

"NICE tie."

We're walking up from the downstairs bar at Ronnie's, and Wynton Marsalis swivels to check my silvery noose. Of course, I tell him where I got it (you think I'm going to tell you?).

Urbane to a fault, he pauses to shake a hand as we file through a capacity crowd at the Scott Club. Eyes glittering, teeth bared in a sly grin below a trim wisp of a moustache, Wynton lights up another admirer, just as he had done minutes earlier in a bewitching set by his group.

This is a rare moment we have here. We're present at the earliest mature incarnation of a musician who should, if he holds course, muster a kingly sway over the demesne of jazz music. Real prodigies come along seldom enough; scarcer still are those with the wit to query their sudden flarepath to success and the chops to suggest that, no matter how good some cat says they are, they're sleeping on a greater suss and inclination to go a lot further yet.

To speak in plain characters, Wynton Marsalis is 20 years old and has the jazz universe at his feet. Not since Clifford Brown floored all Stateside competition nearly 30 years ago has a trumpeter promised so much. There's something about the trumpet that's crystallised a certain enterprise in the jazz spirit: it was the burnished, singing attack of Armstrong, Gillespie and Brown that unleashed a peculiar sense of darting into stratospheres, setting the tail of a tempo afire, cuffing attention to a declaration in magnesium.

The urgent piercing of the trumpet's treble tone can spark a magically abrupt involvement from listener and player alike: a crescendo in chrome effects the transformation of the moment.

Marsalis understands that, has the ignition of excitement down hot and cold — but the most remarkable thing about him is the way he pares a prodigious technique to such etched and polished detail. There's no tautological grabbing, no needless flurries of recourse to flamboyant rhetoric.

In an enthralling 90 minutes it was as if the hornman was shaping a single solo, retreating into the shadows of rhythm, reconnoitering the possible strata of melodies and tactically unfolding the lotus until it was time to close up.

His brother Branford on tenor sax is so elegant a foil it's a disgraceful pleasure. Superficially reserved, even hesitant, it eventually dawns

that there's a fascinating fraternal game in progress. Branford is all droll curves, demure peeks into the gaps left by the last soloist, sudden hefts into the low register and a forecast thundercloud that never quite arrives. When the two meet in a climactic, braced charge against the rhythm you can almost hear the fire crackling. An excellent rhythm section acts as lever to the adventure.

Basically, a hard bop quintet: except hard bop was never really like this. The Marsalis brothers dismantled the locomotive, the undercarriage intact but a sleeker, more angular proposition on top. A mode that had humidity as aired and recharged in a manner that suggested again that this most basic of jazz measures has enormous resource in it yet.

WE SECRET ourselves backstage between sets. I perch myself between sax and trumpet cases, instruments gleaming in the dull wattage that serves to light Ronnie's 'dressing rooms'. Marsalis has one ear on the fusion group that's playing support. "Doo skow doo doo doo... it's sk it's cool," he says, though it obviously isn't. "I never like what I play, but I don't criticise my own shit. When I play, I play to get better."

What does he think about while he's playing?

"Music. It's an abstract art. The object is to attain the highest expression in that idiom so it will stand the test of time and leave an imprint on history. About three per cent of all music that's played around the world does that."

Hearing Marsalis speak — the slight drawl of his native New Orleans toughened to a wisecracker's edge by his years in New York — furthers the archetype of the cool operator. He's friendly, unfailingly sharp in conversation.

His history can be nutshellled in a moment: first trumpet at six, classical lessons till 12, studying at Juillard at 17 and a job with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, the make-or-break workshop for hot young talent. Marsalis stunned everybody. If you can get hold of 'Art Blakey And The Jazz Messengers' on Kingdom Jazz or the debut album for CBS (which I was a little too cool on) you will be too.

"It's the hardest music to play. People look at things in two different ways. Some people look and say, this can't be done; some say, it can, it's just that nobody's doing it. That's how it always is. I decided I wanted to do this because nobody else was really doing it. It's something that's going down the drain — the tradition is so great, but there's so many misconceptions because of the nature of musicians and the conditions they have to play in. It

was my duty to try and play this music, on the highest level that I can play it on."

The conditions — I think of the European festival circuit, the endless round of established clubs and familiar residencies. Is he afraid of being trapped in this routine?

"Everybody's trapped in their surroundings. My job is to see those surroundings improve, for other guys. Like, if you expect things — if you say, Solid — I'm a jazz musician, I'll be put in a shitty hotel, then that's what you'll get. If you say, Fuck this — put me in a good hotel, man — then you'll get that."

You have to be good in the first place, perhaps.

"If you're not good then you don't deserve a good hotel." He laughs, but the assurance is solid. Marsalis knows he's good.

DOES HE consider he can say more in playing a solo than, say, singing a song?

"No, I don't think those two things can be compared. Words — literature — is a very universal thing, so it will always be more popular than music, which is very abstract. You know what I'm saying? Music with words is great but it has to be a certain kind of music which will endure. Great lyrics are as good as great music — but I never hear songs with great lyrics, man!"

"I listen to pop and funk music — the reason I don't like it much is not because of the music, some of it's hip sometimes — but the words don't say shit! What they count as outrageous is how many curse words they can stick into a tune, how many dumb phrases they can stick inside a song."

"A certain level of stupidity is creative. Really stupid lyrics are funny, like Parliament. But who writes great lyrics, man? Rock musicians? I check them for the toons... Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney does some good things once in a while."

And in jazz?

"Miles in the '60s, not in the '70s. That's not jazz. Trane, Bird, Louis Armstrong, Clifford, Clark Terry — I like a lot of people, man. Anybody who can play I like."

I decide to wave a label under his nose. What made him decide on hard bop?

"I'm not playing hard bop. There wasn't no be-bop licks in that set. Hard bop is like... He goes into a superb exposition of bopscat."

"You know what I'm saying? Our music is like a combination of three different '60s groups — Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Some of it's what they used to call avant garde — there's no titles for this music yet."

It'll come. If there's one thing the jazz establishment loves it's a players' school. Marsalis, though, seems set to be immortalised: how does he feel about that kind of attention?

"No critic can make me a star, make me into something I'm not. You understand what I'm saying? The musicians give me respect. When cats who've been playing the music for 40 years, who don't give a shit about me or anyone else — when they come up to me and say, Man — you swingin'! That's what makes me feel good."

"People who've heard some records and read a couple of jazz books and hear me and say, that

sounds like Miles — they can't make me a leader. Either I am a leader and the cats will respect me, or I'm not. Someone else will come and do it. Another cat who sounds like Bird will come."

"Your plan is what makes you a leader. The thing that made Miles great was that he could play. The publicity he got was bullshit to sell records. He could play — that's the bottom line on everything. The last ten years, I don't know. Maybe he just wanted to make some money."

"The whole genre of shit they call jazz fusion — some good music came out of that. I'm not saying it's all bad, but compared to this — it don't stand water, man."

Is there a shortage of great players now?

"I think a lot of the greats have vacated their positions. A lot of the great cats died and replacements don't just come along. You don't force innovation. Ornette Coleman is the last great soloist in jazz on a genius level, but he's not playing jazz now. You understand what I'm saying? You can't just replace Ornette."

"The problem that jazz suffers is that asshole critics try and force asshole musicians into not trying to emulate the great people who came before them. Louis Armstrong, even when he was obviously greater, used to say, Oh, I just sound like Joe Oliver. He was still saying, listen to Joe."

RIGHT, OF COURSE. Taking a greater man's lesson and providing your own nuance and embellishment is finer than lunging after innovation when it's beyond your grasp.

"It's like any music. Some of the cats can play, the rest of them are sad. The avant garde now, that's mostly like 1940s European music with some blues licks thrown in."

"There are people who believe that jazz is not an academic music. What I have to tell them is that once a tradition has been established an academy has to go along and support and develop it. My technique has come from studying that tradition. You want to be a jazz composer? I saw Wayne Shorter sit down and play Thelonious Monk tunes for an hour — he understands, because he studies the masters. You say you want to play something new, that doesn't sound like anyone else, and that's what you sound like — nothin'."

Is this an exclusively black tradition for him?

"Oh no, man, music has no colour. It's just that the majority of good players are black. If this wasn't a black - white thing it wouldn't be no issue. Music is music. It's the exact opposite of racism. It came out of people's desire to express what they couldn't do in words. Do you realise how much pain motherfuckers've had to deal with? You know what it's like when you've been assigned an inferior position in society — when you realise something ain't right?"

Marsalis sounds uncommonly rational on the breaks. But will he burn himself out — star at 20, scuffler at 25?

"That's not gonna happen, man. I can't hardly play yet! It's amazing that I'm 20 and I can do what I can do, but that doesn't make it stand up against the greats. Maybe I'll get to that if I keep going..."

And Wynton went out to play some more.

Teenage
trumpet major
WYNTON
MARSALIS
lights up
another
admirer,
RICHARD COOK

