

Elder Statement: The Ellis Marsalis Trio

By MIKE JOYCE
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The new album by the Ellis Marsalis Trio will leave many listeners considering the virtues of nepotism. After all, if Wynton and Branford Marsalis weren't recording for a major label, chances are good their father and lifelong tutor, Ellis, wouldn't be either. It's a sad fact of life in the present jazz climate: To be young and gifted is a blessing; to be middle-aged and gifted is a liability.

"Twelve's It" (Columbia) is chiefly notable for the splendid performances by the Marsalis family patriarch, who's clearly at the helm of this intimate collection of studio and club recordings. Evidence that he deserves this level of exposure is abundant and takes myriad forms: "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top" is transformed into a cheerful, carefree swinger; "Mozartin" celebrates the family's New Orleans roots with wit and vitality; "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face" radiates a brooding beauty; "Tell Me" and "Zee Blues" capture the improvisational spirit of a live performance. And finally there's "The Party's Over," a staple of Marsalis's repertoire, which provides the album with a spacious and soulful coda.

"Twelve's It" also features Ellis's youngest son, drummer Jason Marsalis, who, along with a pair of alternating bassists—Roland Guerin and Bill Huntington—contributes shimmering accents and an engaging pulse to the lean arrangements. The younger Marsalis credits the aggressive drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, who has frequently collaborated with Wynton and Branford, as his primary influence. Yet in this setting what stands out most about Jason's playing is his keen ear—a sensitivity to tone and texture that complements his father's knowing touch. Ellis Marsalis performs Thursday and Friday at Blues Alley.

(To hear a free Sound Bite from this album, call Post-Haste at 202-334-9000 and press 8172.)

Wynton Marsalis: 'The Midnight Blues'

Tipping his hat to his father, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis opens his new album, "The Midnight Blues, Standard Time Vol. 5" (Columbia), with "The Party's Over," which sets the stage for a series of unabashedly moody performances. Inspired in part by the string-laden recordings made by jazz greats Charlie Parker and Clifford Brown, the music is as accessible as Marsalis's last release, last year's Pulitzer-winning "Blood on the Fields," was ambitious.

Arranger Robert Freedman, who collaborated with the trumpeter on his 1984 album, "Hot House Flowers," once again serves as his silent partner. His orchestral backdrops flatter Marsalis's thoughtful recitals of "It Never Entered My Mind," "You're Blase" and other romantic standards without sounding intrusive or saccharine. Save for a few cloying passages, Marsalis and his band mates—pianist Eric Reed, bassist Reginald Veal and drummer Lewis Nash—quietly explore the album's twin themes of love and longing with unfettered ease.

Although the trumpeter has experimented with a variety of tonal effects in recent years—reflecting his growing interest in blues-rooted vocal inflections—he uses a mute sparingly here, preferring instead to trace the familiar melodies with an open horn and little embellishment. Indeed, Marsalis and Freedman always seem mindful of the warm and sometimes haunting lyricism that lies at the heart of these tunes, so what these interpretations may lack in color and surprises, they more than make up for in melodic power and charm.

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