Donn Young

Horn master Marsalis: warmth, humor, superb technique, and a sense of tradition.

THE KID IS BLOWING THEM AWAY

Recordings by young trumpeter Wynton Marsalis are wowing the jazz world. New releases by old pros meet the same high standards.

Reviewing the 1980 Houston Jazz Festival in these pages, I observed that if the barracudas of the music business failed to convert him into a moneymaking machine, the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who was then all but unknown, would develop into an important creative musician. Given the barracudas' history of success in the jazz crossover and fusion sweepstakes, the concern seemed justified. But Marsalis's daddy has been a barracuda watcher for years, and young Wynton was brought up to recognize the feeding patterns. He decided long ago (relatively long ago; he's only twenty) to follow his instincts for quality, regardless of attempts to capitalize on his spectacular musicianship.

Historically, Columbia Records has, shall we say, taken advantage of fusion opportunities in dealing with jazz musicians. So when Marsalis agreed to record for Columbia, he insisted on artistic control. The executive producer in charge of compromising serious musicians was, in effect, told to sit in the corner while the sessions were recorded. If you like irony, you'll love the fact that the resulting album (*Wynton Marsalis,* Columbia FC 37574) is at this writing being featured in Columbia's advertising as a money-maker alongside LPs by some of the label's most compromised fusion artists. And it is at the top of the *Jazz Times* National Jazz Survey list of most-played albums on jazz radio stations and programs, beating out such fusion leaders as Grover Washington, Jr., Jean-Luc Ponty, and the formidable group known as Weather Report. Interestingly, in sixth place on that list is another album of pure jazz, Art Blakey's *Straight Ahead* (Concord CJ-168), on which Marsalis is the trumpet player. Wynton is also making a national tour that included a stop in San Antonio in late June.

Marsalis and his saxophonist brother, Branford, were steeped in the jazz tradition as they grew up in New Orleans. Their father, Ellis, is one of the city's most respected music educators and a pianist admired by many of the best-known players in jazz. The boys have been surrounded by quality music all their lives, and they are as familiar with the heroes of early jazz as with players on the cutting edge of the avant-garde. Wynton's acknowledged inspirations are Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and Don Cherry, whose styles cover the full range of the jazz trumpet tradition. As a result, he has a balance and perspective that is rare among young musicians, many of whom seem to think that jazz began with John Coltrane, and post-1960 Coltrane at that.

That essence of tradition in Wynton Marsalis's

Jazz kids: Wynton, 11, and Branford, 12, with daddy Ellis (l.) and Sonny Stitt.

playing—his mature and rounded point of view—may be more responsible than the stunning perfection of his work for the eager reception accorded him by all factions of the jazz audience. There are, after all, plenty of technically gifted trumpeters. It is Marsalis's ability to get to the heart of the matter—in spite of his technique—that reminds us of Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, Clifford Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Davis, and Fats Navarro, and of Chet Baker, Freddie Hubbard, and Cherry at their best. In common with them he has warmth, emotion, and humor, the qualities in art with which people most strongly identify, regardless of bravura forms and techniques.

When the Marsalis brothers harmonize an Ornette Coleman phrase from an obscure recording, it is in a way an inside joke; perhaps one listener in a thousand could identify its origin. Yet the quote gives "Hesitation" a final affectionate nudge that leaves the listener smiling for reasons he may not totally understand. Such is the power of suggestion in the hands of creative musicians who work from a tradition.

The atmosphere of the Marsalis album is evocative of the Miles Davis Quintet of the late sixties, not only because the Davis rhythm section of that period backs the Marsalises on four of the performances but also because Wynton finds profound inspiration in Davis's music. Pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams help him achieve the feeling of the Davis band on pieces like "RJ" and "Sister Cheryl." Marsalis's own group is featured on three other tracks. His young rhythm section maintains quality and consistency, and indeed, on "Father Time" and "Twilight" it is more adventurous than the veterans. Marsalis's compositions signal his arrival as not only a major instrumentalist but a composer of substance.

Branford, seen outside the glare of attention surrounding his brother, is at least as interesting a soloist and is in some ways more probing. His playing has been touched by Wayne Shorter's, but not to the point of imitation. In a recent appearance in San Francisco Branford's intense and often funny solos were as astonishing as Wynton's and received as much audience approval. Pianist Kenny Kirkland fully matched the brothers in excitement, if not in lyrical inventiveness. As on the album, drummer Jeff Watts was powerful, intricate, meticulous, and responsively tuned in to the rest of the band. Marsalis was enthusiastic about his brand-new bassist, an eighteen-year-old Philadelphian named Duane Dolphin who seemed to have adapted quickly to the band's complex tempo changes and subtle dynamic shifts.

Though the tempos and harmonic approaches of the Miles Davis heritage influence the Marsalis band in a major way, the group may make its most original contribution in the area of dynamics, an aspect of music largely ignored by small jazz bands. San Francisco's Great American Music Hall audience was fascinated with the tightly controlled changes in volume and intensity in several pieces, notably Thelonious

Monk's "Think of One," which combined rising and falling volume with slowing and speeding tempos in a delightful ensemble treatment. This is not a band of young egos intent only on playing endless solos over unchanging backgrounds.

"My main concern," Marsalis told me, "is to see that the band is a collective group. Everybody's function has to be equally important." Spoken like a leader—which Marsalis has become, apparently in every sense. Columbia Records seems to have resigned itself to its new jazz star's uncompromising nature. That executive producer has come out of the corner and is championing Marsalis, helping to smooth his way. Wynton is also an accomplished classical soloist, and Columbia plans to record him in two trumpet concertos with the Prague Chamber Orchestra.

The brothers play with their father on one side of a newly issued album called *Fathers and Sons* (Columbia FC 37972), which features tenor saxophonists Von and Chico Freeman on the other side. On the basis of his compositions, solos, and sturdy, propulsive accompaniments on *Fathers and Sons,* it is clear that Ellis Marsalis is the equal of many of the most widely known pianists of his generation. As a result of Wynton's success, which led to this exposure by Columbia, the elder Marsalis may at last get the national recognition that he is due.

Inevitably, as Wynton Marsalis's reputation grows, he will be in demand as a sideman for other leaders' recording sessions. That is his role on the Chico Freeman album *Destiny's Dance* (Contemporary 14008). While his individuality does not shine as brightly here as on his own album, Marsalis is nonetheless most impressive. Freeman, active in free jazz circles for several years, does not seem to have the harmonic depth of Marsalis, and there is a sameness to his playing on several tracks of *Destiny's Dance.* As on other occasions, his bass clarinet summons up greater expressiveness than his tenor saxophone. "Embracing Oneness" is a moving bass clarinet performance.

Freeman's father, Von, is a powerful, eccentric tenor saxophonist who has rarely chosen to leave Chicago but has built an underground reputation on the basis of a very few recordings. The most recent is *Serenade and Blues* (Nessa N-11). In *Fathers and Sons* he and Chico dip into the famous Chicago tenor tradition—tough, bluesy, and expansive—symbolized by players like Von, Gene Ammons, and Johnny Board. There is also room for Chico to explore the contemporary, modal byways he customarily travels, and Von contributes a memorable treatment of the ballad "I Can't Get Started." The Freemans are supported by the remarkable all-star rhythm section of pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Cecil McBee, and drummer Jack DeJohnette.

Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams, the quondam Miles Davis rhythm section that supports Marsalis on much of his album, are on their own in *Third Plane* (Milestone 9105), a new recording under

Carter's leadership. It is a class reunion. Innovators in the expansive sixties jazz movement headed by Miles Davis, these men have continued to innovate and lead. Hancock seems to have passed through a period of pop electronic opportunism, during which he was widely accused of having sold out. Whether or not that is true, he produced a good deal of excruciatingly uninteresting music. Although *Third Plane* was recorded in 1977 at the apogee of his fusion trip, it shows no evidence that the experience diluted his abilities. His piano solos are crisp, clean, and inventive. "Dolphin Dance," one of Hancock's major compositions of the sixties, is explored anew by the three reunited colleagues. If anything, they surpass the shimmering intensity of their 1965 performance, the splash and sheen of Williams's cymbals heightening the sunny atmosphere of the piece. Another of the highlights is Carter's "Third Plane." Also included in his previous album, *Patrao,* though in a different format, it is one of Carter's most intriguing compositions; he and Hancock make the most of the surprising harmonic pattern. This is a lovely album.

For me, a stay in New York these days must include an evening at Hanratty's, the Second Avenue bar and restaurant that has good food, dark wood, greenery, and a solid jazz policy. Dick Wellstood, who has moved back into New York from the Jersey shore, frequently holds forth at Hanratty's. Since the days in the mid-forties when, as a teenage whiz kid, he popped into New York from Connecticut to emulate Fats Waller and James P. Johnson, Wellstood has become one of today's most deeply expressive jazz pianists. His work is alive with intimations of virtually every era of jazz piano, from pre-ragtime to free jazz. You are likely to hear reminders not only of the stride giants but also of Art Tatum, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, and, infrequently, Cecil Taylor. Yet Wellstood's work is not some amusingly eclectic pastiche. It plumbs the depths of the jazz piano tradition with a wisdom that allows humor to be expressed in obvious and subtle ways. Spend an evening with Wellstood, and you'll leave New York feeling fulfilled and delighted. Or save the plane fare and listen to *Dick Wellstood Live at Hanratty's* (Chaz Jazz CJ 108), a two-album set that may well be his best recording. It includes a liberal representation of the traditional repertoire you expect from Wellstood, but he also transforms such songs as Cole Porter's "Looking at You," Kurt Weill's "Barbara Song," and, most unexpectedly, "Jingle Bells," which is endowed with such a dose of Wellstood's harmonic magic that it takes on a new life.

Among other recent records of interest are two by James Blood Ulmer, a guitarist heavily influenced by the iconoclastic Ornette Coleman's "harmelodic" theories as well as by urban blues and rock. *Are You Glad to Be in America* (Artists House 13) is an updated release (it was remixed and partly overdubbed) of the Ulmer record issued in England on the Rough Trade label. Because

of its previous unavailability, it has become an underground sensation that is much more talked about than heard. It turns out to be stimulating and—if you haven't experienced the new melding of free jazz and hard rock—a little disturbing. It is also quite danceable, provided that your brand of dancing tends toward abandon. *Freelancing* (Columbia ARC 37493) represents a move toward the harder, blues-oriented side of Ulmer's music. The expression is raw, rugged, and provocative.

Joe Pass has probably never in his life expressed himself rawly in his music. Pass's guitar work concerns itself with elegance, subtlety, and swing. That should not be taken to mean that he is dispassionate; there are moments of heat and power on *George, Ira, and Joe* (Pablo Today 2312-133) that would no doubt have caused the Gershwin brothers to raise an eyebrow or two. Among the surprises are the steely string sound Pass uses on the loping "It Ain't Necessarily So" and his conversion of "Love Is Here to Stay" into a waltz. There is strong support from rhythm guitarist John Pisano, bassist Jim Hughart, and veteran drummer Shelly Manne, whose wire-brush work is a particular delight.

Tommy Flanagan, who combines a soft and graceful touch with unadulterated swing, is represented by two superb new piano trio albums. *The Magnificent Tommy Flanagan* (Progressive 7059) finds him with bassist George Mraz and drummer Al Foster. *Super Session* (Inner City 3039) is Flanagan with Red Mitchell on bass and Elvin Jones playing drums. In each, Flanagan's distillation of melody and his counterbalancing harmonic fullness are supported by a veteran rhythm section. Jones, best known for his hammers-of-Thor approach to drumming, is a sensitive accompanist when he puts down his sticks and mallets and takes up his brushes. He, Mitchell, and Flanagan produce a beautifully crafted version of John Lewis's "Django." The Inner City album is a tad more freewheeling than the Progressive, but it is hard to choose between the two.

The Smithsonian Institution continues to collate and release important jazz albums. *Duke Ellington, 1941* (Smithsonian Collection R-027), is absolutely essential Ellington, the composer and leader at the peak of his creativity and at the helm of his greatest orchestra. *Louis Armstrong & Sidney Bechet in New York, 1923–1925* (Smithsonian Collection R-026), discloses the protean Bechet fully developed, Armstrong nearly so. These are fascinating milestones of early jazz. *Pieces of Eight* (Smithsonian Collection R-029) is a collection of Art Tatum piano solos that have been unavailable for many years. They include some of the 1939 Standard Transcription recordings and a few of the famous 1955 Tatum "house party" sides so sparingly issued by Twentieth Century–Fox in the sixties. Tatum is one of the wellsprings of jazz to which all serious listeners should periodically return, and these are some of his most adventuresome and influential recordings.