She was not moved by the beauty of the piece or the artistry of the mad trumpeter. She was frightened by it, and aghast that her son could listen to this jungle band without a blush. To her it was, in those remote days, as if today a mother had seen her son nonchalantly take out a needle and give himself a shot of heroin.

I don't suppose there is a generation left now that hates jazz simply as such. . . In my youth it was the normal thing for people over 50 to be either frightened of jazz or contemptuous of it. Old soldiers, doctors, schoolmasters and other Establishment figures made a point of equating the word "jazz" with the adjective “decadent”. And English magistrates rarely missed an opportunity to ascribe petty thievery and illegitimate births to the fearful influence of the saxophone.

Now my mother was too simple, too unpretentious, a person, to be contemptuous of jazz – it simply scared the wits out of her. . . I took the record back to college and never again bootlegged it into our house.”

When Duke Ellington died in May of 1974, my father reported on his legacy and on his memorial service that was held at St. John the Divine in New York City with twelve thousand mourners in attendance.

“Edward Kennedy Ellington, identified around the world more immediately than any member of any royal family as the Duke. . . was the son of a butler, but, like other great jazzmen, like Fatha Hines and Fats Waller, who were the sons of parsons or church organists, young Ellington was as a little boy lifted up on to a piano stool and put to the chore of practice, which through the late 19th and early 20th Century afflicted so many generations of little boys both white and black.

What is common to so many men who were to become great jazz pianists is that they started very young and they stayed at it through their childhood and their teens and all their lives. I remember oh 10, 15 years ago, running into an old and engaging jazzman, who was employed

then towards the end of his life in a rather poky, smoky little jazz joint in San Francisco. Like all the good men of his trade, his ups and downs were dictated by the fickleness of fashions in music. It was a lean year and he was playing in a small band with Earl Fatha Hines who was also at possibly the lowest ebb of his popular acclaim.

Well Muggsy Spanier had left his trumpet in this dreadful nightclub but found he needed it on his night off for some impromptu gig or other, so he had to go into the nightclub the next morning, always a depressing experience what with the reek of stale air and spilled alcohol and the lights turned down to a maintenance bulb or two.

He told me that one of the unforgettable shocks of his life was going in there – it was, appropriately, called the Hangover Club – coming in from the bone-white sunlight into the smelly Stygian cave and hearing the most unlikely music coming from the piano, and squinting through the dark and seeing Fatha Hines sitting there, as apparently he did for two or three hours every morning, practicing not the blues or Rosetta or Honeysuckle Rose, but the piano concertos of Mozart and Beethoven. And as Spanier came in, he looked up and said, “Just keeping the fingers loose.”

To be the best, it’s a sad thing most of us amateurs discover, you have to do this every day. I think it was Paganini who said, “If I go a week without practice, the audience notices it. If I go a day without practice, I notice it.”

Well this digression, you may not believe, is very relevant to the character and the mastery of Duke Ellington. I knew all the records of his first great period when I was in college, from say 1927 through 1932 or '3, and when I first arrived in New York I beat it up to the Cotton Club to see the great man in the flesh – long before, I regret to say, I visited the home of George Washington or even Grant’s Tomb.

But apart from a nodding acquaintance in nightclubs and becoming known to him no doubt as one of those regular nuisances who request this number or that, I didn’t meet Ellington alone, by appointment so to speak, until it must have been the very end of the second war. I went up to his apartment on the swankier side of Harlem – there is such a neighborhood – where the rare blacks who had made it, one way or another, had spacious apartments in large Victorian buildings looking out on a patch of greenery.

The date had been for two in the afternoon, and I now think that, in my mind’s eye, I must have expected the very dapper figure of the Duke to be seated in a Noel Coward dressing gown, deep in composition at a concert grand. For those were the days long before band leaders

got themselves up in gold lame and sequins. The big band leaders wore dinner jackets, but the Duke always wore white tie and tails and was as sleek as a seal.

Well, I was shown into a comfortable, rambling apartment with a big living room that had evidently seen a little strenuous drinking the night before. Off from the living room was a bedroom with a large bed, rumped and unmade. And that evidently gave on to a bathroom because out of it emerged what I first took to be some swami in the wrong country. It was the Duke, naked except for a pair of undershorts and a bath towel woven around his head. He came in, groaning slightly and saying to himself “Man!” And then his man came in, a coloured butler, and they went into the knotty question of what would be the right breakfast that might be at once tasty and also medicinal. It was agreed on, and the Duke turned and said, “Now” – meaning what’s your business at this unholy hour of two in the afternoon? Until the breakfast arrived (and he went at it like a marooned mountaineer) he was casual, almost (I was afraid) bored. What I’d come to propose was that he might like to do a long broadcast session with his big band – this, remember, was 1945 or '6, the peak period of his big band – not in concert, as we now say, but in rehearsal. He shot a suspicious glare at me as if I’d suggested recording him doing five-finger exercises.”

Let me interject that they did do the recording and it was a great success.

“The Duke was an elegant and articulate man and strangely apart from the troubles in the recent turmoil of his race – not because he was ever indifferent or afraid. He was in his mature and later years a devout and supremely spontaneous human being who simply assumed that all men of all colours are brothers. All the problems of prejudice and condescension and tension between black and white simply dissolved in the presence of a man that even an incurable bigot recognized as a man of unassailable natural dignity. He had a childlike side, which we ought to remember is recommended in the New Testament for entry into the kingdom of heaven. He was very sick indeed in the last three months. He knew, but he kept it to himself, that he had cancer of both lungs; and a week or two before the end, he sent out what looked like Christmas cards to hundreds of friends and acquaintances. They were a greeting. On a field of blue was a cross made up of two words – one vertical and one horizontal – and they were joined by the letter ‘O’. The vertical word was ‘love’, and the horizontal word was ‘God’. So he died as he lived, an elegant and dignified and greatly gifted man.” (May 31, 1974)

Ellington said that God was a three-letter word for Love and Love was the four-letter word for God.

You may have noticed that I've entirely neglected to tie this message to the scripture. Psalm 116's great thanksgiving for being saved, for mercy rendered, may just be jazz's message as well. Born in the melting pot of New Orleans in the turn of the twentieth century, jazz drew together African and European influences. It acknowledged the struggles the cultures had faced and united them in what Wynton Marsalis would later call the three fundamental elements of jazz: improvisation, swing and blues. In other words, individual artistry and freedom, coordination, balance and community and optimism in the face of adversity.

Which, if you stop to think about it, was pretty much the tune that Jesus hummed as well.

Grace and Peace.