

[Spirituality](#)



(Unsplash/Josh Sorenson)



by Stephen Copeland

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 23, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

I learned to listen at the Double Door Inn.

Many times I'd step into that ramshackle music venue in Charlotte, North Carolina, carrying the weight of all my overthinking, in need of some blues, jazz or soul to help me return to myself. To get back into my body. To reawaken my senses. To reconnect to that heart of mine I had constructed walls around. Time and again that house of rising sounds lifted my soul into what is real.

Ancient Celts had a name for spaces like this. They called them "thin places," where heaven bends down to kiss the earth. For me it's often music that courses through the terrain of thin places, inviting me to listen to that "one central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires, in order to find its true fulfillment," as [Thomas Merton once wrote](#). Powerful music, authentic spaces, *thin places*, help us tune our ears to truths rising from the core of reality.

Many nights in that old white house I found myself spellbound by a patron whom everyone called "Bobblehead Bill," a big-boned man in suspenders who danced in the most unnatural, freeing, beautiful way I had ever seen, his head rolling around on a swivel as he beamed uncontrollably.

How can I learn to listen like that? I thought.

At the Double Door Inn both the patrons and bands had a way of losing all inhibition, surrendering to the moment, to the experience, to the song, to the flow. In a world where everyone seemed to be chasing, achieving, claiming, attaining, doing, no one was performing at the Double Door Inn. They were *swimming*. They were *being*.

I embarked on a journey to find the language for my experiences at the Double Door Inn. Franciscanism helped me find the words for a kind of listening that I believe is vital to being a human being who is fully alive.



St. Francis of Assisi by Philip Fruytiers (1610-1666) (Artvee)

St. Francis of Assisi, God's troubadour, ventured through life as if each day was a divine album of inspired songs. His encounters were invitations to listen deeply, to harmonize his voice with the celestial chorus.

"Take nothing for your journey," Jesus once said. Francis took those words literally. Life for Francis was not a custom playlist — planned and predictable — it was a cosmic radio, and each song was an avenue of grace. Monotony? There was no such thing. Each song — each encounter, each moment — was new. Life for Francis was nonlinear like jazz, inviting him into improvisation yet to simultaneously trust he was held together by the whole, by the drumbeats of hearts formed by God. Where was each song taking him? He didn't know. But he trusted it was someplace true, good or beautiful.

St. Bonaventure expanded on this open and experiential spiritual posture in his metaphysics. At the core of reality for Bonaventure was a divine fountain of love and goodness— "fountain fullness" (*fontalis plenitudo*) — perpetually flowing *from* the dynamic relationship of the Trinity *into* creation. This dynamic is why some Franciscan theologians have theorized there were two incarnations in which the fountain gushed into our world — through creation ([Genesis 1](#)) and the word made flesh ([John 1](#)) — and continues to flow forth today. This cosmic fountain for Bonaventure left "vestiges" all around—divine thumbprints, remnants—for us to drink, swim within or float upon.

Bonaventure may have been an academic, but in the prologue of his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* he suggested that we experience this fountain in a way that went beyond mere intellectualizing: with our hearts, with our senses, so that our investigation is not without wonder, and our observation is not without joy.

In other words, stop reading this article and gaze into the eyes of a loved one; savor your beer; talk to a tree. To intellectualize a song is to cheapen it. The jazz trio of the Trinity plays (not performs) a song for us to receive as listeners, as collaborators, as improvisors.

Stop reading this article and gaze into the eyes of a loved one; savor your beer; talk to a tree.

[Tweet this](#)

Francis' life was its own song. In the last year of his life — when he was blind and ill — he composed his famous "Canticle of the Creatures." Not even his fading senses and dying body could muffle the song in his heart. And now it invites us all into the

dance.

Songs invite us to receive them as the gifts they are; to encounter them rather than project our own meaning upon them. Art is meant to be experienced rather than explained; and life is art. As Merton once wrote about a Kentucky rainstorm, "It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen."

For Franciscan philosopher John Duns Scotus, flowing from the fountain was not a formula for salvation (he refuted St. Anselm's theory of atonement) but rather infinite diversity. Scotus' notion of *haecceity*, or "thisness," invites us to experience (often through surrender) the beautiful particularity of the song.

Advertisement

Might a song on the radio that takes us back to high school, or a hymn we've sung countless times at Mass, or a saxophonist's solo in an obscure blues bar, be its own divine incarnation, its own diverse, particular expression of the ever-flowing fountain? To quote T.S. Eliot, we give ourselves permission to enter the song and "know the place for the first time."

To take this further, might the unexpected — that person we've judged, the monotonous drive to the office — become its own song?

All this goes back to Francis. The Poverello experienced this particularity in the most unassuming places. In the embrace of lepers, whom society had deemed dirty and untouchable. [In his friendship with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil](#), whom the church had waged war against through the Crusades. Otherness, for Francis, did not lead him to turn his head or cover his ears; it was a divine signal to *pay attention* to the song being played and learn how to dance within it. All of reality could be thin.

Might *one* line, *one* solo or *one* riff carry us away? Might the glassy eyes of the drummer, the sweat of the singer who is leaving it all on the stage (kenosis), or the unorthodox dancing of a man in suspenders acquaint us with the beauty of humanity, these conduits of the fountain? As a jazz saxophonist at the Double Door Inn once said to me, "Music pulls me deeper into being." The key, I think, is to first open the ears of our heart.

[Related:](#) [Four Franciscan practices to help us 'see differently'](#)

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: Listening with Franciscan ears.