

Wynton Marsalis: One Future, Two Views

(In separate interviews, two of the music's most intelligent iconoclasts, Wynton Marsalis and John Zorn, talk about the future of jazz.)

The most accomplished and acclaimed jazz musician of his generation, Wynton Marsalis is also as outspoken as he is prolific. Through his own force of personality, intelligence and achievement, he has steadfastly worked to bring jazz back to the center stage in American culture. And he promises, in the new millennium, to “keep the pressure on.”

Marsalis finished out the millennium with a flurry of creativity. Together with several important commissioned debuts and an international tour, he released an unprecedented eight albums on Columbia Jazz and Sony Classical. This extraordinary series, subtitled *Swinging Into the 21st Century*, spans a remarkable scope of original compositions and standards, from jazz to classical. From the rousing big band suite *Big Train* to the lush and melodic septet composition *The Marciac Suite* to tributes to jazz pioneers Thelonious Monk and Jellyroll Morton, from his Stravinsky-inspired *A Fiddler's Tale* to his string quartet album *At The Octoroon Balls*, two ballets and a collection of music written for film, the series reflects Wynton's work ethic and high standards.

Following on the heels of the *Swinging Into the 21st Century* series—the exclamation point at the end of a remarkably productive year—is a special seven-CD boxed set entitled *Wynton Marsalis: Live at the Village Vanguard*. Culled from performances with his septet at the New York jazz haven over a five-year period, it features Marsalis in top form as a bandleader and performer.

On the morning that I visited the talented trumpeter-composer in his Manhattan home—just a few steps away from Lincoln Center, where he serves as Artistic Director for the Jazz at Lincoln Center program he co-founded in 1987—he was typically outspoken, simultaneously audacious and charming. As in other interviews that I've done with Marsalis over the years, he struck me as a man on a mission with no time to waste, intensely focused on his own agenda and quickly dismissive of music that falls outside that realm. And he seemed hopeful about the direction of jazz in the next hundred years.

JazzTimes: What things do you see happening with jazz in the new millennium?

Marsalis: I think there's going to be an end to the old style of jamming on the bandstand that was really initiated during Charlie Parker's time. Historically, that was never a part of jazz music, not in the beginning. The music was always based around melody. Solos didn't come into fashion until Louis Armstrong and didn't become ingrained into jazz until the bebop thing came along. So I think that there will be more emphasis put on presentation and composition as opposed to just soloing, which is really a boring and predictable way of presenting music. I think the days of head-solo-solo-solo-head are over. I also think there will be a return to dance-oriented music, which has always been a part of the jazz tradition. We have a lot of bands in New York playing the dance halls now and there's gonna be

more. So I think that you're going to see a lot of proliferation of the music on that level. But most importantly, I think we'll see a return to adult conceptions of romance, which gives us much more latitude. Harry Connick did that on his last album. What he's trying to do with the ballad form is very interesting to me. Here's a guy who is already popular and could fall into the same format that he's pigeonholed into, but every time I see him he's working on some music. He's using the vocabulary of American popular song, but he's doing all kinds of ambitious things with the form and integrating instrumental material which is very interesting. I think it's hip of him to make that kind of serious statement about music on his new album. He's really saying, "I'm a musician."

I also think in the new millennium we're going to deal with what I call "total jazz," which is a term Duke Ellington used. And to me that means jazz in every form that it can be played in. So if you have the very elite avant garde, which a lot of what they play I don't consider to be jazz, it's more improvised music... you'll always have that, you had that before form. And a lot of people are mistaken by thinking that that's an advance. That's the first thing you have. If you have a group of kids in a room you're not going to tell them to play on the form. It'd take you forever to teach them how to play the form. They have to babble first. And they'll play all kinds of stuff, man, and find all kinda little ways to relate and they improvise. So you'll always have that. That's one aspect of music and that's very, very elite, meaning that you're not going to have a lot of people pay to hear that. It's like a certain echelon of classical music like Boulez or somebody where they want to write a certain type of music. They know that people are not going to gravitate toward it but that's what they wanna hear.

Philosophically, I think we're going to see a retreat from the 20th century misconception that abstraction is always the way to develop material. Picasso told everybody that that wasn't true and they didn't hear it. Abstraction is one way to develop material, that's all. And jazz music more than any other music has its foot in the camp of ritual. It has because of that aspect of it that is derived from African music is ritualistic music. That's why they still have New Orleans parades and they still have the same feeling that they had. The musicians maybe don't play as good now but the feeling of it with the people is exactly the same. It serves the same function. We got off track kind of imitating European critics and European music for a long time. But you're going to see us get on track, because you can't develop very, very long traditions when you're dealing with abstraction. That will give only 30, 40, 50, maybe 60 years of development. Whereas, when you believe in rituals—like the Greeks were ritualists—then you have hundreds of years of development. Japanese are ritualists. Like, they'll tear down a temple and rebuild it the exact same way so the thing that's the oldest thing is also the newest. And we're gonna see more of that, philosophically.

JazzTimes: But isn't this whole aspect of the jam aesthetic on stage part of a jazz ritual?

Marsalis: No, that's part of an abstraction. That's not how the music started. The initial impulse of music wasn't even to solo. Soloing was a special thing. The solo always lifted the tune up. And now the tune lifts the solos up. As time passed, you had a good 40 years in jazz before they started doing that. I

mean, they'd do it at a jam session. It's a ritual in a jam session but not at a concert. At a jam session it's the best way to do things because it's just the musicians, mainly, and you want to hear everybody play. But in a performance you would never have that kind of jam aesthetic. That came in during the '40s with Charlie Parker and everybody. Before that it was always the arrangement and a little bit of solo. Even in concerts—maybe you'd play three. In the case of great soloists like Lionel Hampton or something, they'd play a long time. But that kind of situation, where you have soloists that are just OK that solo for a real long time, I don't think that was part of the plan.

JazzTimes: You mentioned a return to dance-oriented music. What about hip-hop jazz—something that was supposedly bringing more people into the music?

Marsalis: I don't believe in any of that, mainly because even though it's failed miserably somebody keeps propping it up. And they're propping it up with words, they're not propping it up with music. When you had a movement in jazz—let's say bebop—you can start naming people—Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Miles Davis. And you can start naming compositions—"Now's the Time," "A Night in Tunisia," "Donna Lee." In hip-hop jazz, who are the musicians that are being produced? Name me one trumpet player that was produced by hip-hop jazz? Who is it? What do they sound like? Can you bring me a composition and say, "Well, study this and you can understand hip-hop jazz?" I don't think so. Jazz solos have always existed on popular material. And once the tremendous split took place in American popular music in the mid- to late '50s and the '60s—it was completed by the late '60s with the arrival of all the bands from England—then the jazz musician and the popular musician went in two completely different directions. Then they tried to come back together but it didn't work. Now, James Brown's band was full of jazz musicians. 1950s rock 'n' roll—everybody tried to play that. Trane played that kind of Fats Domino thing. Rhythm and blues musicians were on the same circuit with the jazz musicians back then. So popular music developed with the conception of a jazz-based solo on that groove. But jazz music itself has never been developed on any level by any popular form that broke off from jazz. It's never been developed by that. It's participated in it. James Brown's music did not develop jazz, it came out of jazz. So when you try to put those two things back together, as a musician you have to say, "Where are you gonna put 'em together at." Or to put a trumpet solo on top of a hip-hop beat, which is a glorified funk beat with a machine... and to say that's a new form of jazz? If there was gonna be a solo on that music anyway it would be a jazz-based solo. If you're gonna combine that music, you have to combine it at the root, and that's the bass and the drums. And I haven't heard any of that going on. All the hip-hop jazz that's always brought to me always sounds the same... a funk groove. And the bass and the drums determine the identity of your music. What they do most of the time determines what you're playing. Like, if most of the time they're playing something on clave, then you're playing Latin music. If you're playing [something] that has a second line feel then you're playing New Orleans music. If it's a 4/4 type of swing, you're playing jazz music. That doesn't mean you can't use all those elements. The question is, what are you most comfortable doing? Maybe you do all of those things? But then, you don't have an identity. If things don't have an identity they

can't be taught. That's my problem with the non-identity school. You can't teach somebody something that's nothing. In order to speak about it or to teach it, you have to be able to identify it. I mean, Shakespeare knew he was writing plays. There wasn't a question of what he was doing. It wasn't like, "We don't really know what it is, it could be anything." There are books after books, musical treatises. You have musicians who learned the convention and decided that they were going to go against it. But in most instances they go against the convention but they know the convention. They spent time learning it. That was the basis of their scholarship.

JazzTimes: Like Tony Williams when he formed Lifetime. He went against the grain with that band but had his basis in Miles' music.

Marsalis: He was just trying to relate to the rock musician. My personal opinion about [fusion]: it's like rock itself. If you were there it was a great way to meet women and have a good time. If it was part of the soundtrack of your life; you're compelled to defend it because that's how you grew up, that's what you know. But it's the death toll for jazz musicians. Because it puts the amateur musician on the highest level and it took the professional musician and demoted them to the point of being a has-been. The electronic instruments make the musicians sound like they're playing toys when they play. Because the musicians lack the power and intensity, the volume gives them that power. But it has been the choice of the world, and we've seen the direction that music is going in under its leadership. And it's very clear what it is musically. The level of musicianship has not gone up. That's one thing that can't be questioned.

JazzTimes: But from a listener's point of view, that fusion movement was valid.

Marsalis: Everything is valid.

JazzTimes: It was important because it opened the door for a lot of listeners who never heard of Miles Davis or John Coltrane before.

Marsalis: I think the best way to let people know about these musicians is to educate and let them know. I don't believe in this going through the back door. It's like, you're having a banquet and you pull a plate out of some scraps for me. I'll take it because I could be out there starving. But at least let me sit at the table. See, I'm from that time of fusion. I had a pretty good understanding of what that did. I went and saw the Headhunters and all those bands when they played—Miles Davis playing rock. And when I heard them my feeling was, "Well, it's OK." It really didn't turn my head around or anything. And I wasn't even into jazz at that time.

JazzTimes: Yeah, but look where you're coming from. Your father is a great jazz musician. If you were coming from a rock aesthetic and heard this stuff, it would grab you.

Marsalis: We didn't look at our father like that. He was a man struggling to make a living with six kids playing for no people in clubs when me and my brother could go to a club and play to two to three

thousand people. We knew he could play but you have to realize at that time... this whole thing about jazz and the culture, we didn't care about none of that. We was listening to Earth, Wind & Fire and Parliament-Funkadelic. We looked at our daddy like, "Well, we guess he can play." We didn't have anything to compare him to. We just noticed that some musicians said he could play. But we also knew that he played for 50 people and we played for 2,000 or 3,000 every night. He could make \$40 or \$50 on a night and we could make \$100, and there was 10 of us in the band. But the fusion thing... it kind of did him like it did all the musicians from that generation. They were overwhelmed by what had happened, how rock just came in and took over, how suddenly a non-musician could be elevated above a real musician. Some jazz musicians could figure out how to get in on that and make their little money but a lot of those older musicians couldn't figure out how to do that. Because it's a totally different groove, the funk beat and all that. It's a different sound. So from where I was coming from... I was trying to figure out what jazz was, really. I was just going to hear the people play. My preference was to go to a funk concert because that's where the women were. I wasn't gonna sit up in no jazz club going, "yeah, man" with a bunch of old people. Because that was our impression of it. My whole disenchantment with fusion music came with how they developed it, which took place as the '70s passed. It started off with an idea of music but it ended up being just trying to make instrumental pop records. Because once you start trying to become more popular, make more and more money, it sucks you into a vortex. And when you know that the critical establishment is going to go with you no matter what you do, that anything that would force you to maintain your integrity... you can forget about that. So we can look back on the decade of the '70s and look at what it culminated; in the decisions Weather Report made, the decisions Herbie Hancock made, the decisions Miles Davis made when he came back from retirement. They weren't playing jazz-fusion then, they were playing instrumental pop music. Not to say bad or good or to indict them or anything, just to say that that's the direction the musicianship went in, and that was not a development of jazz music. And, of course, they were saying it wasn't a development of it. It's not like you would sit down with them and they would say, "This is jazz." They never said that. They were all saying, "Man, jazz is dead. We're not playing that. This is something else." So far as the development... and the reason why I'm such a stickler for this definition is purely for education. It's very hard to teach kids how to play something that's undefined on some level. You have to teach them what the definition is so that they'll have the opportunity to change it.

JazzTimes: The term "jazz" is 100 years old. Is that term still going to be applicable in the next millennium?

Marsalis: That's one of the greatest terms ever invented. And I'll fight under the banner of that term my entire life. That's a great word, jazz. Jazz music is just coming into itself because, like I say, we never had the intellectual community around us. The intellectual community was always trying to imitate European music. You see a lot of what they did to their tradition. And one thing about European music is that it's still being played in all of its glory all over the world, even though the most forward branch of it is the least popular. Bach's music is being played, Wagner's music is being played.

On any given week in New York you can hear so much music; so much of classical music is being played on a very, very high level. That's what we need with jazz. That's the aspect of European music we need to imitate, not trying to figure out how to destroy our music by coming up with something nobody likes under the auspices of innovation. Just do what Duke Ellington did. He's a 20th century artist you ought to check out. Instead of him retreating into a labyrinth of increasingly indecipherable James Joyce-ian language—some *Finnegan's Wake* something that nobody's gonna want to read, he said, "OK, I can do that too." He just added all of that to what he was doing and he kept his core thing. So I think we're going to see jazz is gonna come into itself. I see the musicians in place now, we just don't have everything around the musicians. We don't have the schools in place, we don't have the record companies in place that want to do it. We don't have the critical establishment thinking right about what the music is like. We don't have the type of books coming out, even though I've seen an increase in good books on jazz, where people are really taking the music seriously. But we need the whole structure around it. And the people are ready for jazz, we just have to give them the music. I always say to jazz musicians, "Once you start to believe that the problem is with the people and it's not with you then you stop searching for a way to communicate with them, short of making your music pop music, putting a funk beat on it. Once you put a funk beat on it then you've surrendered a certain aspect of the difficulty of attracting an audience with something that's jazz. Which that's your prerogative to do. But people will come and listen to jazz music and they will like it. They will like to hear you play. The question is do you play good enough. And I think the musicians are going to question those kinds of things. And the great, unquestioned way of doing things that came out after the bebop musicians—all of that is going to be challenged. That's been unquestioned for 40 or 50 years, like that's the direction people should go in. And it's going to be challenged.

JazzTimes: But isn't that more or less what the avant garde movement has been doing for the past 30 years?

Marsalis: No. Because a lot of times the avant garde is not addressing fundamental things like harmony. A lot of times, I'm not saying all the time. The style that they play is actually older than bebop. And a lot of things exist out of time. There's this belief that music and art is going to proceed the same way that technology proceeds. Like, you know William Johnson the painter? You look at his painting and it's considered to be modern art but also kind of a quasi-folk art. And even though it's in the 20th century it's not considered to be more progressive than what Monet or Cezanne or even Goya, who was like a hundred and something years before him. You don't look at it and say, "Well, that was done in 1933 so then that means it has to be more progressive." It's not necessary for a thing to be chronological for it to be of any value or not of value. But there's this kind of way that we look at stuff where we are confusing art with technology. Like, there's nothing wrong with William Johnson's paintings. It's not like it's bad for him to paint in the style that he paints in. In the same way, there's nothing wrong with Robert Johnson playing the way he played in the 1920s when Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were doing much more inventive things. It's just another form; it's another way of

playing. Or just like there's nothing wrong with Ornette Coleman playing with a kind of two-beat feel, like a Caribbean band would play, when Charlie Parker is playing in 4/4 and playing all this stuff and people like Cannonball Adderley and Miles Davis and Coltrane and Sonny Rollins are doing all these different things. But when you take a style like the style of Ornette Coleman and say because that took place in 1959 it's somehow more sophisticated or it's more avant garde or a more forward reaching statement than something that Duke Ellington wrote in 1947, like "The Tattooed Bride," or even what King Oliver's band played in 1923, the music does not bear that out. If you had to just deal with that as a conception out of time, the concept of seven or eight people playing together the way King Oliver's band did or four people playing the way Ornette Coleman's quartet did, you would definitely come to the conclusion that the King Oliver conception is much more avant garde.

JazzTimes: I'm not suggesting that the avant garde is a progression or more forward-thinking movement than bebop, but it is a reaction to bebop.

Marsalis: I don't think it's a reaction to bebop. I think it's a reaction to the European avant garde, with the exception of Ornette Coleman. He eventually became tied into the European avant garde but he didn't start off like that. He didn't consider himself to be in the avant garde; he was just trying to play. I mean, I want to clarify what I was saying when I say the way bebop musicians did things. What I'm talking about then is more the progression of solos, what the mainstream jazz musicians play—the head-solo-solo-solo-head form. All the members of the band play together just for a short time and then each individual person plays for a long time, then all the members of the band come back for a short time. Also the simple form—the AABA form. There are some musicians today like Steve Coleman and Greg Osby that are not doing that. Danilo Perez is not doing that; Marcus Roberts is not doing that. You know, a lot of musicians are doing a lot of different things and developing different types of material. But I'm talking about the mainstream of jazz musicians; it's still head-solo-solo-solo-head. And that is bound to change.

JazzTimes: There's a quote from you in your bio for the *Swinging Into the 21st Century* series—something like, "The 20th century was about communication and the next millennium is going to be about integration." Can you expand on that a bit?

Marsalis: It's going to go to where jazz started. When Jellyroll Morton described the red light district in New Orleans, he said, "Everybody was there." He was naming all these things that went into jazz—all the Italians and French people and different types of black folks and Creoles. That's the melting pot. Now we have the capability to communicate with each other on a much more global level and once you know you can speak to somebody, then the question becomes, what are you gonna say? And now that we can come closer together with the airplane and the Internet and satellite hookups, we're going to see a much quicker integration. And when that starts to happen, it just means that we'll be where jazz started. Because jazz was ahead of its time. The expression of jazz had nothing to do with what was going on in the United States of America in 1900. So we're getting ready to see the world step into the

world that jazz was born into. All these people like Louis Armstrong and Jellyroll Morton, they were way ahead of their time. And that's what killed a lot of these guys. Charlie Parker and all these people. They were killed by the fact that they were ahead of the society that they lived in and the pressure that that placed on them was just too great. Because they could strip the illusion away and see what really is. And when you're the only one that can see that then you band together with a little group of guys. But it's very hard to stand against everybody. The problem is, our culture was not up to the task of absorbing our music. The music was too powerful. It was dealing too much with what is and we were dealing too much with what we wanted to impose on culture, mainly through the vehicle of race but through other things also. I mean, how are you gonna accept Louis Armstrong for who he is when everything that's told you [says] these people ain't shit. That's a profound thing. But the music is always going to put the pressure on the culture itself. Put the pressure on so that it can be itself—[]the highest part of itself. And again, you have to teach this. And as musicians we have to develop our musicianship so we can keep that pressure on our culture to be itself. Keep that pressure. Keep that pressure.

JazzTimes: That seems to be your own personal goal for this new millennium.

Marsalis: Keep that pressure on. Keep the pressure, so that we can get closer to ourselves. Jazz at Lincoln Center is just one way we do that... bringing the feeling of jazz out here, with force. Don't back down. Come at it the way they coming at it... 'they' being whoever is pushing that bullshit music out here. That shit is very forceful. I mean, you can spend your life studying music and know a pile of music in terms of what's known out here, and you will then be put in a position of having to defend it because you don't want to play hip-hop jazz, which is nothing. There's really no such thing as hip-hop jazz. It's a movement that failed... acid jazz. Nothing came out of it. Nobody said it miserably failed. It's so forceful that you are then put in a position of being defensive, like you have to defend yourself against it. It's really comical because it's not like you have to defend yourself against anything they're doing musically. It's not like you're responding out of insecurity. It's like, something can be said and then it is. I can go up and say something about you and that's it. And they're gonna make this into a movement of jazz? I mean, how can you... even that didn't fly. One thing I will say, at least—they're still trying to pump life into it but it did not fly. I was watching that movement very carefully: "If this bullshit here flies, that would really, truly be something." I mean, where's the music? That's my only question about hip-hop jazz. Some young musicians all want to imitate hip-hop and all this other shit. Why would we want to imitate that? What is in that world that we want to get? I mean, there's one thing that we will definitely get in terms of them fine-ass women they have. But you know, besides that, man, we ain't gonna get no music. I guarantee you that.

JazzTimes: And then of course, that's mutated into another movement—the drum 'n' bass thing.

Marsalis: It just becomes more absurd as it goes along. Once you start with something absurd as your premise, there's no limit; it's like an equation. You can have some long mathematical equation and you

get something wrong in the beginning of it... Well, shit, all the rest of it is gonna be wrong. You can be sure that it's not gonna come out right. You have to go back through the whole problem and trace where it broke down. And our culture right now—we're still dealing with issues that we had in the 19th century. We still haven't resolved a lot of them. But we will.

JazzTimes: Any other parting thoughts about things that might come to pass in the new millennium?

Marsalis: I would like to see the CDs cost a lot less. Music costs too much money, man. Nobody can afford to pay that kind of money. It's really about injustice and greed, really. For live shows and all that, I'm always saying, "Charge people less money. Let's get people into what we're doing." Give shit away. We could give scores away—give it away. Have people playing it. Let's get the music out here.

JazzTimes: So that would be your agenda if you were running your own record company right now?

Marsalis: Well, you'd go broke. My agenda would be to not go broke but to not gouge people, man. I feel very uncomfortable with that; just the gouging that goes on.

JazzTimes: People need to have access to great stuff.

Marsalis: You have to make it available.