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## *In the Midst of Sadness: Fred Rogers and Johnny Costa and Jazz!*

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

I am learning still more about the famous television show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. In the midst of lament, I am finding some joy.

It sure is hard, though, these days. Day after day, I find myself in some sort of lament. Times are lonely and hard. People are frustrated and isolated, even angry, struggling inside our homes without much broader community beyond our own households.

So, I rejoice in small moments of discovery and education and inspiration and life. Today, I want to lift up, and give some unsolicited advertising, to two men, one famous and one less so. One is Fred Rogers, who, of course, most of us know and admire through his deep and sensitive television show for children, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Even during this season of screen fatigue, watch a few episodes – whether you have young children around or not, and especially if you do have young children around.

The other person I want to highlight, however, is the man who was the music director for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. His name was Johnny Costa, a brilliant jazz pianist, who worked behind the scenes, leading the scenes, for twenty-eight years. (I learned much about Costa through a fascinating YouTube video produced by Charles Cornell, to whom I am indebted in this article! Thank you, Charles Cornell). Johnny Costa was fantastic in his own right. The great jazz musician, Art Tatum, called Costa, “the white Art Tatum.”

Fred Rogers was actually an excellent musician, and pianist, himself (he was also an ordained Presbyterian minister). Indeed, it was Fred Rogers himself who wrote much of the music that was featured in the children's show. It is sweet and lyrical music!

But—and here's the thing—the music in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was not simple. It was sweet and lyrical, yes, but not simplistic. The pianist and music director, Johnny Costa, was actually a well-known jazz pianist in those days (see the Art Tatum quotation above). Johnny Costa took Rogers' melodies and harmonies and riffed powerfully on them!

You can get a taste for this simply by listening to the well-known introductory theme song in several different episodes. Every time they play the tune, it is different! In most television shows that we know, the theme song – whether good or not—is simply the same catchy melody and arrangement, usually employing the same tape over and over again. That's fine.

But, in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Johnny Costa and the musicians play a different (rather jazzy version) of the theme song, in the background, in each episode. Take a listen to several of them (and watch the seventeen minute video of this phenomenon in Charles Cornell's YouTube). It's jazz, pure and simple, improvising differently on a distinctive theme, over and over again.

I focus on this delightful observation for two reasons. One is for the sake of children, of whatever age. In my opinion, children do not need music that is “dumbed down” for them. The better the music, the more powerfully Fred Rogers' messages were delivered (listen to his short little piece on anger, “I'm Angry.”).

The other reason is for the sake of the church, especially our liturgical church, The Episcopal Church. Yes, we

pray and sing with certain fixed words and melodies. But that never means we pray and sing them the same way. Jazz teaches us that we can say the same prayers (and sing the same melodies) in new and different and inspirational ways every time we pray them. Episcopal liturgy is made for jazz! Episcopal liturgy is made for improvisation!

So it is in this season of pandemic and social distance, that all of us churches are having to improvise. It's not easy. Improvisation, though it looks free and breezy, is actually hard work. It takes a lifetime of practicing scales and chords and structures and intonations, and then more practice. But good prayer is the same as good jazz. We take a good and established tune – the Eucharist, maybe—and we pray it with our imagination and creativity. We hope that the result is spiritual depth and spiritual delight!

Thank you, then, to Fred Rogers and his sensitivity and intellect, his ability to express complicated things with simplicity and depth. Thank you, to Johnny Costa who used his pianistic prowess to raise lyrical songs to jazz heights. Thanks to each of you, struggling to pray and serve in these restricted times. Thank you adapting, for improvising, and then practicing some more. Yes, maybe we strike some wrong notes in some of that improvising, but when we strike the good notes, they transport us to heaven. May grace and jazz, in children and in adults, be with us all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip