



Churchgoers participate during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

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It's a beautiful Sunday morning and three longtime professional musicians are only minutes away from a gig.

Only this time, drummer Paul Testa, 64; pianist Ron Simone, in his 70s; and bassist Dick Jones, 76, are ready to go "onstage" at The Lakes Lutheran Church.

Jazz Sunday is presented once a month at Lakes Lutheran and the idea has proven wildly popular as churches attempt to find new ways to attract parishioners. On this particular day, The Lakes Lutheran Church is celebrating its 25th anniversary, so the mood is especially festive.

"It's not a concert," explained Testa, who has been playing the drums in Las Vegas professionally for about 35 years. "Instead, it's a jazz interlude that always has a religious-based psalm.

"The rest is not rocket science. We're simply taking hymns and playing them in a way so that the congregation can sing to them."

The Lakes Lutheran Jazz Trio is back by popular demand and everyone — including the musicians — is having fun.

In attempting to break the mold of traditional church music, many houses of worship have moved to live music that is different from the norm. Started three years ago, Jazz Sunday has hit the right note in its own way at Lakes Lutheran.

The church was created following the construction of the Lakes master planned community, built by developers Al and Mart Collins in the 1980s. When the growth hit what was then the extreme west end of the valley, The Lakes Lutheran Church was also born.

Bishop Steve Talmage of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, of which Lakes Lutheran is a member, remembered the old days of the church long before Testa, Jones and Simone modernized the service with their monthly jazz trio.

“It was back then that people were flocking to Las Vegas,” Talmage told the gathering. “Many people were trying to escape the cold of the East Coast and Las Vegas was exploding.”

Thus, the need for Lakes Lutheran, which has remained small and accommodating at the same time.

There is now a mellow beat to accompany the messages that are delivered. Almost like soothing dinner music, the songs fit the service perfectly.

Gary Koon, now retired, and his wife, Dorrell, returned to Lakes Lutheran after attending another church.

“The music is one of the reasons why we came back to the church,” Koon said.

Testa’s wife, Dee, added, “This (Jazz Sunday) is the happiest Sunday of the month.”

The last song provided plenty of smiles across the congregation: “Get Me to the Church on Time,” composed by Frederick Loewe with lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner for the 1956 musical “My Fair Lady.” Nearly six decades later, the trio at Lakes Lutheran is still generating positive feelings as parishioners find their way back to their vehicles.

The Louis Armstrong hit “When the Saints Go Marching In” has been played on occasion, too, in yet another example of how the music adds to the fun of attending The Lakes Lutheran Church.

“Ron goes to St. Joseph’s Catholic Church,” said Testa, who was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., before working in the live orchestra for “Lido de Paris” at the Stardust and moving on to play several other hotels including the Sahara.

“We definitely get a kick out of playing at the church,” Testa said. “There is an extra satisfaction for us. While there is an entertainment value to it, also very important is that the music helps

people connect to the word of God. That's the primary goal and everything else is icing on the cake."

The music is designed to complement the service.

"We're not delving too far from the original intent of the service," said Testa, who plays drums Mondays and Tuesdays at Circus Circus. "We all really enjoy adding a new innovation to the church."

Testa said he actually got the idea of adding jazz to a service from a former choir member who brought the three the music for a jazz Mass in Chicago.

"We did that about six or seven years ago," he said. "Then, we thought we might just have a trio and about three years ago, we started doing the one Sunday a month performance."

As a result, Sunday Jazz won its place on the church calendar.

"That's my way of giving back to the church," Testa explained, "and it's very heartwarming to see how popular the music has become."

The experience has been a great one for three talented senior citizens who collectively have lived in Las Vegas for more than 100 years. Were it not for the fact that the Musicians Union lost a battle in 1989 that replaced most of the live music with recorded music, the trio might still be performing somewhere else in Las Vegas.

"Ron and Dick used to work together in the relief band," Testa said. "Back when entertainment was seven nights a week, these guys would have to play with a three-hour-or-less rehearsal. They did that for more than 25 years, so they were the top guys playing for entertainers like Frank Sinatra."

The relief band concept started to disappear and when the musicians strike hit in 1989, many musicians suddenly had to reinvent themselves.

"Long after the strike, I worked with Rich Little at the Sahara for an extended time, but I had to also work a lounge for 13 years," Testa said.

But at Lakes Lutheran, the group is happy to attract a new audience of people who come to church to check out the music.

"What we're playing is certainly a bit more upbeat than a standard Lutheran service," he said. "Our intent is to not only entertain, but also attract people to the church."

Jones, a native of North Carolina who moved to Las Vegas 47 years ago to capitalize on a then-booming music business, said the monthly performance does everything from pleasing the congregation to giving the trio time to play great music together.

“We really enjoy it,” Jones said. “It has nice vibes and we really like the people, and in addition, we like each other.”

Simone, whose own musical career has included performing with the Rat Pack and Barbra Streisand, loves the trio.

“We like to sneak in as much jazz as we can,” said the former New Yorker who arrived in Las Vegas in the early 1960s. “It’s important to have music in church nowadays. Otherwise, it’s like sitting in a college classroom.”

The next Jazz Sunday is set for the 8 and 10:30 a.m. services February 22, 2015 at 8 and 10:30 A.M.



Dick Jones plays the bass during Jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Dick Jones, from left, Ron Simone, and Paul Testa, play music during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Dick Jones plays the bass during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Pastor Kurt Sortland blesses churchgoers as jazz Sunday service comes to an end at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Ron Simone plays the piano during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Altar girl Gabby Muniz, 11, carries a cross to the front of the church during the beginning of jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



A Jesus statue is seen at Lakes Lutheran Church during jazz Sunday service, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Dick Jones plays the bass during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Churchgoers read a prayer during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



Ron Simone plays the piano during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)



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Paul Testa plays the drums during jazz Sunday service at the Lakes Lutheran Church Sunday, Jan. 18, 2015. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)