

Joyful noise

By Dave Becker
STAFF WRITER

IT'S early Sunday afternoon, about midway through worship services at the small San Francisco church, and the congregation is working through the Nicene Creed.

It's hard to recognize the centuries-old confession of faith at first, however. Saxophone bursts dart through the words, illuminating and emphasizing key passages. A pianist, drummer and bass player form the rhythmic underpinning for the horn solo and the recitation, while a few members of the congregation join in on congas.

The creed, a rote statement of belief in many other churches, is a joyous celebration of Christian belief and triumph here. The fervent, jazz-based playing of church leaders and members transforms the ancient dogma.

Welcome to St. John's African Orthodox Church, a unique institution both in the spheres of religion and music.

Blending traditional elements of Christian worship and belief with a heavy emphasis on the works of jazz legend John Coltrane, the church combines familiar elements in a completely unfamiliar way. Think of a cross be-

tween a charismatic Baptist church and Yoshi's Nitespot on a good night, and you begin to get the idea.

"The emphasis here is on music and spontaneity," says Bishop Franzo W. King, founder of the church, which is on Divisadero near Haight Street. "The idea is to uplift people and let them know there's meaning to their lives.

"We work on the belief that the healing power in music is the swiftest and the surest way to God. It's the best medicine for awakening the soul."

The church grew out of a Wednesday night prayer circle King, a saxophonist, started in the mid-1960s. King and other musicians and spiritual seekers would sit around and discuss musical and religious matters. Conversation often focused on Coltrane, whose works assumed an increasingly spiritual bent during the later years of his life.

St. John's was organized in 1968, two years after the musician died at the age of 40, and was incorporated in February 1969, with the seminary-trained King as its head and a theology that mixed traditional Christianity with Sufi mysticism and lots of jazz. The

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church proclaimed Coltrane a saint, adapting his music as a principle part of worship.

"In a lot of ways, this church is an extension of the spirituality I experienced when I heard and saw John Coltrane perform" in 1965, King says. "I felt I had been baptized in sound.

"I feel that Coltrane was very unique in his calling; he was compelled by the Holy Spirit himself. God was first for him, not an afterthought. If you study what he wrote, it's clear his music was being played for God. It was of God, from God and for God."

The church's services and doctrines have evolved over the years, most dramatically in 1982, when it became affiliated with the African Orthodox Church, a small denomination with about a dozen churches scattered across Africa and the United States. The fundamental principles and goals of St. John's have remained the same, however.

"We've always been about Jesus, as metaphysical as we might get about it," says King. "The music is a tool. It's the purity of John Coltrane's music that prepares people to deal with a relationship with God."

The church has slowly grown from the handful of prayer circle participants to a regular membership of a few hundred. Prospective members are drawn in by a number of factors, the most significant being the music.

Robert James Haven, an associate minister at the church, plays saxophone in the church and also in a half-dozen jazz and dance groups in the Bay Area. He says there's something fundamentally different about performing at the church.

"I feel the music is somehow on a higher level here," he says. "I still play in clubs all the time, and I very seldom have the same experience, where people are really listening and feeling the music.

"The spectator relationship with the audience is broken down somewhat in the church, because we encourage people to participate. And everyone's playing with a different purpose. There's still ego involved — these are musicians, after all — but the ego seems to be buried when it's going right."

The church, adds King, is one of the few places where music can be free from the commercial pressures and other interferences of nightclubs, concert halls and

Getting to the church

St. John's African Orthodox Church is at 351 Divisadero St., just off Haight Street, in San Francisco. Sunday services begin at 11:45 a.m. The small church fills up quickly, so arrive early if you want a place to sit. It can get pretty loud, too, so those with sensitive ears may want to protect them with earplugs.

A briefer informal vespers service takes place Wednesdays at 6 p.m.

Ohnedaruth, a jazz group comprised of church members and ministers, performs Coltrane's music periodically at area clubs and festivals. Upcoming shows include dates March 4 and 18 at Cafe Du Nord, 2170 Market St. in San Francisco.

For more information on the church or Ohnedaruth, call (415) 621-4054.

other traditional jazz venues.

Besides the music, the church's open and accepting atmosphere is a big drawing factor. The typical Sunday congregation is an even mixture of black and white, with some folks in traditional church attire and others looking as if they stopped in on the way to the punk club down the street.

"When people come and experience the music and different cultures and races being together in a joyful and prayerful atmosphere, I think that's what gets them to come back," says Sister Mary Deborah Williams, a church worker who hosts a radio program on Coltrane and the church (noon to 4 p.m. Tuesdays, on KPOO, 89.5 FM).

That atmosphere isn't an accident, either. King says his idea from the start was to have a joyful, non-judgmental and loving environment for worship.

"I like to think it's not intimidating in any sense," he says. "It seems like somehow we've been able to get out the message in a way where there's not such a hard line between the secular and the spiritual.

"In a lot of churches, anything to do with having fun is a sin. I grew up in a church where it was

wrong to dance. But I feel that if you use the words 'I'm saved,' there should be some happiness behind it."

Of course, not everybody understands or agrees with such notions. Several jazz publications have referred to the church as a "Coltrane cult," and services regularly attract tourists and other curiosity-seekers.

Williams, who fields many questions about the church as a result of her radio show, says it's fairly easy for her to satisfy such curiosity and explain to outsiders that the church is a solidly Christian enterprise.

"In a lot of ways, it's a very traditional church," she says. "The only thing that's really unusual is the music, and it's not hard to explain to people that this is another manifestation of the Holy Spirit."

"Maybe some people can't understand jazz in a church," adds Haven. "But if I can get someone to come to a service, I hardly ever feel I have to explain anything afterwards."

One reason most outsiders know little if anything about the church is its small, half-hidden location in a slowly gentrifying neighborhood.

Williams says the size and location of the space, which has been home to the church for nearly two decades, severely limits its work. The space is much too small to handle the crowds that come to worship Sundays, noise restrictions in the building limit the hours of services, and the location makes it difficult to expand community services, such as free meals for the homeless and youth counseling.

"I think I've grown past the point of frustration as far as the space problems," Williams says. "You learn to use whatever the Lord gives you to it's greatest fullness, but there could be so much more going on in the right place."

King says he's dreamed of a larger place for years, and would also love to establish a second church in the East Bay or Marin County to better serve the church's far-flung membership. Limited funds (the church relies entirely on individual donations even for its community programs) have kept such dreams at bay.

But King keeps the faith and recalls the message Coltrane wrote in the liner notes to his landmark album, "A Love Supreme" — "No road is an easy one, but they all go back to God."



John Coltrane

The man behind the saxophone

Who was John Coltrane?

Almost universally regarded as one of the most influential and talented performers in the history of jazz, the saxophonist was a virtuoso player, a strikingly original composer and a man devoted to spiritual pursuits.

Born in 1926, Coltrane began playing saxophone and clarinet at the age of 15 and spent the early years of his career working with rhythm-and-blues artists such as Earl Bostic and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson. The be-bop revolution drew him towards jazz, though, and he spent several years backing up Dizzy Gillespie and Johnny Hodges before embarking in 1955 on his most significant partnership, with trumpeter Miles Davis.

With Coltrane's help, Davis pushed jazz past the rigid structures of be-bop into the more free-form style of modal jazz. The two performers had a stormy relationship, though, as Davis often felt Coltrane

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was upstaging him.

In one famous exchange between the two, Coltrane explained that when he was caught up in a solo, he often didn't know how to stop. "Try taking the saxophone out of your mouth," Davis icily responded.

Coltrane collaborated with pianist and fellow jazz explorer The-

lonious Monk and backed up Davis on his landmark "Kind of Blue" album before focusing on his solo career in the 1960s.

A series of brilliant albums — "Ascension," "Giant Step," "A Love Supreme," "My Favorite Things" — documented Coltrane's deepening religious convictions and his stunning development as a player. The sax-

ophonist played with unprecedented speed and agility, often keeping two melodies going at once and fitting notes into dense, layered patterns that came to be known as "sheets of sound."

Coltrane died of liver failure at the age of 40, leaving behind a small but powerful body of work that continues to have a profound impact on musicians today.