



Isaiah J. Thompson ***The Book of Isaiah: Modern Jazz Ministry***

Pianist Isaiah J. Thompson to Release New Mack Avenue Records Album *The Book of Isaiah: Modern Jazz Ministry* on June 6, 2025.

Inspired by classic sacred-jazz works by Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams and others, Thompson tells the story of his transformative journey in faith

With its life-affirming meld of swing and blues and its expert command of jazz heritage, pianist and composer Isaiah J. Thompson's new Mack Avenue Records release, *The Book of Isaiah: Modern Jazz Ministry*, is easy to love. Dedicated jazz fans will be able to draw lines from this music to landmark works of jazz divinity by Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane and other titans.

But this ambitious and soulful album is also, as Thompson explains, easy to misunderstand.

"I have to be careful when I talk about this project specifically," he begins, "because what tends to happen is that an assumption is made: 'Oh, you know, Isaiah grew up playing and singing every Sunday in the Black Baptist church and he's just playing hymns and combining gospel and jazz.' But that's just not my story."

The real narrative behind *The Book of Isaiah: Modern Jazz Ministry* involves a young musician searching, studying and finding his faith at last as an adult. Although he did spend some time in the church with his family as a child — "when you go because your parents say to go," he explains — he wasn't especially musically involved, and by high school he was already living a primarily secular life.

He continued to grow and progress in his career, becoming one of the most acclaimed young pianists of his generation: a slew of high-profile awards, *two* degrees from the Juilliard School, and work with renowned artists including Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Christian McBride and John Pizzarelli, whose trio, an institution in small-group swing, Thompson joined in 2019.

Still, something was missing. To start, he was placing far too much of his self-worth on being a celebrated musician. "My entire *identity* was in my playing," he says. Indeed, it was a kind of

overcommitment to the piano — a surplus of practice and “too many gigs” — that put Thompson’s career at risk.

“I got tendonitis in both arms, and that’s a condition you continue to have,” he says. Thompson has been diligent in his rehabilitation, and today, his tendonitis has opened up new pathways in his musicianship. “I have more respect for the instrument,” he explains. “I understand that I am not incapable of injury, so every time I play, I know it’s for a purpose. There’s no need to play unnecessary things.”

Even so, the injury was devastating and led Thompson to a crossroads. “It forced me to think about what is actually important in life,” he says. “If I can’t play, then who am I? What is my existence? What does it actually mean?”

As he continued to wrestle with these profound questions, the pianist was reminded of his spiritual deficiency every time he heard his first name. “I was walking around with this name that I hadn’t studied,” he says. So he began to discover his namesake and his faith in earnest. He dug deep into the Book of Isaiah, one of the Bible’s most challenging books, learning about the prophet who dared to foretell the coming of Jesus Christ. Eventually, independent study wasn’t enough, and Thompson pursued his spiritual education at Fuller Theological Seminary.

By that point, Thompson had begun to notice that the more traditional Baptist culture he saw as a child wasn’t the only option for a man struggling with his faith. “I saw pastors with Jordans on,” he recalls. “I saw people who were my age. I saw people who were walking in their faith very strongly, but they weren’t ‘religious’ — you know what I mean? And I found people who thought critically about their faith but were still believers.” He and his wife, a noted worship singer with several generations of ministry in her family, chose a nondenominational congregation where the message of salvation and love felt pure and right. “We work on ourselves every day,” says the pianist. “We study the Word together.” In 2022, Isaiah J. Thompson was baptized.

When it came time to unpack his experience with faith musically, once again questions of identity moved to the fore. Unlike his co-producer on this project, the brilliant jazz pianist **Cyrus Chestnut**, he didn’t grow up playing piano in church. “When people call me to play gospel gigs,” he admits, “I say I don’t think I’m qualified to do that.

“I feel like I’m a *jazz musician*,” he continues, pausing. “There are so many ways to acknowledge the Lord, and it doesn’t have to be through just playing gospel music. He gives people all types of gifts.”

A devoted student of jazz history, Thompson wrote his music under the sway of jazz icons who crafted paeans to the Creator without explicitly chasing a “gospel-jazz” fusion. The spiritual works of Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams and Wynton Marsalis became major touchstones, as well as the transcendent recordings of John Coltrane and the churchly textures of Charles Mingus.

Thompson’s “The Feeling of Freedom,” for instance, an anthemic reflection on faith and race, finds direct inspiration in three masterworks. He was able to hear several performances of Wynton Marsalis’ *Abyssinian Mass*, and it remains one of his “most treasured memories of live music,” he says. He was also galvanized by Marsalis’ “Work Song,” from the trumpeter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning oratorio *Blood on the Fields*, and by Ellington’s “Work Song,” from *Black, Brown and Beige*. Thompson finds stirring connections between these two “Work Songs,” both of which offer penetrating insight into slavery’s place in the American story.

To subsume his influences into a personal vision, Thompson tapped trusted collaborators including tenor saxophonist **Julian Lee**, bassist **Marty Jaffe** and drummer **Miguel Russell**. New Orleans percussion great **Herlin Riley** contributes tambourine and vocals on select tracks, and played “a huge part in my coming to faith,” Thompson says. “He’s a strong man of faith. I asked him a lot of questions, and he was just so kind. It was literally the next week that I signed up to be baptized.” The vocal star **Vuyo Sotashe** sings on three tracks, including a thoughtfully swinging, Williams-inspired arrangement of the Lord’s Prayer. Thompson’s wife, **Kaitlin Obien-Thompson**, adds backing vocals to the album-closing “The Prophet.”

Throughout these eight tracks, from the McCoy Tyner-indebted “In the Temple (Spiritual Warfare)” to the solo-piano meditation “A Prayer,” Thompson probes his devotional life without fear. In the process, he underscores simple but too-often overlooked truths about our relationship with God.

“The Word tells us that these are commands,” Thompson says. “It’s not like, ‘Be kind when you feel like it’ — that’s a command. You’re going to face opposition, whether it’s from people, from yourself, whatever it is.”

He returns to one of his favorite and most fruitful topics, the blues. Faith is not only exaltation, Thompson reminds us. Rather, it’s a lifetime of light against dark, forgiveness against anger, major against minor. In other words, the blues. “I pray for strength but also love. I have to balance,” he says. “That’s the blues. That’s what I live.”