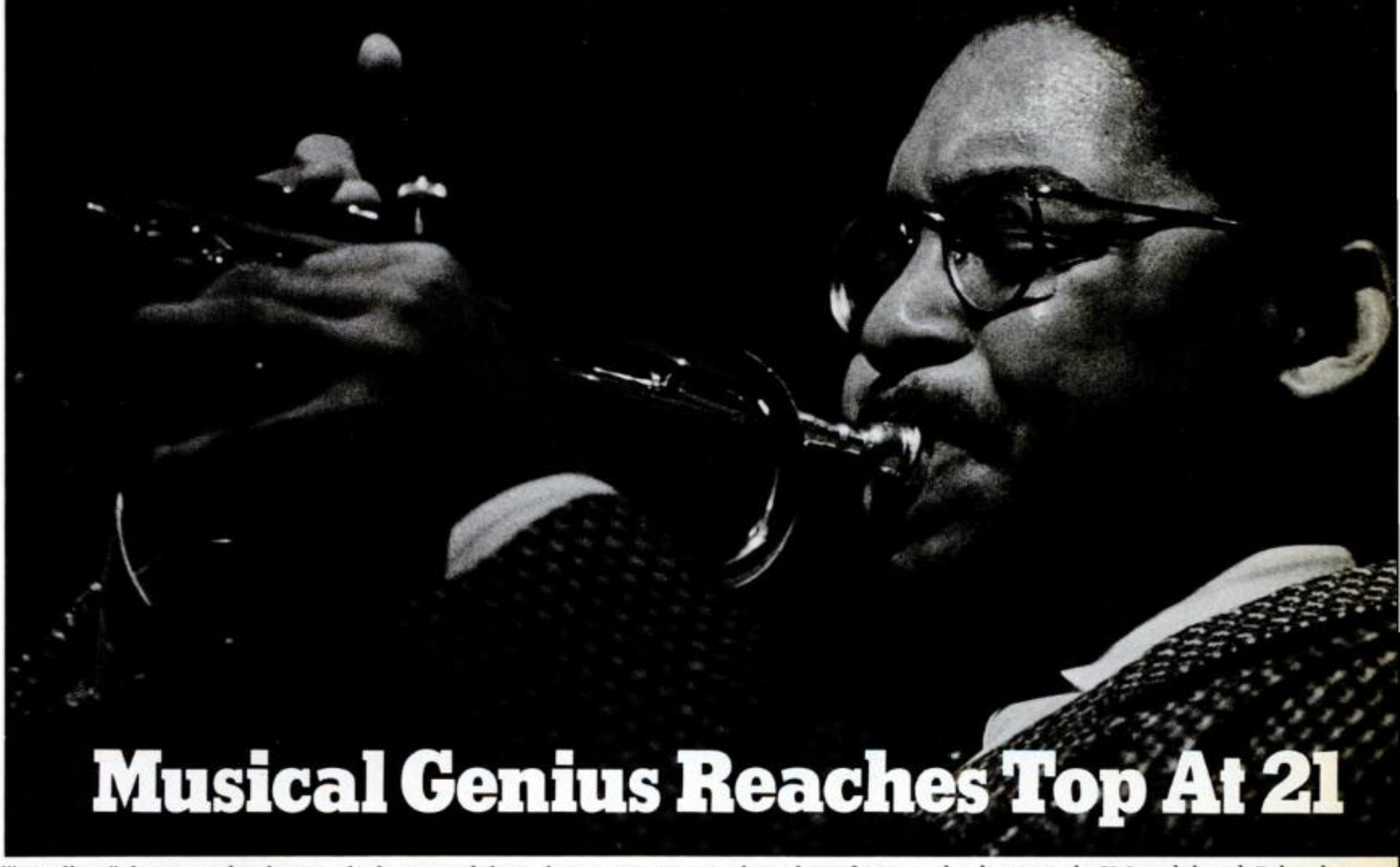
WYNTON MARSALIS



Musical Genius Reaches Top At 21

Wynton Marsalis has zoomed to the top as both a jazz and classical trumpeter, winning the acclaim of critics and audiences in the U.S. and abroad. Below, he is shown (c.) with members of the Wynton Marsalis Quintet, (l. to r.) Kenny Kirkland, Phil Bowler, Branford Marsalis (Wynton's brother) and Jeff Watts.

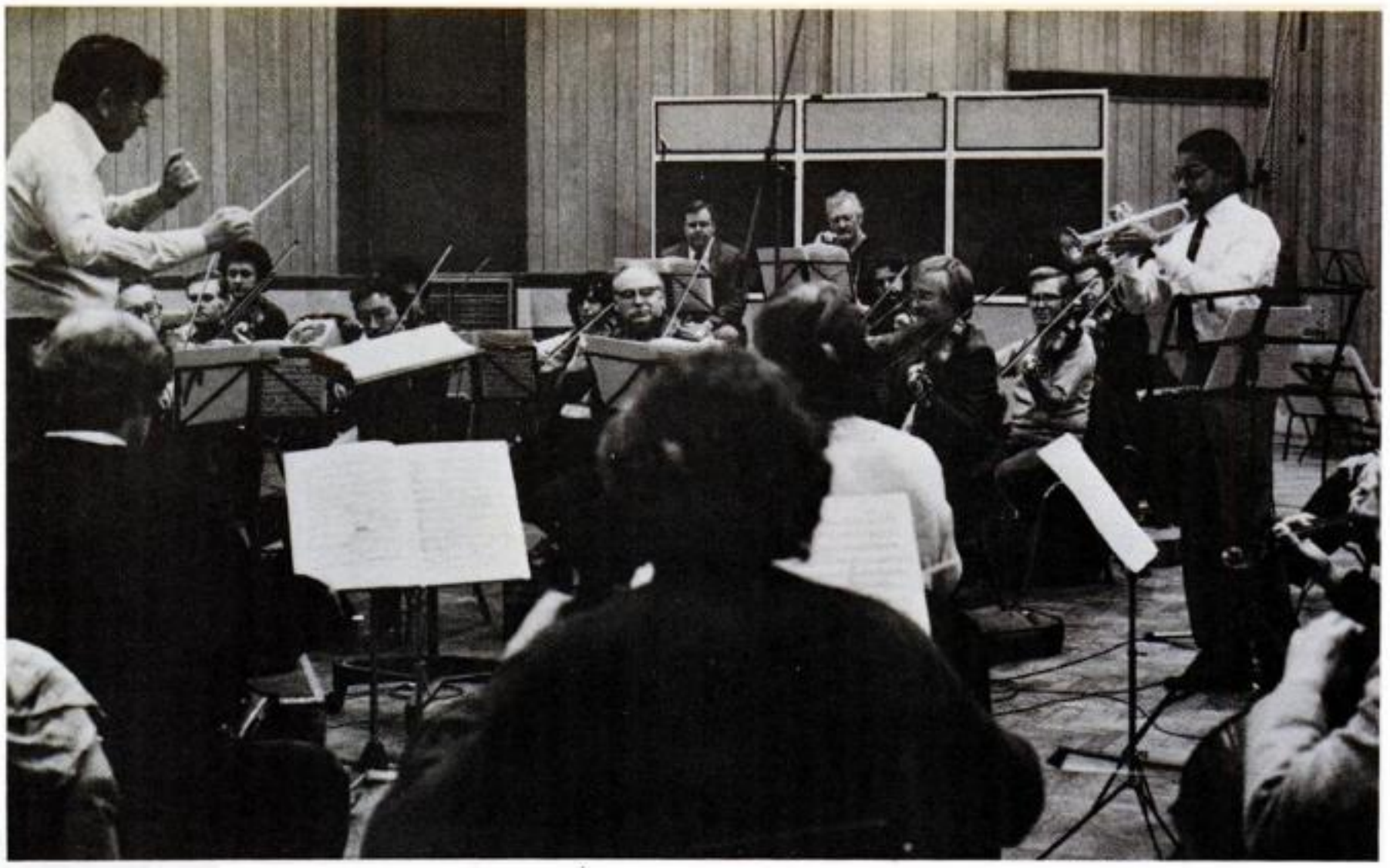
By PHYL GARLAND

WYNTON Marsalis does not look like a messiah. He is affiliated with no religious cult and wears elegant, conservatively tailored suits rather than sandals and flowing robes. Yet he has a mission that has driven him to commit his time, energy and formidable talent to its completion. A lean, compactly built young man of 21, whose horn-rimmed glasses lend an air of premature distinction to his handsome features, he ardently serves the cause of jazz, a recently neglected Black-born art form that he calls "the greatest music of the 20th century." His temple is the concert hall, the night club, the recording studio or any place where he might play this music for the multitudes, and his gospel is enunciated through the brilliantly conceived and impeccably executed musical statements of his trumpet. Already he has been anointed as the musical messenger who might well save jazz from extinction by resurrecting its endangered tradition of creative improvisation. His own best witness is his unprecedented record of achievement.

In 1981, when he was in his late teens, he already had earned the respect of aficionados as a sideman with the Art Blakey Sextet, and won Downbeat magazine's Critics' Poll as a Talent Most Deserving of Wider Recognition. The venerable Leonard Feather, jazz critic for the Los Angeles Times, named him "Young Man of the Year," noting that "he seems to have become a symbol for the fledgling decade."

One year later, in 1982, Wynton began to receive that headily anticipated recognition. His first album as a leader, recorded when he was 19 and simply titled *Wynton Marsalis*, was released by Columbia Records to almost universal critical acclaim. Here was a young man of the coming generation playing real acoustic jazz of a cooly sophisticated and cerebrally demanding nature. There were strong echoes of his predecessors on trumpet, especially Clifford Brown and Miles Davis, but this was clearly his own music and

Continued on Next Page



In London, Marsalis plays one of three trumpet concerti (Haydn, Hummel and the Leopold Mozart piccolo-trumpet work) he recorded with the National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Raymond Leppard (l.). Below, he discusses technique with celebrated classical trumpeter Maurice André who said, "Wynton Marsalis is potentially the greatest trumpeter of all time."

WYNTON MARSALIS *Continued*

his own style. In December, this debut recording won Downbeat's award as Jazz Album of the Year. He hurdled over perennial stars such as Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis to win the title as top trumpeter, and was voted Jazz Musician of the Year. No artist so young and of such brief experience had ever racked up such a victory.

For those who dismiss polls as being merely amplified rumblings from the unenlightened, convincing testimony comes from a master of the art of jazz. Pianist Herbie Hancock, who toured with Wynton on the Kool Jazz Festival circuit and produced his album at Wynton's request, recalls his initial reaction. "I expected him to be a guy who played real nice for 18, although the real test has nothing to do with age. It's nice to develop young, but the real test is when you can perform at the same level as the best around. Wynton is in that category. I would put only three trumpet players in the highest echelon: Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Freddie Hubbard. Dizzy and Miles have a kind of depth to their playing that could add another plus to them. But Wynton is in a category with those three. . . ."

UNLIKE some prophets, Wynton has been much honored at home. Mayor Ernest Morial proclaimed a "Wynton Marsalis Day" in his hometown, New Orleans, in February 1982, with full-scale festivities

Fluid in speech and forthright in manner, he is a natural for the media. He has been written up in numerous national publications and has appeared on *The Tonight Show* where guest host Bill Cosby introduced him as "the young man I'd like to have marry my daughter."

This is heady stuff indeed. But it does not stop here. Having reached the pinnacle of acclaim in the jazz world at an age when most are just beginnning, Wynton has embarked simultaneously on a separate career as a solo trumpet artist in the classical field. It is an outgrowth of his dual development, for at the age of 14 he won the Louisiana state-wide youth competition to appear as soloist with the New Orleans Philharmonic, playing the Haydn *Trumpet Concerto*. At 17, he won an award as Outstanding Brass Player at Tanglewood, and went to New York to enroll in the prestigious Juilliard School of Music as a full scholarship student.

This demanding training prepared him for another historic breakthrough. This past December he went to London to record three major trumpet concerti (by Hummel, Haydn and Leopold Mozart) with the National Philharmonic Orchestra under Raymond Leppard, a leading classical conductor. The album, which will be released late this spring by Columbia Masterworks, is considered a "first" for a jazz artist in terms of what it portends for his future.

This recording came about primarily through the man who is responsible for discovering Wynton. He is Dr. George Butler, CBS vice president and general manager for jazz and progressive music. An erudite Howard University graduate who once aspired to become a concert pianist and who holds a Ph.D in musicology from Columbia University, Dr. Butler says, "The thing that's so unique about this situation is that usually classical artists cannot make the transition and play jazz with the attitude that should accompany jazz. They can play the notes, but when it comes to improvisation there's no feeling for it, so they can't improvise. Wynton in like a different animal when he's in either/or. He just adapts to whether it's classical or jazz, and it's incredible."

Top executives at CBS Records warble Wynton's praises in an assortment of keys. Dr. Joseph Dash, head of the Masterworks label, readily refers to him as a "genius," noting, "I think he's going to be as big a smash in the classi-

Continued on Page 32

cal world as he has become in the jazz world, and I can't think of another artist like that." Pointing out that Wynton is the first Black classical trumpeter of note, he says, "If you add up the Black classical artists who have made it, other than opera singers, you don't have a very long list after Andre Watts. There aren't many—or possibly any—who have made it to Andre's level, but Wynton will."

To those who are accustomed to dealing in the hard-sell world of the music business, some of this praise might sound like part of a monumentally successful public relations campaign. But several other factors cut through this clatter of applause. They are: the magnitude of this young man's talent, his towering commitment, his rock-hard certitude as a person who knows what he wants to do, and the combination of forces that have enabled him to seek his goals.

He readily credits his father, Ellis Marsalis, a highly respected New Orleans jazz pianist, for inspiring him to become a jazz musician. "I'm lucky, because of my father," says Wynton, who was named after jazz pianist Wynton Kelly. "I know that if it weren't for the fact that my father is a jazz musician, for the fact that he has jazz records, I know that I would not play jazz, because there was nothing. None of my surroundings, none of my peers, nothing on the radio, nothing I got at school gave me any input."

Ellis Marsalis, a graduate of Dillard University, left a powerful imprint on more than one of his six sons. Branford, who is a year older than Wynton, is a brilliant saxophonist who appeared on Wynton's debut album and regularly shares the spotlight as a member of his brother's quintet. Last year the senior Marsalis recorded with Wynton and Branford on an album called *Fathers and Sons* which also earned critical praise. Working as a performer and teacher of jazz improvisation at the New Orleans Center for Creative Art, the father was gentle in his guidance. "I felt that if they decided to go into music, it should be because they wanted to and not because they had been pushed into it," he says.

Branford had started on piano and shifted to clarinet while in the second grade, soon settling on saxophone. It was then that Ellis decided to get an instrument for little Wynton so he wouldn't feel left out. At the time, Ellis was playing at the Riverboat with Al Hirt, the noted New Orleans trumpeter. Ellis recalls, "Clark Terry brought Miles [Davis] by and he heard me when I asked Al for an advance to buy Wynton a trumpet. Miles said, 'Don't get that boy no trumpet. It's too hard. Let him play something else.'" The advice was ignored and Al Hirt ended up giving Wynton his first trumpet.

Wynton, who was six at the time, made his first public appearance nearly a year later. He played *The Marine Hymn* in a recital at the Xavier Junior School of Music and got a standing ovation. But music was not a major interest and he practiced perfunctorily.

EVEN as a young child, Wynton displayed the single-mindedness that characterizes him today. "He always stuck to one thing," says his mother, Dolores Marsalis, a graduate of Grambling College who "used to sing with a little jazz band" and did substitute teaching before devoting full time to raising her six sons. She continues, "He taught me a great big lesson about life. He would only commit himself to the things he was most enthusiastic about, not dabble in a whole lot of little things."

It was when he entered the eighth grade that Wynton decided to make his greatest commitment. He was 12. "I looked around and wanted to find something that I could do," he recalls. "I thought I would play basketball but I wasn't good enough. I was too short and stuff, so I got into the band and I couldn't play. Everybody could play and I was the saddest one there. I was one of those cats that wanted to act like they could play without practicing. I see cats like that all the time, now."

He began serious study with John Longo, a jazz and classically trained trumpeter who now plays with the Mercer Ellington Orchestra. Wynton readily praises Longo, noting, "He would teach me on Saturdays from 2 to 5 or 6 p.m. That was when we didn't have much money, and sometimes he didn't get paid. But it was more than just a lesson. He made me want to go home and practice. When I decided I really wanted to play, I went to the library and read everything I could find about the trumpet. I listened to every record."

He worked so hard that there was room for little else in his life. "I used to practice all night. That's all I did — practice trumpet. I would wake up in the morning and start practicing. I'd go

Returning to New Orleans last year for "Wynton Marsalis Day," Marsalis is greeted at airport by the Dirty Dozen Brass Band. At right, he is shown at a reception in the mayor's home with (l. to r.) Moses Hagan of the New Orleans Philharmonic, conductor Paul Freeman, Mrs. Sybil Morial and Mayor Ernest Morial. The reception followed *Symphony in Black III*, a concert chaired by Mrs. Morial.

Continued on Page 34

In their New Orleans home, Ellis and Dolores Marsalis are shown with their six sons (l. to r.), Wynton, 21; Delfeayo, 17; Branford, 22; Ellis III, 18, and (foreground) Jason, 5, and MBoya, 11. At right, Wynton makes a "pilgrimage" to statue of trumpet great Louis Armstrong in Armstrong State Park in New Orleans.

WYNTON MARSALIS *Continued*

to school and think about practicing in the daytime. I would play band in the evening and come home and pull records and books out and practice."

In jazz he discovered a new world. "I looked at the album covers and knew those people were really serious. Clifford Brown would have poses where there was such intensity on his face that I knew he was doing something that was the product of a lot of thought. The thing that attracted me to this music was that it was *hard*. I knew I couldn't just sit down and play it. Like, I played in a 'funk' band and we'd learn a tune in a half hour. This music is *80* times harder."

With additional training from other teachers, and courses in theory and harmony at the New Orleans Center for Creative Art, Wynton eventually prepared himself to become a professional musician. Throughout high school he worked 'funk' gigs, jazz gigs, played first trumpet in the New Orleans Civic Orchestra and the Brass Quintet while maintaining a straight-A average in school. He worked so hard that his mother became concerned. "My poor little baby working with all those older musicians. I was proud but worried that he might be too busy to enjoy adolescence," Mrs. Marsalis says.

TODAY, in the first stages of what promises to be a historically significant career, Wynton insists that hard work is the only way to master music. "There's no way to know without studying," he asserts. "I want young musicians to know that. You have to get the knowledge yourself. Don't blame it on the teacher. Don't blame it on the programs in your school if they aren't that good. You've got to go out and get the teachers you want. You must learn how to play your instrument correctly and learn how to read."

Wynton is alarmed at the way the greatest jazz musicians of the past have been ignored, calling Louis Armstrong, his forerunner as a jazz prophet from New Orleans, "a genius of the highest order and the greatest trumpet player this nation ever has or probably ever will produce."

Interest in jazz has declined, Wynton believes, in great part because of the failure of Black people to support it —those "who never come to the clubs, never buy the records and aren't even interested in hearing about it." That is why he has undertaken his mission of restoring jazz and its greatest creators to their proper place of honor. One strategy has been to deliver lectures at schools and colleges, hoping that he might prick the curiosity of young people who will want to grow up with this music.

Wynton's mentor, George Butler of CBS Records, established the pattern by having his protégé accompany him on presentations before music organizations, particularly those involving young Black people. He sees Wynton as a new role model and thinks he can be an important one. "I've been concerned about the fact that athletes, unfortunately, have become the role models for a lot of Black kids — great baseball or basketball players. This is not to disparage those guys, because they are talented in terms of what they do, but all it takes is an injury and that career is over. It's one thing to be superb athletically, but it really doesn't take very much in terms of intellectual background to do that. Young people respond to Wynton because of his youth, the way he speaks, the way he looks, his manners. He's a ray of hope and this is just the beginning."