

Wynton Marsalis

## A Life in Jazz

### An Education in Integrity

[Nexus Lecture 2023](#)

With an introduction by Rob Riemen

Nexus Library XIII

Nexus Institute Amsterdam 2024

#### **EXCERPT:**

We need a revolution in vision.

Never has there been a time so out of touch with hardship as a basic fact of life. Voracious screens of all sizes demand attention to a constant stream of content for the tranquilization of anxious minds. Every death, disease, disappointment, crime, crisis, and injustice is depicted as *the* defining aspect of a life. One would think that in order to have some utility, these insurmountable difficulties would turn, at some point, to heroic transformations, catastrophic capitulations or hard-earned lessons resulting from surviving or thriving in spite of them.

Instead, we are horrified and titillated by one sordid fact after the other, some true, but many more false, simply because it's easier to make up a tragic story than to live one. In a cold

irony, we die slowly as spectators, overconsuming visual products created by people who are pretending to be most alive.

Charlie Parker said: 'If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn.' He was talking about mining the depths of human feeling, not lauding the cheap thrills of your favorite vices.

Pain is a part of the process of revelation. My great grandma, Mama Rosie used to say: 'Life has a board for every behind, and yours is fit just for you.' That's why the blues is fundamental to jazz. It is reality therapy that prepares you to survive the inescapable 'what is' of life.

My mentor Albert Murray was born in 1916. He grew up in Jim Crow Alabama during the golden age of the Ku Klux Klan. He was so quiet about the injustices of that time that I often goaded him with pointed questions about it. 'You mean you can't remember one instance when the downright meanness of the prejudice rattled you?' Never wanting to appear vulnerable, his response was always the same: a cool dispassionate silence and a look off into the near distance.

After years of hearing my stories about the troubles we endured in that first generation to actually integrate, he observed: 'You always tell me stories about the abuses you suffered in Louisiana. I hear you. The South was rough, but did you not have a single white person looking out for you when you grew up?' I replied: 'Yes, for one, my trumpet teacher George Jansen showed me a lot of love.' Mr. Murray curtly responded: 'Well, tell stories about him too.'

He went on to say: 'The history of race relations in the struggle for American democracy has always been white and black versus white, even going back to the Underground Railroad. Tell a complete story. Don't drop facts because it feels good to have a neat victim/villain narrative casting yourself as hero. The more nuanced and honest story is the better story.'

Mr. Murray, a military man who was a champion of institutions and collective aspirations, could talk for hours about the devoted teachers who expanded his sense of the possible. He insisted on the importance of celebrating those unseen heroes and heroines whose selfless investments elevated the quality of life for him and the community. 'Civilization is an effort. It depends on them, man. Their commitment and persistence builds institutions and binds a community to its higher aspirations', he would say. 'You need to recognize.'

Jazz, with its young folks and masters, its ways, procedures and systems, can be likened to every other field with these same things. The various constructs -- from the legal system to the railway system to the school system -- enable our daily activities. Over time, millions of people give little parts of themselves to develop these operations. They are expressions of our collective belief, dedication and ultimately, of our humanity. These achievements come under constant attack from natural and man-made forms of corrosion. Their upkeep and improvement require daily and

deliberate investment. It is uphill and often thankless work, but every day, people are out and about the business of keeping it real.

Willful corruption, however, is the truest enemy. It conspires to overwhelm and collapse our various systems so that they no longer work for us, but on behalf of whoever the predatory agent may be. Out of respect for the millions who sacrificed and contributed, we are charged to protect our infrastructures against these constant assaults. This is only achieved through vigilance, hands-on reinforcement, and unrelenting defense.

At a certain point in its embattled history, there were no longer enough people willing to defend jazz from an unabating onslaught of destructive elements. A music that had expended so much of its public space in the cause of Civil Rights would soon be collateral damage in the redefining of American culture that followed. This new America would enjoy a perpetual youth movement that sold the spirit of taboo under the banner of ‘teen culture’. Jazz could not possibly be itself and also exploit the tastes of kids. Youngsters who were also unwittingly uneducated in music so as to avoid toiling under the mythology of ‘other persons’ excellence.

This was a problem, because jazz is an unapologetically adult music. It is emotionally and formally complex, and sophisticated. Modern, postmodern and metamodern at once, because similarities, differences, actualities, appearances, analytics, abstractions, and the to-and-fro of differing perspectives exist whenever any group of people begin to improvise, swing, play in clave or play the blues. In every moment, any musician’s choice can alter the identity of a performance. Why would you not want your kids to know about that?

Through the first eight decades of the twentieth century, jazz produced the longest index of brilliant musicians the world has ever seen. Those final two decades however, saw an equally unprecedented and accelerated extinction of that roster with few replacements. The best older musicians couldn’t tolerate being considered irrelevant and not ‘with it’, and the younger musicians needed only to play the popular music they had already grown up playing. The local musicians that kept the jazz going in communities struggled to eke out any type of living through playing. Things got tighter and tighter all over and on many levels. Something had to give... so a significant portion of the music capitulated to the times and began fulfilling the single burning request that has been lodged since it was born in New Orleans: can you be less?

Its objectives quickly shifted from a group of people balancing volume and intention to a group of individuals asking for more of themselves in an onstage monitor mix; from infinite swinging and grooving possibilities to one or two repetitive backbeat inflected rhythms; from coherent extended melodic solos to strings of overemotive phrases with appropriate ‘into it’ faces for effect; from a tradition of innovation based on musical study and discovery, to the innovation

of violation like the first legal gambling site connected to a sporting league housed in a college, the first doctors to successfully addict their patients to legal drugs, the first bankers to cunningly sell the empty future of faulty assets to their trusted international colleagues while also bankrupting their own company, on and on, you know... lucrative stuff that becomes pervasive, goes largely unpunished, and becomes accepted as 'just the way we do things'. There it is, that windy precipice upon which we must fight corruption over and over and over again.

When we surrender too much ground, it becomes the baseline. Charlatans are celebrated as saviors, and the -- seemingly -- trivial, mannerly rituals that stitch together the complex tapestry of society are deftly unraveled, leaving the tatters of civilization scattered on the howling winds of decadence and disrespect. In Crouch's words: 'Apathy is the enemy.' As we look away, look away, look away, a loss of faith undermines our trust in each other, drives us out of the community square and away from the soul and warmth of collective creativity that produces meaningful public works. Trash becomes treasure.