An anecdote begins the book. Rummaging for vinyl jazz albums by John Coltrane in the back of a music store in Washington D.C., Howison met another scavenger. He struck up a conversation about jazz with this stranger—older, greying African American man. It was not small talk; it was jazz talk, which sparked quickly into flame. They found the warmth of fellowship as they spoke of musicians they heard and records they prized. For author Jamie Howison, this reveals the existential potency of jazz. Many times, I have stepped into this jazz zone. When the talk turns to Trane (as he was called), you go deeper.

John Coltrane, jazz saxophonist (1926–1967), is a compelling figure to many. Rare is the jazz musician who inspires books outside of biographies and autobiographies. Literature searches on John Coltrane, however, tap into a flooding river of philosophical, cultural, and even theological sources. *God's Mind in That Music* mines the songs and the life of Coltrane for spiritual gold and silver, and finds a rich lode—along with patches of wood, hay, and stubble. The phrase that makes the title comes from a quote from rock guitar player and jazz aficionado, Carlos Santana, who was speaking of his response to Coltrane’s piece, ‘The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’: “I could hear God’s mind in that music, influencing John Coltrane. I heard the Supreme One playing music through John Coltrane’s mind.”

Any competent writer on the significance of John Coltrane must address multiple themes: the music, the man, the culture, and the thought life. Howison does all this well, drawing the reader into the story. Personal interviews with many musicians and jazz critics augment the author’s knowledge of the key sources on Coltrane. Music is about playing and listening. Howison has listened deeply to this music and he narrates some of his experiences in coming to terms with John Coltrane, adding a personal touch that is not self-indulgent.

The foundations are laid in the first three chapters. The introduction intrigues the reader to take this man seriously. This is followed by an apt music guide to Coltrane’s music, an ocean of music for which some navigation is needed. ‘Theologies Engagement With Music’ capably begins this one-of-kind reflection from a Christian perspective. Howison surveys several frameworks for understanding jazz theologically, considering the work of Jeremy Begbie, James Cone, Hans Rookmaaker, and others. Here and elsewhere, he pays close attention to matters of race for two reasons. First, jazz began primarily (but not exclusively) with African Americans. Second, the music has often carried with
it concern for the state of blacks in the United States. One can overplay this theme, as did Ken Burns in his otherwise-excellent film and book, Jazz (2000). Howison does not.

In chapter two, ‘The Contested Story of Jazz,’ Howison wades into the troubled but friendly waters of jazz origins. He is not drowned; neither does he get to the bottom of things. Perhaps no one can. But the exploration is worth the worries. Jazz is not uniquely black, but it emerges in mostly African American settings, particularly Storyville, 1897–1917, in New Orleans. Enter: Louis Armstrong, musical originator extraordinaire. One need not settle his vexed matter to continue, however. Suffice to say that one may understand the nature of a phenomenon without sussing out its ultimate origin.

Chapter three is a biographical account of Coltrane’s life. While it does not add much if anything that is new to the story, it tells it well. Coltrane did not speak or write much about his life, but the evidence is there to unearth and ponder.

Quite ingenuously, Howison then explores the theological meaning of eight of what he deems Coltrane’s quintessential tunes in relation to theology: ‘My Favorite Things,’ ‘Naima,’ ‘Wise One,’ ‘Alabama,’ ‘A Love Supreme,’ ‘Ascension,’ ‘The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ and ‘Attaining’. Each piece is a lens or portal into different stages along Coltrane’s musical sojourn; each opens up expanses of analysis and reflection. The waters are deep; but the soundings are worthy. For sake of space, I will focus on two pieces, ‘Alabama’ and ‘A Love Supreme.’

Coltrane was not a ‘race man,’ in the sense that he did not lead with racial concerns. In this, he was like Duke Ellington, as Harvey H. Cohen’s Duke Ellington’s America explains. Music was Coltrane’s muse, but not without a social conscience. In chapter five, Howison examines ‘Alabama,’ which is a lament for the murder of four young black children who died in the bombing of their church in Alabama in 1964. The white perpetrators were not brought to justice until long after Coltrane’s death in 1967. Howison gives a close analysis of this piece, musically and culturally. Without a word, the piece evokes profound sadness as well as a hint of hope. It speaks not only of the awful event but of the Christian lament of the slave, the marginalized, and the oppressed African-American on American soil. I often play a video of this piece in my courses at Denver Seminary as an introduction to both jazz and the genre of lament. For many (and for me), it is arresting and unforgettable. Howison’s treatment of this poignant piece is equal to the task. That is no minor compliment.

“God’s mind in that music” is best evaluated in Coltrane’s iconic work, ‘A Love Supreme’ (1965): his most overt theological confession and declaration. Howison subtitles this chapter ‘Grace.’ In the liner notes to ‘A Love Supreme,’