



*Wynton
Marsalis: 1987*

KEN NAROUN

By Stanley Crouch

Editor's note: We last interviewed Wynton Marsalis in 1984. Since that time his popularity and notoriety have, if anything, grown and, as can be seen in the following interview, he views his position with the utmost responsibility and seriousness. It is interesting to note that despite—or perhaps because of—his popularity, the trumpeter has become the focal point in a critical controversy waged over questions of innovation vs. imitation. In addressing these questions, and those concerning his success, the importance of knowledge and technical preparation for a career in music, and the role of jazz education, he brings the same carefully considered articulation which identifies his musical creativity.

STANLEY CROUCH: Do you have anything to say before we begin, an opening statement?

WYNTON MARSALIS: Yes. I want to make clear some things I think have been misunderstood. Were I playing the level of horn I aspire to, I don't think I would be giving interviews; I would be making all my statements from the bandstand. But at this point, words allow me more precision and clarity. What I want to do is become a serious menace to the misconceptions that I had when I started playing, and I would like to provide some of the information that I have been fortunate enough to get from masters like Art Blakey, Ron Carter, and Walter Davis Jr. They have too great a regard for what they have done and for the greatness of the jazz tradition to allow someone to function under the illusion that he is playing music when he is destroying it. Even though I was told over and over to learn the standard tunes, to find how to play the chords on the piano, I refused to do so, assuming that that was just some old stuff which had no relevance to me. After all, funk was the basis of my first level of development, and we know the endless succession of great virtuosi that music has produced—none.

In fact, when I want to show young musicians the results of disrespect for tradition, I put on my old records with Art Blakey and hang my head in shame as I listen to the confidence I had in disrespecting the bandstand of that great man. Every time I see Art Blakey now I apologize, then thank him for tolerating such an aberration and continuing to remind me that I was not playing much of anything other than the horn itself—and very little of that, come to think of it. I was just playing scales in whatever key the tune was in. But that was enough to be considered musical in my era.

SC: But it seems to me that you have been steadily developing since I first heard you when you were 18 and with Art Blakey.

WM: Hopefully.

SC: What I find most interesting is that you have much more command of the fact that an improviser has to place his sound in an ensemble, not just play over a background.

WM: Hearing your part in the context of a moving ensemble is something that matures as you sharpen your perception of music. But I'm also concentrating on that, and have been for the last few years. I can hear the bass and the drums with much more clarity now than I used to. In the past, harmony notes, bass parts, and rhythm just flew by me, and I would try to grab onto them in a haphazard fashion. I'm now learning how to integrate my notes with those around me. I can hear where these things fit in the form as well. But that also has a lot to do with being fortunate enough to have Marcus Roberts on piano, Bob Hurst on bass, and Jeff—the Tainish one—Watts on drums. They are so involved in understanding the history—and the legacy—of their instruments that they bring a high level of seriousness to the bandstand. The very fact that you are surrounded by musicians intent on making *music* purifies your own hearing.

It is also important to note that each of them—Marcus, Bob, and Tain—is equipped with the proper level of education and

humility to one day add to the already noble tradition that first took wing in the Crescent City. It still befuddles me that all the drums Jeff Watts is playing has been overlooked. He's isolating aspects of time in fluctuating but cohesive parts, each of which *swings*, and his skill at thematic development through his instrument within the form is *nasty*. But then he is The Tainish One. Marcus Roberts is so superior in true country soul to any other piano player in his 20s that just the *sound* he gets on the instrument dissolves all comparison. He is also very diligent. Marcus Roberts is about studying, about learning more and more harmony and furthering his ability to give the kind of variety to his ensemble playing that Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and Wynton Kelly brought to such a high art. And Bob Hurst brings an intelligence of such classic depth to his bass playing that it seems very rare, given how far the quality of acoustic bass playing has sunk over the last 20 years. Bob Hurst knows that Mingus, Paul Chambers, Ray Brown, and Ron Carter helped leave a legacy that only a fool would ignore.

But the thing that makes me really proud of these musicians is that I know from personal experience what type of misconception they've had to fight through to get to a conception that will allow them to attain the degree of musical artistry that we are all presently inspired by. Furthermore, were I even to *consider* jiving, I would have to face the wrath of my own band. Few out here today can boast that.

SC: If they could, we wouldn't be hearing what we're hearing.

WM: Well, at least I didn't say that.

SC: How do you respond to the assertion that you and your musicians are no more than neo-conservatives muddling through a swamp of sentimental nostalgia instead of innovating?

WM: It's my position that very little thorough information regarding the music of John Coltrane, the jazz Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, Monk, or Ornette Coleman is possessed by those who use terms like "nostalgia" and "neo-conservative." Nowhere do I hear these group conceptions being tackled, and nowhere do I hear that level of improvisational authority exhibited within those forms. Are we, therefore, to conclude that the works of these musicians are not strong enough foundations upon which to develop? Or could it be perhaps that this music is just too difficult for those who *know* that it demands staying up all night transcribing the components of albums like *Filles De Kilimanjaro*, *Crescent*, *Mingus Presents Mingus*, and *The Shape Of Jazz To Come*?

All of those albums have one thing in common: the level of conceptual and compositional complexity is exceeded and extended by the improvisation. I'm sure that it's much, much easier to whip up this hasty, fast-food version of innovation than to humble yourself to the musical logics that were thoroughly investigated by these masters. And thus armed with this lack of information, one feels free to relax in the low standards of the status quo. If there is someone among these so-called innovators of today who is playing with the harmonic sophistication of John Coltrane, the rhythmic brilliance and explosiveness of Elvin Jones and Tony Williams—or Billy Higgins or Ed Blackwell, the

melodic, blues-based invention of Ornette Coleman, or the overall conceptual mastery of Charles Mingus, please let me know. I'd like to join his band and bask in the warmth of all this musical knowledge.

SC: *It seems to me that many would prefer to evade the challenges of jazz through transparent eccentricities that sound good in interviews, rather than address the difficulty of meeting the levels of musicianship you've cited.*

WM: That is only a temporary situation, because more and more musicians are at home doing the work of honing, sharpening, and preparing to take the field by addressing the fundamentals of this music—swing, blues, grooves, and at least the same level of technical skill serious musicians had over 40 years ago.

On trumpet you have Wallace Roney, Terence Blanchard, Roy Hargrove, Marlon Jordan. On saxophone, James Carter, Todd Williams, Wes Anderson, Branford, Ralph Moore, Sam Newsome, Gary Thomas. On bass, Reginald Veal, Peter Washington, Christian McBride, Delbert Felix, and Charnet Moffett. On piano, Cyrus Chestnut, Peter Martin, Benny Green, Mulgrew Miller, Kenny Kirkland. On drums, Lewis Nash, Tain, Kenny Washington, Smitty Smith, Winard Harper, and, regardless of how it sounds, my little brother Jason. There are many others but, unfortunately, their names don't come to me right now. As a composer, Elton Heron will soon have to be dealt with, and, from recent conversations, I know Kent Jordan is getting ready to come out here and do some instructing.

SC: *Whom do you refer to as the predecessors who set technical standards?*

WM: Art Tatum. Try that. Then, after that humbling, try Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Fats Navarro, Bud Powell, Clark Terry, Sweets Edison, Cootie Williams, Charles Mingus, Ray Brown, Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, and so on. Let me make one thing clear here that is too often overlooked. When the jazz tradition represented a certain level of seriousness, the music was maintained by known and *unknown* virtuosos. Many a musician has told me that he was in some backwater town and some never-heard-of musician came up on the bandstand and reinforced the superiority of knowledge and serious woodshedding.

That is one thing I must say for my father, Alvin Batiste, and the many musicians who taught me in New Orleans. They understood the legacy of the Crescent City; they were lucky enough to have heard Louis Armstrong and were intent upon cracking my teakwood-hard head with musical information. I used to hate to see Alvin Batiste coming up to my house because I knew he would have 10 long pages of music with many notes, each of which he intended for me to thoroughly deal with. One can never be thankful enough for those kinds of concerned influences and examples.

Let me not leave out my mother. I can still hear her voice calling me, "Wynton, bring your skinny behind in here and practice that trumpet, then do your *homework*." Those were the days when I and my partners would get together and brag about who had received the most thorough whipping for some act of stupidity that received no sympathy. In the interest of truth, our bodies were lit up, and with each lick came a greater understanding of the significance of discipline. Once one realizes that his body will remain cool if he does what he's supposed to do, he charges into his tasks with much greater relish.

SC: *What about those people who say that older people should listen to the young?*

WM: They should. They should listen to the young doing what they told them to do.

SC: *In working on a Charlie Parker biography for the last six years, I have come to understand that people like that were responsible for Parker learning how to play. When he didn't know what he was*

doing, they weren't interested in his enthusiasm. They told him to go home and learn or stay home. Today, someone would justify a young Bird's fumbblings with a philosophy whose logic only existed from sentence to sentence, not note to note. In other words, musicians then took their art so seriously that they weren't afraid to call someone into question. Today, however, what Charles McPherson calls "the relativity clause" allows for anything under the banner of self-expression.

WM: Today we have what I like to call the "all music theory," which means that one will claim to be able to play a little pop, a little classical, a little jazz, a little reggae, a little Third World music, a little Brazilian, some ragas, even some music called techno that purports to explain sound by machinery. This produces people who claim to like everything. My question to them is this: Since it takes a long time to learn how to truly appreciate serious art—wherever it comes from—how do they find the time to like *everything*? This actually reflects a deep contempt for the hard work and discipline required of artists from any culture to produce high art.

That's the reason I had to come to the painful realization that I had to stop performing classical music before audiences. I didn't feel like cheating my audience by giving them half-practiced, shoddy performances. I found there simply was not enough time for me to pay respects to both the unarguable greatness of European music or jazz. Every time I would mess up Haydn's concerto, I would have nightmares about him attacking me with a long dagger for publicly mutilating that which he spent long hours structuring for maximum expression. Conversely, I would cringe when imagining the outrage Pops must have felt in heaven when a trumpet lesson he was giving Gabriel was interrupted by the sound of people like myself who were playing with negligible blues feeling and swing. The time I spent bludgeoning Haydn could have been devoted to learning how to swing and reaching a functional appreciation for blues.

SC: *Then you see study of the fundamentals of jazz as something that requires more time than you were able to give when you were performing in both European concert contexts and jazz bands.*

WM: Definitely. Study is the only protection against folly. When you listen to musicians like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Monk, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Charles Mingus, Billy Higgins, Elvin Jones, Max Roach, and any of the masters, you hear the results of many long hours spent addressing the specific techniques of this music and the thought processes that are evident in the work of all great artists.

SC: *I'm often surprised at how little jazz musicians speak of the conscious thought necessary to create works of art.*

WM: That goes along with the general American conception that even the expression of a modicum of intelligence is elitist. Some people just don't talk about music because they are afraid of being dismissed as too intellectual, which is their business. It doesn't matter if you choose not to talk about thinking if you do think. But if you conclude that thought is foreign to jazz, you will find yourself elevating exuberant ignorance to the level of heroism, as though being uninformed is some sort of bravery, or is a significant departure from the limitations of the norm. But when you listen to Charlie Parker on *Koko*, you can be sure that he's not just feeling his way through the form, he knows every chord and also knows what he can do with every chord to express the entirety of his personality—joy, humor, romance, or whatever he feels. The music of Monk is too perfectly constructed to believe he just sat down and was satisfied with whatever came out of the piano. That level of meticulous craft reflects such a high order of musical intellect that it opens the way for complete emotional expression. The kind of emotion you get from great musicians is the result of the freedom that not having to stumble over fundamentals allows.

SC: *What about those who say jazz is all feeling?*

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THE YOUNG LIONS—Elektra Musician 60196-1
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WM: It doesn't matter what anybody says, including you and me. If sufficient thought and study have been put into your music, you will have the freedom to express everything from the most subtle to the most obvious. If you don't put in the time and the necessary study to master the vehicles for your feelings, only obvious emotion will be able to make its way through your ineptitude, and the levels of power and grace that you hear in Ben Webster will never arrive in *your* music. That's why it is so important to learn parts by ear from albums. That puts you directly in contact with the actual spirit of the music, which is what I peeped when I learned Bird's solo on *Embraceable You*. The level of musical thought, instrumental technique, human emotion, and elevated spirituality that he was functioning on is far beyond words. If it wasn't, he wouldn't have needed to play the saxophone; he could have stood up in front of people and *told* them what was happening. But Bird was a musician. People like Martin Luther King have that power in language. When they speak, you know you are in the presence of the sound of greatness expressed through words.

SC: But it seems to me that too many musicians don't contemplate the fact that the term "solo" is dangerous. It makes the uninformed believe that if you remove an improvisation from the environment in which it was played, that you actually understand what was going on, which is that those notes were being fitted into a tempo and into the mobile context of an ensemble.

WM: Definitely. That's why *all* parts should be transcribed.

SC: Though you have greatly benefited from the constructive criticism of the masters you were lucky enough to work with, most younger musicians must study alone or with their peers or in jazz programs. Given your travels, your clinics, and your experience with jazz education, what do you see going on?

WM: Very little in too many instances. Too often we are not taught that the primary function of education is not to prepare you to get a job, but to provide a foundation for a comprehensive development throughout your life. If musicians realized that, they wouldn't be taking funk drumming classes in college. But the music programs are too often geared to following trends. In classical music education, they believe you *should* know in detail what makes the music great. So you are expected to learn Bach's chorales because they are a significant part of the foundation of Western harmony, not because you will end up writing in that style or getting a job playing it. When your education is dominated by the trends that have a high position in the market place, you get young musicians who will talk about Charlie Parker and focus on how much money he made and not how much music he *played*.

SC: Were you to organize a jazz curriculum, what would it be?

WM: I haven't thought enough about that in detail to say what an *entire* curriculum would be, but I know what some of it should be. If you were going to get a four-year course in jazz, you would be required to study and play blues all four years. You would learn how King Oliver and all those musicians played blues; how Jelly Roll Morton wrote blues; how Louis Armstrong extended the harmonic and rhythmic implications of blues; how Duke Ellington adapted a lot of Armstrong's conceptions and techniques to the big band and extended the whole textural proposition of Western music; how Kansas City musicians and Lester Young used blues as the foundation upon which a riff-based style was developed at the same time as the rhythm section of Basie, Jo Jones, Freddie Green, and Walter Page taught everybody how to swing a band harder. Then the students would have to address Charlie Parker and the specifics of his harmonic and rhythmic contributions, with the full understanding that they were all fueled by blues. Next, they would have to learn how Thelonious Monk took blues in another direction altogether, reaching back to the very beginnings of the music and refining them through the perspective of infinite sophistication that Duke Ellington provided. Then a student would have to address the lyrical extensions of Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and Monk that Miles Davis brought to his band in the '50s. By this time three years will have passed and the student would have learned that blues is more than eight-, 12-, or 16-bar forms. He or she would know what Duke Ellington knew, that the blues is both a mood and a philosophy toward sound *and* rhythm, which we all recognize when someone is referred to as playing a blues beat. Then students are prepared to deal with the complexities of the later developments of jazz—the rhythmic and melodic extensions of blues in Ornette Coleman; the mature work of Charles Mingus, which uses so many different forms and sounds; the implications of John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones; the harmonic sophistication that Wayne Shorter brought into the Miles Davis band, and the complexities of form, harmony, rhythm, and meter that Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams introduced. I must emphasize here that I am only concerned with musicians who have made contributions based upon addressing *swing*. A number of other figures have been celebrated for approaches that I, at this point, hear as only vaguely related to jazz.

SC: What about fusion?

WM: It's a great concept, like cooking. The question is not whether or not one uses various ingredients to make a meal, but whether the various ingredients are used to the highest degree of crafted succulence. *Afro-Bossa* is an example of supreme fusion. It is Duke Ellington's use of elements from different cultures filtered through his highly refined blues and groove sensibility. The strongest elements of fusion musics should be the grooves, because the grooves in every culture give a true depiction in sound of the vitality of the people. *Afro-Bossa* is a study in the mastery of grooves. Each one is different, each one is precise, and each one has a specific effect on the piece in question. At no point does the music sink down into shallow imitation, like that common sock cymbal beat that is played on ethnic grooves in fusion music.

SC: What I hear in fusion is the same thing I see in videos—there is no aesthetic parallel to the level of technology at work. If those whose music is promoted through videos had one-tenth of the information about music that those who make videos have about film, we might hear something truly innovative.

WM: That is one of the reasons why in interviews those musicians choose to focus on the equipment they're using, not the music they're making. They refer to all these piles of instruments they use to put little sounds on many different tracks to give the music the illusion of the type of depth that comes with thorough knowledge of polyphony. But the question I want answered is to what degree has that music been refined and

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expanded since its beginnings 20 years ago? Which virtuosi has it produced who can stand up to the virtuosi produced by jazz such as those we have been speaking of? I don't deny that electronic instruments are fascinating, but I still want to know which fusion musicians have developed them to the degree that Louis Armstrong developed the trumpet 20 years after Buddy Bolden opened the way, to the degree that Coleman Hawkins developed the saxophone, that so many acoustic bassists and drummers developed their instruments? Where are they? But I would also like to say that I intend to investigate them myself, though I don't know if I'll come up with anything the public will ever hear. As a matter of fact, Marcus Roberts has a whole studio full of equipment.

SC: Do you have anything to say, in conclusion, to young musicians?

WM: Work on your sound. Understand that the control and the production of expressive sound is the highest aspect of music. Study the noble level of thematic development in Louis Armstrong, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk. Know that all musicians have to have good sounds, no matter what instrument they play. Louis Armstrong, Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, Fats Navarro, Clifford Brown. Bass players check out Ray Brown, the living master of the sound of the bass. Piano players, listen to Duke Ellington, Monk, Count Basie, Tommy Flanagan, Wynton Kelly. Drummers listen to the majesty of the sound Max Roach gets, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Billy Higgins, Roy Haynes. Learn grooves, learn tempos. Study harmony through Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Monk, Bird, Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Wayne Shorter. Learn how to hear

your place in a band when you're improvising.

Don't be afraid to read books about this music. Read Albert Murray's *Stomping The Blues*, Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz*, *The Jazz Tradition* by Martin Williams, *Satchmo*, *My Life In New Orleans*, *Treat It Gentle* by Sidney Bechet, Ellington's *Music Is My Mistress*, *African Rhythm And African Sensibility*, Ralph Ellison's essays in *Shadow And Act* and *Going To The Territory*, Mark Gridley's book, even though it co-signs some bull when he starts justifying fusion, *Jazzmen*, especially the essay by Roger Pryor Dodge, where he calls into question the suspect level of jazz criticism, a problem he recognized 50 years ago and that still plagues us today, and definitely *To Be Or Not To Bop*, because Dizzy Gillespie chose not to obscure historical substance by only talking about feeling. He discusses the kinds of chords they used to invent bebop and what they were working on rhythmically, leaving no doubt how thorough musicians like him, Charlie Parker, and Monk were. They believed that the tremendous love and respect they had for this music could only be truly expressed through the mastery of their craft.

Remember this: *swing*. A few years ago I had the honor of playing with Sonny Rollins, and I saw him stand people up on their chairs by smoking through some *Rhythm* changes at the Beacon Theater in New York. I knew then that when somebody who can play that much horn unleashes the highest level of knowledge and fire and swing, that the purity of the music will touch listeners with the deep love and respect that it takes to become a master of that stature. And regardless of how many obstacles you might have, know that if you are serious, you are not alone. As Bob Hurst says, "Soon All Will Know." db

L E G A C Y



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