

A Closer Walk with Thee

by Fr. Frank Coco, SJ

A Jesuit's priestly and musical vocations made beautiful music.

He directed retreats and he taught high school for years. He also played the clarinet. Fr. Frank Coco, SJ, who died in 2006, was a regular fixture on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, sitting in on sessions and performances of some of that city's great musicians, including Al Hirt, Pete Fountain, and Ronnie Kole.

This musician-priest had a calling that "enabled him to connect with and minister to many people whom few others could have reached. He counseled troubled members of the bands, gave a sympathetic ear to sad bar patrons on occasion, and is said to have heard confessions in an out-of-the-way booth at 2 in the morning."

So reads the jacket copy on Coco's autobiography, *Blessed Be Jazz*, from which these excerpts come.

"My good buddy, Father Coco," is how legendary clarinetist Pete Fountain (on left) would introduce fellow clarinetist Fr. Frank Coco, SJ (on right), when the latter sat in on sessions at Fountain's club in New Orleans.

Got your horn with you, Father?"
"Just happen to have it with me."
"Come on up and play a couple of numbers with us, Father . . . Let's have a good hand for Father Coco. He's a Jesuit priest. Where else but in New Orleans?"

The looks of curiosity, of incredulity, never cease to amuse me. I suspect they don't expect very much and are prepared to give polite applause. I once overheard some clear-cut skepticism as I passed the table of a group of beer-drinking Texans.

"What the hell is this?"

When I left the bandstand after playing a few numbers, I made a point of walking by their table. One man was generous in his compliments, so I struck up a conversation.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Midland, Texas."

"Don't you have anything like this in Midland, Texas?"

"Reverend, there ain't a damn thing in Midland, Texas."

"Except," I said, "a bunch of dirty old oil wells."

"Yeah, we got them all right."





I think I made a believer out of him, so to speak.

Speaking of ministry, I find it easy to read the mental process that sometimes brings patrons, employees and musicians to me with their fears, confusions and hurts. *Father is really human. Why, he plays jazz on the clarinet and really enjoys it. Seems like a regular fellow.* First, there is instant identification as a priest. Then, the drawbridge between me and them, in the form of the happy music that is jazz, drops, and they feel welcome to come across with their burdens and pains and heartaches.

I have had many opportunities to heal and help that would never have presented themselves were it not for my “jazz ministry.”

Blessed be jazz!

It was mid-summer in the Court Tavern, the lounge of The Court of Two Sisters. This French Quarter restaurant with two entrances, one on Royal Street and the other on Bourbon Street, has as lovely a patio as you will see anywhere. The lounge is one step off Bourbon Street, and its front door is left open for the edification of the passers-by.

Jim McNelley, whom I had never met or even seen before, stopped, looked in, liked what he was seeing and hearing, and came in. I happened to be on the bandstand doing my usual two or three solos per set. I bowed to the applause, left the bandstand, and sat down. I was sitting alone, as was often the case. Jim came to my table.

“Do you mind if I sit with you?” Jim asked.

“Not at all. I’m by myself.”

“Are you really a priest?”

I pointed to my Roman collar.

“Yes. This is for real. Jazz is my hobby. I have an open invitation to sit in with any number of bands in this area.”

“I think you missed your calling,” Jim offered.

I hear that often, and I have a standard answer.

“No, I have two callings, jazz and the priesthood.”

Sometimes I add my standing one-liner:

“I’m a jazz musician but I moonlight as a priest.”

Ifirmly believe that priestly presence in any milieu can have sacramental value. In that sense I do not think a priest is ever off duty. And in the context of ministerial presence, opportunities will come for direct ministry. I am always ready and willing to seize them. Two such opportunities, among many, stand out. I cherish them. One concerned Lou Sino.

It was always exciting to be present when my good friend Lou Sino was performing. He was a remarkable trombonist, a vigorous jazz vocalist, who jumped and quivered as he sang. A supreme showman, his trademark was a pyrotechnic rendition of “Tiger Rag.” I had heard of Lou during his years with Louie Prima’s band. I was delighted to learn that Lou had quit the road and decided

to come home. I discovered him at a little club in New Orleans called The Bistro, on Tulane Avenue, just a few blocks from Jesuit High, where I was teaching at that time. I walked over there one evening to hear him and, as ever, hoping to sit in.

Lou lived up to his advanced billing. I was enthralled. I discovered, too, that night a plus in the person of Rene Netto, one of the very best reed men in New Orleans. He



Coco was a veteran of Pete Fountain’s Half-Fast Walking Club, a fixture for years at Mardi Gras. Fountain’s wife Beverly and the wives of other musicians came up with the name. “They felt we were completely devoid of precision or discipline—which was . . . a fairly accurate assessment,” Coco wrote.

excels on tenor sax, and is very capable on clarinet and flute.

Before that evening at The Bistro was over, I was rejoicing that I had discovered a musical bonanza right in my own back yard.

Someone in the band knew me and introduced me to Lou Sino between sets. He obligingly let me sit in that evening and many evenings thereafter both at The Bistro and in half a dozen other clubs in the New Orleans area.

My fondest memories of Lou and his band came a

few years later, in the early '70s, when he was alternating nightly with The Ronnie Kole Trio at the Royal Sonesta Hotel in the French Quarter. The tourist trade was brisk in those prosperous days. Economy Hall, located in the basement of the Royal Sonesta, was often packed.

It was at Economy Hall, between sets, that a door opened on an opportunity for priestly ministry that brought some consolation into the married life of Lou and Pat Sino. Lou made his request casually.

"Father, I've got to talk to you about something when we finish up tonight."

"Sure, Lou. Be glad to," I said.

It was after hours, about 1 A.M., when we sat down to talk.

"My wife and I are Catholics, and we want to get back to the practice of our religion," he began.

It was a familiar story: two young people, in love, impatient, anxious to get married, by-passing the requirements and conditions of the Church, short-cutting their way to the office of the Justice of the Peace.

"We've been wanting to get our marriage blessed in the Church and get back to practicing our religion. We just haven't got around to it yet," he explained.

"You say you are both Catholics?"

"Yes."

"Had either of you been married before?" (*The question.*)

"No."

I know I breathed a sigh of relief.

"No problem then," I said. "I can get this fixed up for you in no time. What's your parish church?"

He did not know.

"I haven't been going to church much, but I want to get back to it."

Within a week the paperwork was done and arrangements were made. On a Saturday afternoon five persons stood in front of rows of empty pews, before the altar of St. Cletus Church in Gretna. The lifetime commitment that Lou and Pat had made years before was supplemented by the long-missing, beautiful ceremony in the Church.

We were only five. I officiated. The pastor and a friend of Pat's were the witnesses. Pat cried. Then we all went into the rectory, signed some papers, and had a celebratory drink. That night, I was at Economy Hall, and Lou—who had few inhibitions—thanked me publicly.

"Father married Pat and me this afternoon. A honeymoon with five kids along is going to be hell!" Lou announced.

Lou re-discovered his Catholic faith and later the Bible. In his last years he was reading and reflecting on the Scripture—which led to our between-sets discussions on the occasions that I was able to come to hear and play with his band before his untimely death.



Once I had the unexpected privilege of sitting in with the late, great Zoot Sims. Zoot was a renowned tenor saxophone player, who, when I met him in New Orleans during a run at the Hyatt-Regency Hotel, was also playing a lot of first-rate soprano sax.

Although I brought my clarinet with me to the Hyatt (just in case) I really did not expect to be invited to sit in. Even before I sat down, however, I felt I had a chance, because I noticed that Zoot was using a local drummer, my good friend Freddie Kohlman. Freddie knows I love to play, and I knew he would put in a good word for me. Musicians vary greatly in their willingness to let players, known or unknown, sit in with their bands.

Zoot proved to be gracious, for after one set Freddie came to my table to chat and to inform me that Zoot was going to call me up. As the second set got underway, I assembled my clarinet, moistened my reed and was at the ready.

When I had finished playing "Just A Closer Walk," I got a taste of Zoot's wry humor. He looked up from his chair—Zoot sat while he played—and said:

"That's nice. Do you know anything else?"

I laughed.

"A couple more tunes. Let's do 'Willow, Weep For Me.'"

I remember Zoot doing some marvelous choruses on "Willow" that night. Before I left the bandstand he said:

"I like some of the things you did on that number."

Then he remarked that he was "always learning," and I thought: Learning? From me?

What I remember most vividly about that pleasant evening is a remark that came out of the audience, near the bandstand, when we had finished playing "Closer Walk."

"You going to preach us a sermon now, Reverend?" someone asked.

In a sudden flash of inspiration, I fired back:

"I just did." ❏



Fr. Coco's book, *Blessed Be Jazz*, is available from Acadian House Publishing, www.acadianhouse.com 800-850-8851. CDs of Fr. Coco's music are available from the New Orleans Province of the Society of Jesus, 504-571-1055, www.norprov.org.