



A STEVE TAYLOR FILM

# BLUE LIKE JAZZ

COLLEGE / YOUNG ADULT STUDY GUIDE  
BY CHRISTIAN PIATT AND AMY PIATT

## KNOWLEDGE VS. BELIEF

“There was a time when I knew everything.” – Don Miller

Why is it that all of our parents seem to get less intelligent as we get older? We start out believing they know everything, and then it’s just downhill from there. We learn they make mistakes, that they don’t always know the answers and that sometimes, they’re flat-out wrong.

For some of us, this realization is a gradual one. We get used to the idea over time that our parents aren’t the infallible, untouchable, perfect beings we once thought they were. They’re just people, like us. But for some, the epiphany is Earth-shattering. It sends us into an existential tailspin, shaking up the order of everything we thought we knew.

The same goes for the church.

Some people – and some churches – approach faith more like a rulebook for life or a set of answers to all of life’s questions rather than as a space in which to question, doubt and explore the mysteries of life. If God is perfect, and



if the Church is God’s Body on Earth, then it should be perfect too, right? So when that illusion begins to crumble, it can lead to a crisis of faith.

For Don, like many others, college was a time to experience new things, to encounter new ideas, and to question everything. But this value system doesn’t work well with the fundamentalism of his church back home. And when he sees the deep flaws in the façade of the church, he is faced

with a choice: walk away from school and return to his old life, or reject religion and accept that the church has failed him.

Can we really blame him?



### QUESTIONS:

- Has there been a time when you felt that organized religion let you down personally? How did you respond? How did that experience shape your understanding of God?
- How are – or were – questions handled in your church, if you took part in one? Were they welcomed? Brushed aside? Criticized for being a sign of faithlessness? Were your questions always answered?
- What is the most important role of organized religion in the world today? Do we even need it to experience God?

**DID YOU KNOW?** *The author doing the reading in the big-box bookstore where the students staged a protest is Blue Like Jazz's author, Donald Miller.*

### FAITH VS. INTELLECT

“Meaning? The universe doesn’t owe us meaning, son. If you want meaning, I suggest you try a dictionary.” –Mr. Larkin (Atheist debater)

Don’s father challenges him with the statement, “A brain like that, working for a church? You only believe that stuff because you’re afraid to hang out with people who don’t.”

- Is critical thought allowed in most religious settings? Is it allowed in yours?

- Do you agree that “church people” tend to insulate themselves from others because they’re afraid of differing views? Why or why not?

- What could churches do to begin to overcome these stereotypes?

- How can churches engage with communities to wrestle with ideas – to be part of those conversations and not merely observers?

In the scene at Powell’s Books during the debate about whether God exists, the theist says, “Mr. Larkin (the atheist) has set up the Scientific Method as his own biblical canon.” Do some scientists do this? What about atheists? Do they effectively make a religion out of their non-belief?

What do you think about the following quote from the theist author during the debate: “We long for love, and justice, beauty, transcendence, because they echo the voice calling us to know their origin.” Is this a phenomenon exclusive to people of faith? Can someone explore the deeper meaning of life and the origins of things like love, justice, beauty and transcendence without considering the possibility of the existence of a divine being?

Consider the following exchange during that same scene:

**Don:** Where do we find meaning?

**Atheist:** Meaning? The universe doesn’t owe us meaning,



son. If you want meaning, I suggest you try a dictionary.

- Do we “deserve” to seek, and even to find, meaning in life?

•Do some people lean on their faith out of fear that life will otherwise seem meaningless? Is this a good enough reason to believe?

•What do you believe is central to the meaning of life?

**DID YOU KNOW?** *Powell's Bookstore* actually is a famous independent bookstore in Portland near the campus of Reed College. The debate scene was filmed inside the actual store.

## ARCHETYPES VS. STEREOTYPES

A common theme throughout the movie involves the juxtaposition of archetypes and stereotypes. The dictionary says that an archetype is “the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype.”

The definition of a stereotype is “a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group: *The cowboy and Indian are American stereotypes.*”



It's a tendency in human nature to stereotype. Our brains want to find categories for everything, to help us make better sense of the world. When we look at a cat, we know it's a cat because it has a certain “cat-ness” to it. Stereotyping, in itself, is natural and often unavoidable.

But sometimes it can cause a lot of division and pain, and can lead to greater ignorance rather than understanding.

•How was Don's home church portrayed in the film? Was it an archetype or a stereotype? And what if all of that actually

happened? Does it make a difference, even if it helps reinforce other people's stereotypes of what church is like?



•What about Penny's church, and her priest? Are they archetypes or stereotypes? How are the two treated differently in the film?

•Which characters in the movie are archetypes, and which are stereotypes?

•What about the “Pope?” is the character an archetype, and if so, of what? But is he also portraying a religious stereotype? Where does the “inspiration” come from?

•Where do our own stereotypes come from? And what effect do they have on the way we live and relate to others?

•Do you ever feel stereotyped? In what ways? How does it make you feel? How do you react, or want to react, to being stereotyped?

**DID YOU KNOW?** The “Blue Like Jazz” book faced sluggish sales when it was first published in 2003. But following generally positive reviews and word-of-mouth buzz, it ended up becoming a New York Times Bestseller. To date, it has sold more than one million copies.

## INDIVIDUALITY VS. CONFORMITY

One of my favorite scenes of all time in a movie is in Monty Python's “Life of Brian,” when Brian is being followed by a mindless mob that mistakenly thinks he's the Messiah.

“Think for yourselves,” he says. “You're all individuals.”



“Yes, we’re all individuals,” the mob chants.

“I’m not!” cries one poor soul from the back.

That mob, for many people, is the church.

In “Blue Like Jazz,” the contrast between the fierce individualism depicted at Reed College and the hollowed-out, anti-intellectual groupthink of his hometown church is stark. Sure, it’s probably exaggerated a little bit for effect, but the distance between the two often feels just about that unbridgeable.

Don’s church friends fear that college will “brainwash” him. His dad hopes that Reed will help “deprogram” him. His fellow student, the “Pope,” suggests all religious folks have “drunk the Kool Aid,” a reference to the zombie-like mass suicide of the Jonestown cult.

It’s clear from the scene in Miller’s home church that he feels out of place there, especially once the youth pastor’s hypocrisy becomes clear. But although he finds the Reed College experience exhilarating, he also laments that, “I wake up here, feeling lost in a sea of individuality. Everyone seems so sure of themselves. They have their own look. Occupy their own space.”

- Is there such a thing as too much individual expression and autonomy? What is the risk?
- What about the dangers of the group/mob mentality? What examples of this doing harm have you seen, particularly ones that involve the church?

• Is there a healthy balance? Does religion foster that or hinder it? How could it do a better job seeking that healthy balance for contemporary culture?

**DID YOU KNOW?** *The movie was made possible by the efforts of fans that refused to see the project die. A campaign on KickStarter was started after a September 16th, 2010 blog post by Donald Miller that the project was dead due to the lack of backers. By the end of the funding period on October 25th, “Save Blue Like Jazz” had raised \$345,992 (of the \$125,000 goal or 276%) from 4,495 backers. This earned the project a Hall of Fame ranking on KickStarter as the highest funded project ever.*

### ART VS. FAITH

“Sometimes you have to watch somebody love something before you can love it yourself. Penny loves Jesus. My dad loves Jazz. He told me jazz is like life because it doesn’t resolve... (but) every time I put on ‘A Love Supreme’, I swear I can hear something my father says isn’t there; I hear resolution.” —Don Miller

I share common loves with both Penny and Don’s father. Some consider the improvisational uncertainty of jazz to be antithetical to the rituals, dogma and doctrine promoted by much of organized religion.

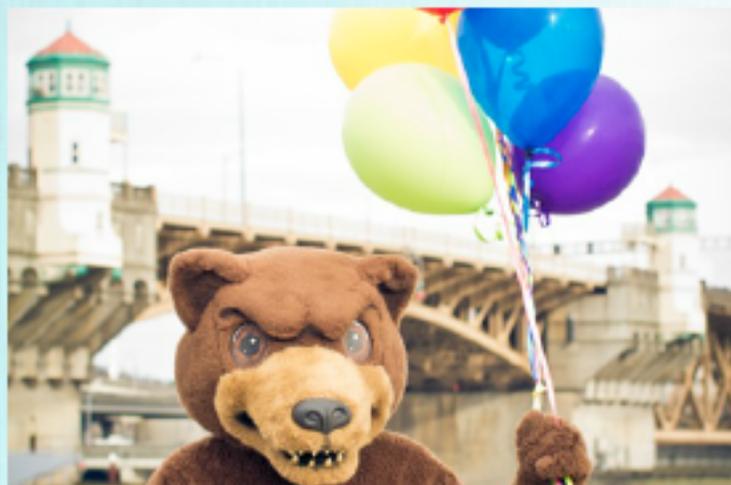


But John Coltrane saw the two as inextricably linked. His jazz album, “A Love Supreme,” was his own musical tribute to God. Interestingly, in the film, Don finds a copy of “A Love Supreme” in Penny’s room while she’s away on a mission trip to India. The parallels between jazz and faith – and the use of this album in particular – bring to mind a piece of spoken

word poetry I wrote of the same name a couple of years back. Here's an excerpt:

*But Trane began to believe the power lay  
Not in either way, but instead in music's fray.  
He believed melody could heal the sick.  
He believed arpeggios could summon the rains.  
He believed that, in his tonal dissonance  
Was a cosmic constant, a Divine being,  
A key to nature's geometry  
Reflecting life's asymmetry,  
Like the nectar from a healing tree,  
Music was life in a dying world.  
A composition of the spheres,  
Transcending the style of his years  
Transcribing the elliptical, orbital patterns  
That gathered order into all matter,  
Transposing the audible life stream  
From dream to daylight,  
From fantasy to true sight  
His second heaven was life-bread, leavened  
By perfect consciousness  
Of a Love Supreme.*

- Can faith be contained by religion? Can it be nurtured by things like ritual, doctrine and dogma? Can it be compromised by it?
- What style of music or art best reflects your own faith? What has most influenced your faith to become like this?
- What does the following quote from Miller mean to you: "What if God is trying to compose something? What if the stars are notes, swirling in the blue, like jazz?"



**DID YOU KNOW?** Reed College is an actual college in Portland, OR? It may be most famous as the school that Steve Jobs dropped out of. Reed also has a nuclear reactor that is primarily run by undergraduate students.

### APOLOGY VS. FORGIVENESS

"So much to apologize for. Maybe I'll start with the Crusades and then work my way up to U.S. foreign policy." – Don Miller

Though it appears only about halfway into the book, the film uses the confessional scene as the culmination of the story. This is where everything changes for Miller, when he reclaims his faith, not on the terms laid out by his home church, not by Penny's beliefs and not by the teaching of his professors.

For Miller, it is with some reluctance that he accepts this newfound faith in God. "I come out of this subculture that believes in God," he says to the Pope from inside the confessional, "in Jesus, the whole deal. I came here to escape it because I was ashamed of it. But it turns out I'm not just ashamed of my strange church or its political views or all the hypocrites. I'm ashamed of Jesus. I'm ashamed of Jesus because I want you to like me."

That shame, it seems, is not enough to keep God at bay. "I've spent a school year trying to ditch God," he says, "but I can't. It's like he's following me around."

In accepting God's presence in his life, he also feels compelled to confess, not just for his own sins, but for those of



the Church as a whole. The following exchange concludes the movie:

**Don:** “I’m confessing to you that I’m tired of being a hypocrite and a coward. I need you to forgive me. Do you forgive me?”

**Pope:** “I wouldn’t know what to forgive you for.”

**Don:** “Do you forgive me for misrepresenting God? He isn’t like me, and He isn’t afraid, and He isn’t a coward, and He isn’t like that messed up priest who raped you when you were a kid. I should have told you that a long time ago...do you forgive me?”

**Pope (after a long pause):** “Yeah. I forgive you. It’s good, Miller, what you’re doing...Do you really believe all this stuff?”

**Don:** “I think...I do.”

**Pope:** “Then *dominus vobiscum* (God be with you).”

- Is there a difference between offering an apology and asking for forgiveness? Which is harder? Which is more vulnerable?
- Have you ever apologized or asked for forgiveness for something on behalf of your church or your religion? How did it feel? How was it received?
- Do you think the Catholic ritual of confession is a holy, valuable act, or does it place the Church in a position of unreasonable power over people?

•If you were to write a letter of apology on behalf of Christianity, what would it say? From whom would you seek forgiveness?

**DID YOU KNOW?** *Steve Taylor, the director of the film, is the son of a Baptist minister. Steve has been a professional musician for nearly thirty years, both as a solo artist and as the front man for the band Chagall Guevara. He recorded a song on the soundtrack for the Veggie Tales “Pirates Who Don’t Do Anything” movie, and he also had a song that appeared in the 1990 cult film “Pump Up the Volume,” starring Christian Slater.*

*Christian Piatt is an author, editor, speaker, musician and spoken word artist. Christian is the creator and editor of the Banned Questions book series, which include Banned Questions About the Bible and Banned Questions About Jesus. He co-created and co-edits the “WTF: Where’s the Faith?” young adult series with Chalice Press, and he has a memoir on faith, family and parenting available April 1, 2012 called Pregmancy: A Dad, a Little Dude and a Due Date. His blog can be found at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christianpiatt/>*

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**STUDY NOTES:**

