

CNN Movers

Wynton Marsalis Moves Jazz to Forefront of American Music

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(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

WYNTON MARSALIS, MUSICIAN: That feel, that pulsation that comes about when the band starts swinging and the people have gone through something to check this music out, and they start swinging, then they're like -- their first step out is like, look, we waited out here in cold for hours, you better be swinging, and then when that swing starts to hit them, they start saying, all right.

LORRAINE GORDON, OWNER, THE VILLAGE VANGUARD: He plays a great trumpet. My God, what trumpet player plays classical as well as he does. That's a star.

JAN HOPKINS, HOST (voice-over): Or to be perfectly accurate, a superstar. At 38, Wynton Marsalis has already sold more than 10 million CDs, phenomenal, the critics say, for a jazz musician. He's the first in history to win Grammys in classical and jazz in the same year. He composes. He plays. He teaches. And we're just scratching the surface.

HOPKINS (on camera): You have a lot of awards, lots of Grammys, lots of doctorates -- doctor, doctor, doctor, doctor, doctor, right?

MARSALIS: Right.

HOPKINS: And a Pulitzer prize. First jazz musician to get a Pulitzer. Is that the most important one?

MARSALIS: You know, not -- I'm honored to receive any award. I can remember receiving an award in third grade, but the greatest award really is when you play for people and they keep coming, when you see them over and over again. And when they see you, it's like you have a connection with them, and you can tell they like you, and they respect what you have done.

HOPKINS (voice-over): And what he's done. The story of jazz is a history of its musicians. In the '20s, Louis Armstrong gave jazz a solo trumpeter. The late '20s, early '30 have Duke Ellington to thank for the big band sound. In the '40s, the bebop revolution of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

DIZZY GILLESPIE, MUSICIAN: My cheeks just developed gradually, it was a gradual development, and before I knew it -- I was like that. HOPKINS (on camera): In the '50s and '60s the story was Miles Davis and cool jazz. It may be impossible to

know what combination of personality and talent have come together to push him to the forefront of American musics. But for last 20 years, most agree Wynton Marsalis has been voice of jazz, breathing new life into a dying music form and bringing it to a whole new generation of fans.

HOWARD REICH, JAZZ CRITIC, "CHICAGO TRIBUNE": Wynton Marsalis arrived in the music scene pivotal moment, the early 1980s. At that point, jazz was at really low ebb. America had basically forgotten about this music. It was still there, but the public had forgotten. When Marsalis arrived in New York, he had almost everything going for him, and he had so much talent, so much verbal acuity that he gave music identity, and the media needed somebody to latch on to, and he became the star.

HOPKINS: In 1987, Marsalis was named director of jazz at Lincoln Center, the world's largest and arguably most important jazz showcase. So with all this going his way, how come the critics keep taking aim at Wnyton Marsalis?

ELLIS MARSALIS, JAZZ PIANIST, WYNTON'S FATHER: If you take time to go back in history, you can read the comments that was made about the music of Beethoven and various other musicians in earlier years. You know, Johan Bach's music was considered old and passe by his own children in the 17th century.

HOPKINS: And it's no different for Wynton Marsalis today. He takes heat for playing music of Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton rather than the more avant garde.

And Marsalis has weathered more than just musical criticism. He grew up in a family of musicians in New Orleans, at a time when it was all but impossible to make a living playing jazz. The story of how a teenager left the crescent city with only a trumpet and wound up in New York trumpeted as the crowned prince of jazz, next, on MOVERS.

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HOPKINS (voice-over): New Orleans, Louisiana, a city so infused with jazz even funerals are occasions for music. So perhaps it was no accident that New Orleans is the birthplace of Wynton Marsalis. Born October 18, 1961, he was the second of six boys. Four of them became musicians. Branford, the oldest, plays sax, Wynton, trumpet, Delfao, trombone, and the youngest, Jason, drums. While not a musician, son Ellis is a computer virtuoso. The fifth son, Umboya (ph) has spent a lifetime overcoming adversity.

W. MARSALIS: Then we had a little brother that was autistic. It put a tremendous strain really on my family, really on my mother, because then, we didn't really know what that was, you know, the type of help and care for an autistic child in 1974 and '5 in the South. I mean, where we were, my father, no matter what went down, you

never heard him complain, you never heard him blame anybody. So for his vibe was always straight ahead.

HOPKINS: It was Wynton's father, Ellis, who got the whole musical dynasty going. An award-winning jazz musician himself, Ellis Marsalis has played most of his adult life in New Orleans.

(on camera): Six kids, six boys, and not a good time for a jazz musician. So money was probably pretty tight, wasn't it?

W. MARSALIS: Oh, yes, it was tight.

HOPKINS: Your dad worked regularly, right?

W. MARSALIS: He worked. He worked. He struggled. I mean, he worked. He worked now. He never was out of work. I remember once he got down to like his last \$20 or something. We had a family meeting. We never had those. So we knew, oh man, it must be something big. And he said he was thinking whether he was going to drive a cab or not, and my mom was like no, no, she didn't want him to drive a cab; she wanted him to keep playing.

HOPKINS (voice-over): While Ellis Marsalis made his way teaching and playing in a jazz band, it was Wynton's mother, Dolores Marsalis, who held the family together.

E. MARSALIS: I can't even conjecture what it would have been like, you know. If there was definitely a recipe for disaster, it would have been all of us without her.

HOPKINS (on camera): You were talking about your mom's cooking.

She -- good cook?

W. MARSALIS: No, my mom, she's a great cook. I mean, I don't talk about her desserts. I mean, everything she cooked -- she could cook an egg -- she scramble an egg and it tastes different from what you used to. She just has that combination, like jazz, has that combination to that real soul and intelligence.

HOPKINS: So is food important to you now? Or it's just not quite the same?

W. MARSALIS: It's important, but -- I mean, food is important to everybody of course. You know, what I'm saying, but, you don't get that feeling, you -- the feeling that you get from your mother, when you have a mother to cook like that, you don't get that feeling again.

HOPKINS (voice-over): While she could pour her creativity into food, prospects were limited for black women in the pre-civil rights South.

W. MARSALIS: There was a lot that she had to accept also, coming up in the time that she came up in, having the type of intelligence that she had, not being able to express her creativity the way she wanted to express it, not being able to get jobs that she should have been able to get. You know, there's a legacy, there's a thing amongst

women of that generation, where they were really subjected to something that -- you know, I'm sure it leaves a bad taste in her mouth. She won't talk about it, but if I think about it, but she put a lot of her energy into her raising of her kids. And I'm sure if she had come along today, her life would have been very different.

HOPKINS: While the Marsalis children benefited from their mother's nurturing, Wynton says it was clear from the time he was very young that they would get no coddling from their father.

W. MARSALIS: He's a jazz musician, so he would just talked to you straight -- I don't want you to be a rebel and look to me to finance it, because I'm overworked already, I've got too many kids, so let's deal with what is, what I want you to I do; I want you to do what you want to do.

HOPKINS: What Wynton Marsalis wanted to do was to be a musician. But the first music he would play was not New Orleans jazz.

(on camera): You said that when you were growing up, you didn't listen to jazz around the house.

W. MARSALIS: No, that was his music. We listened to James Brown and the stuff that was popular then, in the late '60s or the early '70s. Funk just came in, like Earth, Wind and Fire, Parliament and The Blockades and all this kind of stuff. We didn't really -- jazz -- that's not anything you would really listen to.

HOPKINS (voice-over): At least not anything a 9-year-old wanted to listen to. But at 12, Wynton started classical training on the trumpet, and by 17, he had discovered the music of Louis Armstrong, and from that moment on, it was clear: Jazz was on his mind.

New York next, when MOVERS continues.

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W. MARSALIS: When we use the term something like "formal education," all education is formal. There is no such thing as an informal education, even if it's just your mother showing you how to scramble an egg, says no, don't do that, put this in here, you know, turn the fire down there. That's education. Because you're in a school with 15 people, it doesn't make it any -- that's information, and how it's transferred. That's really all it's saying.

HOPKINS (voice-over): Two years at Juilliard school in New York made up what most would call Wynton's formal education. At 19, he was out of school, off and playing. Critics say almost from the moment Marsalis made his recording debut as a band leader in 1982, he was a hit. REICH: He was a brilliant technician on the trumpet. He was young, articulate, handsome, and he was arriving at the day dawn of

this new media age. When he arrived, the stage was now ready for a new young star to give the music a new face.

HOPKINS: That new face became a one-man jazz blitz. He crisscrossed the U.S. and Europe, conducting hundreds of performances, and making the rounds of the vintage jazz clubs in New York. Perhaps no one place has been more important to Marsalis than the New York jazz landmark The Village Vanguard.

(on camera): It's a place that you go back to over and over again. Why is it an important place to you?

W. MARSALIS: Well The Village Vanguard is like a -- so much great music was played in it, it's like a shrine, but it's a shrine of jazz, so it's very informal. The first time I walked into The Village Vanguard was 1979, and I remember thinking, what is The Village Vanguard? It's like those little restaurants that you go in that you heard somebody told you about, and in New Orleans, and you just say, oh man, and then the food comes out, and you're like, OK, I understand now. What goes on in there creates the ambience. And the Vanguard, trained, played in there, everybody -- Monk, Miles - - so many great musicians have left this spirit and vibration in that club that when you go in there, you know that you have to take care of some business.

GORDON: Wynton is not a musician who forgot the Vanguard. Many men played here, got big, never came back. It's OK. Onward and upward, I say, but Wynton has never forgotten. When his own men play here, who became leaders, like Wyclif Gordon (ph), Russell Anderson, Eric Reed who play, he's always down here to see those men, cheer them on and be a part of the group. He's not an elitist. He's beautiful. They all love him.

We are going to finish tonight with one of the classic of all jazz tunes, that you can go anywhere in the world and play this, and people know it, and they love it and it's easy to play.

HOPKINS (voice-over): There are also those who do not love him. He has been widely criticized for playing the old-time music of Ellington, Armstrong and the other classics of jazz, and for not playing fusion and the more avant garde music.

E. MARSALIS: Apparently, the way that he handles it is to work even harder. So if somebody says well, blah, blah, blah, this, or that or the other, he just turns and starts writing even more music.

HOPKINS: You were actually talking about rehearsals. You were saying that, you know, the best rehearsals are when people really argue things out.

W. MARSALIS: Oh yes, and the jazz band rehearsals are -- yes, we're like a family really, we have heated discussions all the time.

HOPKINS: And that's good, you like that.

W. MARSALIS: I love that, because that means everybody takes their music seriously. And you know when to stop.

HOPKINS: And you don't have any problems being challenged?

W. MARSALIS: No. That's what jazz music is about, freedom of expression. We've had many heated exchange up there in the room. I mean, I'm not involved in all of them. So it not so much they're messing with me, it's just, generally, you know, that happens.

HOPKINS (voice-over): Whatever happens, Marsalis has the energy to handle it.

W. MARSALIS: When I was younger, I used to really have an inordinate amount of energy. Sometimes I could go like a week or two weeks, where I sleep one or two hours a night. Really, it was irritating in a way. Now, no, it's not like that, but who knows why. Sometimes it comes back, like I get energy, just, boom, OK, here we are.

HOPKINS: Are you hard to live with?

W. MARSALIS: Yes, for that reason, more. Just the energy, you know, a week, a month, a year, you start saying "man."

HOPKINS: Is that part of the reason you haven't been married?

W. MARSALIS: Well, that's more complicated than that. I live a very complicated life, and it's always best when you live a complicated life to be silent about it, and I always am.

HOPKINS (voice-over): What Marsalis will talk about, almost like gospel: spreading the jazz word, everywhere and anywhere, when MOVERS continues.

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ROB GIBSON, DIRECTOR, JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER: The mandate of jazz at Lincoln Center is really about reaching a global audience with our art form. We want to kind of take over jazz, if you will, if we can. That is vision of Wynton Marsalis.

HOPKINS (voice-over): That vision has kept Marsalis and his jazz forum hopping. Last year alone, they gave over 400 events in 100 different cities worldwide. Revenues from the Jazz at Lincoln Center activities, \$12 million in 1999. That's unprecedented for a jazz group. And virtually unprecedented, in just one single year, Marsalis released 15 CDs. Extraordinary, when you consider saxophone great Wayne Shorter averages only one CD every two years. It's too early to put a price tag on Marsalis' 1999 album blitz, but jazz critic Howard Reich says Marsalis is about art, not commerce.

Perhaps his most ambitious creation, his recent composition done in conjunction with the New York Philharmonic, dubbed "All Rise." He says the work encompasses no less than entire history of musical expression.

HOPKINS (on camera): One of the things that I've seen you do recently is the collaboration with the Philharmonic. Is this the kind of collaboration that you're talking about, bringing all different kinds of music together and finding what's common, what everybody really loves about it?

W. MARSALIS: Right, just to see that it is together. I mean, the perception that our musics are so different -- well, there are differences. But it's still harmony, rhythm, form, texture. A groove is still a groove, whether it's a groove of Beethoven or something Count Basie.

HOPKINS (voice-over): While "All Rise" has received excellent reviews, critics say where Marsalis makes most important contribution, even beyond his work as a bandleader, performer or composer, his almost religious devotion to spreading the jazz gospel.

REICH: You'll see Marsalis sometimes when no cameras are around, no reporters are around. He'll be have played a concert, and he'll be backstage, and 5-year-old kid or a 10-year-old kid will come back with his parents with a horn, and Marsalis, after some exhausting three- hour performance will give the kid a lesson right then and there.

HOPKINS (on camera): You're involved in a lot of education projects -- teaching kids about music, teaching kids about jazz. Why is that?

W. MARSALIS: Just to be a part of the kids's lives in a small way. You just go and you get them out of math or a subject, you talk about music, and you make them aware of a little something different, and maybe a little bit of it sticks with them.

HOPKINS (voice-over): To get it to stick with them, Marsalis has teamed up with Segio Zawa (ph) and Yo-yo Ma to produce a series of videotapes on music.

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W. MARSALIS: And always, the large monster of practicing comes to trample on our dreams. Almost no one likes to practice. That's just the truth. We all want to be heroes, but we just don't want to fight the dragon. And that's understandable. I mean, dragons have bad breath.

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HOPKINS: While Marsalis teaches children, these days he is also learning from them, especially from his own children.

(on camera): You have three sons big part of your life.

W. MARSALIS: I mean, yes, so much you want to give them and pass on to them. And just not because, like, they are future and stuff that you hear all the time, because

it's fun. And you can learn a lot from them. HOPKINS: Do they teach you things about music? I mean, do they like different music? Hip-hop, rap?

W. MARSALIS: Yes, they like the stuff that they group up with, and you have to participate in their culture that you grow up in, no matter how abhorrent it is to somebody else, but if you are a parent, you have to give your kids the opportunity to not be you.

HOPKINS (voice-over): Just a lesson Wynton Marsalis learned from his father.

Wynton Marsalis, a mover, instrumental in pushing jazz to the forefront of American music.

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