

## A Catholic jazz artist explores sacred music

Retta Blaney | Sep. 14, 2009



Deanna Witkowski

### 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.

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

Early, I wake in the gloom,  
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 darkness 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 reimagined 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).*

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