

Young man with a horn, 2 Grammys and strong ideas

Marsalis sounds off on bad taste in music

By Kevin Lynch
of The Journal Staff

WYNTON MARSALIS answered the door of his hotel room with his eyes at half-mast and a pair of briefs the sole thread of the conventional dignity he usually maintains quite well.

It didn't much matter. This was only a one on one interview on a Monday morning. Marsalis may be a man of strong viewpoint and confidence in his talents, but he is not a man of airs. He never bothered to get dressed, even though he would have to leave Milwaukee for Minneapolis in an hour.

In a still-thick voice he explained that, after his performance the night before in the Marc Plaza's Crystal Ballroom, he had gone out and spent some time with a friend he knows here.

"Every night I say I won't but then I always do," he said, shaking his head. "I guess I feel all right, considering I've had about two hours sleep in the last four nights."

Rest has been a rare commodity since he performed a classical piece followed by a jazz piece on the highly rated Grammy Awards telecast Feb. 28 — and also carried off two gilded gramophones awards on the program.

Since then he's been performing every night at a different Midwestern city before large audiences in ballrooms and halls. His concert here last Sunday before 1,200 listeners and lookers had wowed some, perplexed others.

"Yeah, it's strange at times," he mused. "Very different from playing clubs because it's hard to read audiences now. They don't really react. So it's hard to call tunes because you don't know what they're responding to."

That's part of the the curious price paid by a jazz musician who's attained a certain glamorous image without really aiming for it.

"Sometimes, people out there seem to be saying, 'What's going on here?' And we sometimes think, 'What are we doing here?'" Marsalis said.

Without his wire-rim glasses, the lean Marsalis looks barely 23 years old. But after 10 minutes of waking up, his eyes were focused with a taut intelligence.

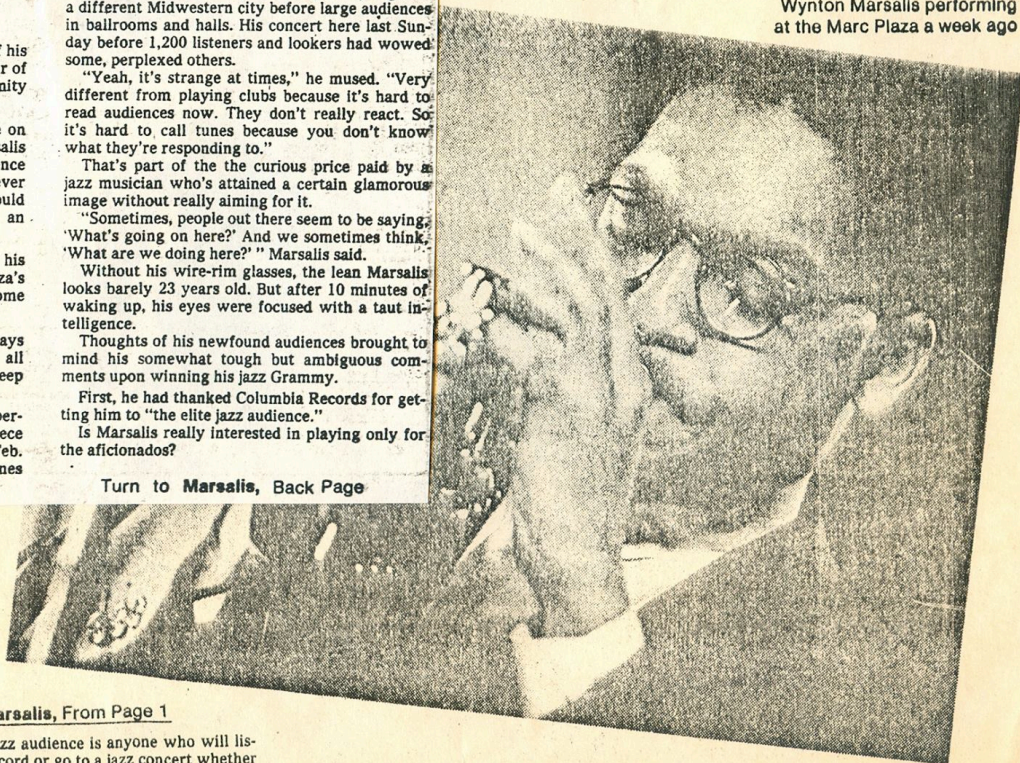
Thoughts of his newfound audiences brought to mind his somewhat tough but ambiguous comments upon winning his jazz Grammy.

First, he had thanked Columbia Records for getting him to "the elite jazz audience."

Is Marsalis really interested in playing only for the aficionados?

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Wynton Marsalis performing at the Marc Plaza a week ago



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"The elite jazz audience is anyone who will listen to a jazz record or go to a jazz concert whether

Rockwell Blake

And we went through opera house in the United States and Canada and talked to him. He said, 'This person is you, this person won't be you, this person said you'll be you, this person said you'll be you.' This fall I will be over it.

vent home and said, "no way around it, I've got to Europe."

Successful series of European produced engagements and France. Upon his return to the US, Chicago and Boston were waiting. He decided to move away from New York City and returned to his wife to Plattsburgh, where he grew up.

He really think the difference in four years ago and two and today is I've had the ability to show what my band can do in different repertoire. "People who heard me in the top register at the Met opposite Marienne, they think they've realized that I've changed. I really, what they are recognizing is they are hearing me in a different repertoire."

In country I sing in repertoire. In Italy, one is offering me Rossini, the Mozart. France is offering me. Every country has its own prejudices in what it wants to hear from a particular voice. Once that's settled, they ask for over and over again."

Philosophic about critics

On a career on the upswing, he can afford to be more philosophical about the critical beating he's received several years ago.

"I'm a person who has decided to sing, if I expect them to sound and say that I can, I think that's asking too much of myself," he said. "Then I'm going to stretch myself into singing they want to hear."

He decided they don't like his style. I will never please them. But by virtue of the fact I respect what I do, I have some people out there who also respect what I do, saying this, and I keep telling them it's true, that it will help me to respect what I do."

"I can do a job I'm happy that I can say I did as well as I can, then I can expect more of myself than

ten to a jazz record or go to a jazz concert whether they like the music or not," said Marsalis. "Just the fact they are interested enough to bother puts them in a very small percentage of the music-listening public."

But the audiences are obviously bigger and paying top dollar to see him. He now stays in fancy hotel suites like the one we sat in.

"I'm happy for whoever responds. I feel lucky I'm getting the music out to more people. I've played concerts where the people threw bottles on the stage and others where half the audience walked out."

"You have more leverage when all this happens. Plus you get treated more humanely. That's a difference. Most jazz musicians don't really know what that's like."

Kept to himself

At the Grammy Awards, Marsalis generally kept to himself, hardly interested in hobnobbing. One wondered whether this young black phenomenon of the jazz and classical worlds was interested in meeting the young black phenomenon of the pop music world, Michael Jackson.

"No, I really don't have anything to say to him. I respect him for his talent but I'm not going to walk up in Jackson's face just to cop some publicity."

His award acceptance speech also prompted "amens" from the jazz community and raised some eyebrows. Staring straight into the eyes of the music industry's upper crust, Marsalis claimed jazz as an American art form that would never be vanquished by prevailing trends or "bad taste."

What exactly did he mean by bad taste?

"Anybody who watched that program knows what I mean," Marsalis said. "All this decadence everywhere. I mean that's cool for them. You know, I'm young and it's exciting to see people running around naked but when I'm 40 years old I don't want to be seeing that stuff. People saying on records let's screw. That's tasteless."

"All this crazy sexual stuff is fine for a person's private preference. But don't market it. That's just bad taste. They get some [buxom] farm girl and put her on an album. People putting red stuff in their hair, something that was done in Britain five years ago to actually make a statement. And all these crazy videos...."

A paradox in underwear

Suddenly, Marsalis is a charming paradox — a young man in his underwear making a matchbook scoot across the table with playful finger fillips as he quietly rails against his own generation. But the problem is not his generation, in his final analysis.

"I mean, the priorities are all turned around," he says. "I'm tired of people who justify all this by saying, 'We have to look to the children for what they can tell us.' Well, every adult was a child once. I'm not putting down any of these performers in particular. It's the music industry milking

everything they can. But they'll do it regardless of what Wynton thinks."

Many viewers also wondered what difficulties Marsalis had after his classical segment, when the camera caught him fiddling with his trumpet valves while his jazz quintet began its performance.

"I was late getting onstage to begin with and after doing the classical segment I had to grab the other trumpet," he explained. "I had oiled the valves earlier but didn't get a chance to turn them back around. I did it then [on camera] but it didn't really bother me."

Marsalis seems to take any challenge or crisis in stride.

"It was tough playing in a big hall like that. There's no monitor so we couldn't really hear each other. But it went all right, considering."

Likes current projects

What pleases him is talk of his current projects. "I'm doing an album with string accompaniment," he said, quickly adding, "It's some good writing with some good hip harmonies and stuff. Klaus Ogermann is doing the arrangements."

Marsalis is also doing another classical album. "It's another baroque album but that's all of that for me. People like Gary Giddins [a leading jazz critic] keep calling me neoclassical this-and-that. They're trying to pigeonhole me into someone who's conservative. But really, anybody who plays jazz today automatically is not a conservative. I play these baroque things and I enjoy that music but I know just as much about Schoenberg and Bartok."

Marsalis was just as quick in calling to task jazz musicians, especially the avant garde which some wish him to emulate.

"The so-called avant garde takes too much for granted," he said. "They forget that jazz is supposed to swing. That it has to work from that groove. You have to build from what came before. I'm not naming names but climbing up a strong

musical foundation is what puts Parker, Miles and Coltrane right up on top."

"Some other big names, they don't even really know how to play the music."

Nobody will ever accuse Marsalis of being unable to play his instrument. He cares too much about the standards of the art forms he works in.

"Of course, if I say any of this, people will say 'Oh, there's Wynton being arrogant,'" he says with a wry shrug.

Still, his views take on distinction partly because of his extraordinary talents and example. He became the first person ever to win Grammys simultaneously for classical and jazz performances.

Few people demand as much of themselves as Wynton Marsalis does of himself. Maybe that's why he's worth listening to.

BEST SELLERS: DISCS

SINGLES

1. Girls Just Want to Have Fun _____ Cyndi Lauper
2. Thriller _____ Michael Jackson
3. Jump _____ Van Halen
4. I Want a New Drug _____ Huey Lewis and the News
5. 99 Luftballons _____ Nena
6. Somebody's Watching Me _____ Rockwell
7. Footloose _____ Kenny Loggins
8. Bang Your Head (Metal Health) _____ Quiet Riot
9. That's All _____ Genesis
10. Taxi _____ J. Blackfoot
- No. 1 a Year Ago — Hungry Like the Wolf _____ Duran Duran
- No. 1 in '79 — Do You Think I'm Sexy _____ Rod Stewart
- No. 1 in '74 — Seasons in the Sun _____ Terry Jacks

ALBUMS

1. Thriller _____ Michael Jackson
2. 1984 _____ Van Halen
3. Colour by Numbers _____ Culture Club
4. Sports _____ Huey Lewis and the News
5. Can't Slow Down _____ Lionel Richie
6. Synchronicity _____ Police
7. Learning to Crawl _____ Pretenders
8. An Innocent Man _____ Billy Joel
9. 90125 _____ Yes
10. Seven and the Ragged Tiger _____ Duran Duran

From a poll of: Mainstream Records (Waukegan, 76th St., Howell Ave., Mill Rd., 27th St., Murray Ave., 35th and Capitol); Radio Doctors; Galaxy of Sound (Mayfair and County Fair Mall); Total Eclipse (Menomonee Falls); Breakwater Records; Musicland (Brookfield Square); Billboard magazine.

Wild Bill Davidson to play here today

Legendary jazz cornetist Wild Bill Davidson will perform today from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Bradley Pavilion of the Performing Arts Center in a concert presented by Tom Halker's Red Mill.

The 78-year-old Davidson is one of the greats of the swing era and a master of the Chicago jazz style. He has recorded numerous albums and performed around the world with many of the classic performers of jazz, including Sidney Bechet and Eddie Condon. Davidson will perform here with the Frank Vlasits Trio and clarinetist Chuck Hedges. Also on the program will be Don Nedbeck and the North Water Street Tavern Band. Tickets for the concert are \$10 and available at the door.