

The Night Pastor

I recently came across a record by 1960s Episcopal priest and jazz musician Robert Owen.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



We were flipping through the records in the discount bin when we saw it: *Music to Lure Pigeons By*. The album cover was a black-and-white photo of a man, balding, with laugh lines. He's looking, with half bemusement and half satisfaction, at a pigeon standing on his outstretched hand. Under the photo it told us that the 1967 record was by a band called the Night Pastor and Seven Friends. The \$5 price tag was worth it for the album art alone, so it got added to the stack and came home with us.

My husband and I are big believers in the serendipity of the discount record bin. It was there we found *And God Created Great Whales*, Alan Hovhaness's tone poem for orchestra and whale song; *Passed This Way*, an album of the best Bob Dylan covers we had ever heard, played by two young Servite monks in the 1960s; and an Andrés Segovia compilation with a photo on the cover of the classical guitarist playing the guitar, smoking a pipe, and holding a dachshund all at once. The Night Pastor turned

out to be no exception.

Music to Lure Pigeons By is ten tracks of swingy, up-tempo Chicago jazz, as performed by Robert Owen, the Night Pastor himself. This is not just a cool name for a bandleader but an actual job title, held by Owen for several years as part of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. The Night Pastor's job, as the back of the album informed us, was to "reach out into the night, ministering to the needs of the 'Night People'—the ones who work—the ones who play—the ones who serve—the ones who are served."

The Night Pastor program began because of Owen's love of jazz: his friendships and collaborations with many of the musicians who played along Chicago's Rush Street led him to suggest the idea. "When we stopped playing, the musicians would start telling me their troubles," he told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1965. "I began to see there was a real need for a ministry to the night people."

Press coverage from the early days of the program suggests that his office, above a hamburger stand at Rush and Oak, was well trafficked by those seeking counsel long past business hours. The *DeKalb Daily Chronicle*: "Chicago Night Pastor Believes God Doesn't Go to Bed at 10." The *Daily Herald*: "Night, Loneliness, Jazz—The Life of Reverend Owen." Wearing his clerical collar, Owen walked along dark sidewalks and dipped into bars to minister to people late into the night. However, ministry, as you might know, doesn't pay particularly well, and so the Night Pastor program also depended on Owen's music.

Music to Lure Pigeons By is actually the second of two albums Owen made as part of a fundraising effort to continue his program—the proceeds helped him pay rent on his office and support his six children. The first, *The Night Pastor and Seven Friends Play Chicago Jazz*, is a little more religious in tone. It opens with Owen reading Psalm 150 over a jazz backing: "Praise him in the sound of the trumpet."

"This is the way that some of my musician friends pray to God," he would tell audiences as his band launched into one of their renditions of jazz standards.

From there, the press hits for Robert Owen slow down. He shows up in the society column every once in a while, talking about his work or raising money at a suburban church, wearing a suit and tie at a party. Then in 1970, six years after the Night Pastor program began, his obituary appears in the *Chicago Tribune*, and a few days later a write-up of his funeral: "Rich, Poor, Militant, Meek Pay Tribute to Pastor

Owen.” A few days after that there’s the lineup for the benefit concert for Owen’s family, put on by the jazz musicians he spent the last few years of his life ministering to, collaborating with, and living among.

The diocese appointed another priest to succeed Owen, but in 1977 the Night Pastor program was discontinued. Decades later you can still find little traces of Owen’s life and work online, posted by people who came across him in the same ways I did. One blog I visit occasionally is run by an enthusiast of midcentury album artwork, but the comments section is full of fond remembrances of Owen from his parishioners and one of his children. I learned that as a parish priest in the Chicago suburbs, Owen was apparently involved in the excavation of a mastodon found near Wheaton College, and he taught his acolytes how to fold crosses from palm leaves for Palm Sunday.

One of the ways I feel the closest to the religious life is by seeing the way others have lived it. I love a spiritual autobiography, the works of Thomas Merton or Simone Weil or Óscar Romero wrapping their minds, their hearts, their arms around the idea of God and others and what it might mean to live a life of service. In finding *Music to Lure Pigeons By* after digging around in the discount bin, I found not just a perfect example of album art but also a man who served his community in a way that honored who he was and what he loved. The Night Pastor’s story is one of joy in service—of someone who, in loving his community, found a way to make it better and brought his whole self along for the ride.