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Miles

Sesame Street

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Chicago Style**



WYNTON

PROPHET IN STANDARD TIME

By Dave Helland

A rainy afternoon in Arlington Heights, Ill.—just a mile up the street from the Italian-American Sports Hall of Fame—the photographer and his assistant convert one corner of Wynton's hotel suite into a studio while he fiddles with his trumpet. Somebody tripped over it a couple days before and one valve sticks.

"Do you have a name for your trumpet?" the photographer asks.

"Johnson." Wynton replies, chuckles, and adds, "No, not really."

The hotel is filled with a bat mitzvah, wedding receptions, and a sales meeting—no space for a rehearsal—and the band has dispersed. Alto saxist Wes Anderson has gone home to be with his wife during her labor. He calls during the interview to announce the birth of Wessel IV, 7 lbs. and 4 oz. Wynton plays a riff to him over the phone—the basis of a future composition by Anderson dedicated to his son?

As the photographer juggles lights, cameras, and a step ladder, we engage Wynton in more banter, the sort of topics that come up when you're hanging with someone you've just met. Where'd you grow up? What'd you do? "In Kenner, outside New Orleans, and I liked playing ball and fighting. I didn't like getting beat up, but if you like to fight you're going to get your butt whipped, too. My whole thing was I was not going to take any of the disrespect that was prevalent at that time where we were growing up. Three black kids in school with 50 white kids, you're going to fight, especially if the whites aren't making much money."

His reading matter: Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*, Albert Murray's *Stompin' The Blues*, his friend Stanley Crouch's *Notes Of A Hanging Judge*, Harold Cruise's *Plural But Equal*, J.H. Kwabena Nketia's *The Music Of Africa*.

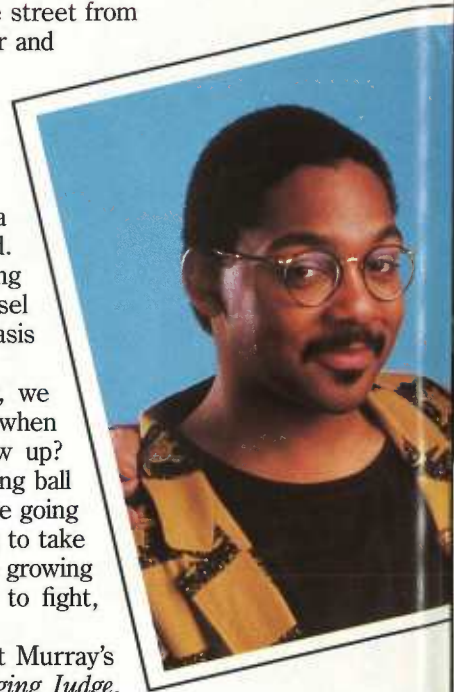
The controversial and censored rap group, 2 Live Crew: "No doubt in my mind that 'Chew my d**k like a rat chews cheese' is obscene. I don't care whether you are a black person living in the deepest ghetto or a white person living in the loftiest penthouse, it is obscene to anybody who has children. Definitely they should be allowed to do that; they shouldn't be censored. I just think you should raise kids so they are not preoccupied with vulgarity. But ultimately if people want a certain thing, they'll purchase it."

His appearances on *Sesame St.* and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*: "I liked those shows; I liked them when I was growing up. I wish Fat Albert was still on TV."

Jazz movies: "I didn't like *Bird* but *Round Midnight* was alright. None of these movies capture the complexity or richness of the people involved. With *Bird*, if they would have just let his music come out clearly, the sound of Bird, the beauty in his sound, the movie would have been successful.

"I don't think *Amadeus* got trivialized. One interesting thing, my little brother Delfeayo was saying just last night, from seeing *Amadeus*, you realize just how messed up the people around Mozart were by the greatness of his genius, the nature of it. The same thing is true of Charlie Parker, but I don't think he was addressed on that level [in Bird]."

Miles Davis: "In his autobiography, he gives the impression that he ran me off his bandstand in Vancouver. Not true. I went on his bandstand to address some disparaging statements that he was making about me publicly. I felt I should address them publicly with my horn. I don't know who this mysterious 'they' was that he claims told me to go up there. I told me to go up there. I told him I'm up here to play, and he said come back tomorrow night. I said, 'I'm here tonight.' When the guitarist finished his solo, I started playing. He claimed I didn't know what they were playing. Bull. His band was playing blues, and when I started playing he was trying to cut them off. When they stopped, I left. There was no





"A beautiful day in
the neighborhood."
Wynton and Mr. Rogers



JOHN BOOZ

PREACHIN' AND TEACHIN' WYNTON GOES TO SCHOOL

"Jazz music really teaches you what it is to live in a democracy," Wynton Marsalis explains to a classroom full of youngsters. "The whole negotiation of the rights of individuals with responsibility to the group, that is the greatest beauty of jazz music as a mythic entity. The myth of jazz teaches you what it is to be an American. Just as a spiritual mythology has gods and heroes, the gods of the jazz mythology are Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. The myth we teach our kids today is a commercial mythology. The gods of commercial mythology bring destruction where they go, bring misinformation and exploitation, all of which are justified by commercial ends. The worth of something now is determined by how well it sells, rather than its substance."

Not all of what he has to say is on such an exalted, philosophical plane. Some of it is practical advice for the student musicians. "You can learn all your scales in a week—it's like learning the multiplication tables. Woodshedding is different; it's going off by yourself and addressing your deficiencies relentlessly, subjecting yourself to yourself. Music can really help you with your discipline and with your personality." Much of his talk, however, is about how much fun it is to play in a band—marching, stage orchestra, and especially, in a jazz band. Sitting in with Ron Carter's band at Lincoln High School in East St. Louis [Ill.], Justin DiCioccio's band at LaGuardia School of the Arts in New York City, George Allen's band at Overbrook High School in Philadelphia, and Bart Marantz's band at Booker T. Washington High School in Dallas; visiting elementary and high schools in Connecticut with Yamaha's Bud Di Fluri and returning the next year to find that the number of students playing trumpet has increased from a couple to a dozen; directing a recreation of the classic Ellington Orchestra of the late '30s with an all-star group of high school students organized by Philadelphia educator George Allen; or chatting with groups of students who were his guests at each of his *Crescent City Christmas Card* concerts last December—working with students is an important part of what Wynton does. It's how he met his new pianist, 18-year-old Eric Reed, who he first heard four years ago. It's part of his master plan.

"To produce one Louis Armstrong, you have to have 50 trumpet players marching in the street who can really play. Charlie Parker grew up in an environment where there were many great saxophone players. You're not going to produce a genius of that level with two people who are trying to escape sophistication.

"What I would like to see is bands all over the country that can play Duke Ellington's music. I'd like to see marching bands with the New Orleans style of improvisation. To have students learning these things, having a culture informed with the richness of itself and therefore not susceptible to exploitation by the vulgarity that is being elevated now."

way I would get into a physical confrontation with him, it wouldn't be fair. I wouldn't get into a physical confrontation with a man old enough to be my grandfather.

"When I had left, then he picked his horn up. It struck me as being strange that the same breath and lungs that could carry those disparaging words failed him when it was time to play some music. I was raised to believe in integrity; musical integrity, hard work, and practice. No amount of race baiting, woman hating, self-elevation, and the other aspects of Mr. Davis' persona that he has adopted, none of that is going to help him especially when it comes time to deal with some music.

"I want to close the book on the Wynton Marsalis/Miles Davis commentary. That was just a lot of talk that had nothing to do with me or him; but any time that these questions can be settled musically, he's free to come on my bandstand or, if invited, I will show up anywhere in the world at anytime with my horn to let it be known publicly how I feel about these things. We can go to the bandstand with it. Let's play some music and then we'll see what's happening. But you know, when I went on his bandstand, Miles was playing organ [*loud laughter throughout the room*]."

Wynton's third exercise on standards, *The Resolution Of Romance* [see "Reviews," Aug. '90], is an intimate family affair dedicated to his mother Dolores with his father Ellis on piano and Delfeayo behind the boards. "I was trying to pay homage to my father, but I had to wait till I learned to play the changes well enough on tunes he would like. We've been talking about this for a couple years and I kept a list of the tunes he mentioned."

Romantic and sensual, short takes on a score of tunes—mostly standards of the American popular song with a couple originals—the disc is also a lesson in sophistication, musical and emotional. "We tried to play in every key ['Where Or When' in E, 'The Very Thought Of You' in F#, 'I Got A Right To Sing The Blues' in A]. That's another arena of musical sophistication you have to address. It's a matter of being able to hear, working on your hearing by playing a song in every key and singing the bass notes to yourself so you can hear the bottom of the form of what you're doing."

He recorded with the sheet music in front of him underscoring the importance of knowing the meanings of the songs so that each solo still captures that feeling, that spirit. And Wynton agrees that they don't write 'em like that anymore? "Not on the level of Kern or Gershwin coming out of that whole romantic, European-type of harmony and the American sound of the blues. The combination of this addressing of a certain type of harmonic and melodic sophistication has been lost.

"And the meaning of lyrics, all you really have to do is compare songs of different eras. Whoever does this will see the lack of romantic sophistication. A lot of this goes with our denigration of women and the exploitation of teenage sexuality. If you are really dealing with music you are trying to elevate consciousness about romance. Music is so closely tied up with sex and sensuality that when you are dealing with music you are trying to enter the world of that experience, trying to address the richness of the interaction between a man and a woman, not its lowest reduction.

"If you're dealing with the architecture of the human spirit, you're not dealing with old and new. Very few people writing are thinking about what it means to be human on the level of *The Odyssey*. You want to see Odysseus come back and kick those people's behinds. You don't care whether it is in Greece or New York. "Stanley Crouch says everybody has two heritages: their ethnic heri-

Wynton with members of East St. Louis' (Ill.) Musicfest U.S.A. Gold award-winning Lincoln High School music program.



tage and human heritage. The greatest works of art, that is what they address. The human aspects are what give art its real enduring power, not the racial aspect. The racial aspect, that's a crutch so that you don't have to go out in the world.

"Think about the people who are the foundation of jazz—Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Ellington—these were not racist men. They had to talk Duke out of a tune in *Black, Brown And Beige* entitled 'The Black, Brown And Beige Is For The Red, White And Blue.' Our greatest figures are men the caliber of Duke Ellington. So let's talk about Duke Ellington. Why elevate the unsophisticated when you can deal with the sophisticated?"



"The reason jazz music is not being developed at a rate we want to see it developed is not because it is the end of the world. It is because youngsters are not being taught the fundamentals of the music."

The intelligentsia tries to explain the world but only if it fits their interpretation of it. Historians discuss the end of history: the last great ideological struggle has ended, i.e., we won, the commies lost. Physicists postulate the end of science: how does a discipline based on the measurement of observable phenomena continue when the observations at a subatomic level are unverifiable? Meanwhile, academics argue over the canon: the works produced by the great minds that form the core of Western civilization, and the role they play in education. So it seems logical to question the end of jazz. Will a music that has repeatedly redefined itself continue to redefine itself every couple of decades? What irreparable loss will the music experience in the next 10 years as the last of its great innovators and the men who worked closely with them end their playing days? How will "the sound of surprise" keep from being just another classical music based on the compositions of those long dead?

"Apply that to any art form. Would anybody say when the Renaissance masters died, the art of European painting died with them? No, Picasso could paint in that style if he chose to do it; that's how great a painter he was. Some of his figures do have that Michaelangelian-type of vibe. Picasso addressed the fundamentals. You go to an exhibit of Picasso, you're going to see the same stuff—apples on tables—though he didn't paint in the style of the Renaissance, but he addressed the fundamentals. A lot of stuff that is going on that is called jazz doesn't address the fundamentals of jazz.

"Louis Armstrong said that early New Orleans music is the foundation of jazz music and the closer you get to playing that way, the closer you are to jazz. When I first read that, I thought he just wants everybody to play that old style. That's not what he was saying at all. He meant, first, the communal conception of improvisation. A lot of music that is called jazz doesn't have that. Number two, the conception of vocal effects on instruments—how King Oliver played. Number three, a dance-oriented rhythm, a beat, a lope to the rhythm, a swing, an attitude of optimism in the

face of adversity, not the attitude of commercial exploitation. Fourth, a type of worldliness in the conception of the music that is best represented by Duke Ellington on records like *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* [Fantasy 9498], *Afro-Bossa* [Discovery 871], *Latin American Suite* [Fantasy 8419], *Far East Suite* [Bluebird 7640]. These are very sophisticated works that deal with music from all around the world, that address a certain type of virtuosity and sophistication in terms of techniques that were developed in New Orleans music. That is what Ellington was always looking for. In his *New Orleans Suite* [Atlantic 1580], written in 1970, he was dealing with these same fundamentals: call and response, clarinet obbligatos, blues, trombone growls, happy type of swing, the mysteriousness of the music, the melancholy.

"The reason jazz music is not being developed at a rate we want to see it developed is not because it is the end of the world. It is because youngsters are not being taught the fundamentals of the music. People talk about what jazz is. Duke Ellington is what jazz is, he is the greatest jazz musician, his music is the most comprehensive. I go around the country all year and I listen to nothing but bands. There is not one high school band in the country that can play a concert of Duke Ellington's mature music. Not one band. Not one. That's what the problem is. The problem is not that we've done everything. We don't know the music. My whole definition is based on Duke Ellington. He is the figure I hold up because he addressed most comprehensively what jazz music actually is." So to the extent that Anthony Braxton, Joe Zawinul, or Kenny G[orelick] meet the "Ellington Test," that they address the fundamentals of group improvisation, vocalization, and a swinging optimism, is the extent that they play jazz.

One of the goals that Wynton has set is to make available to schools all around the country the sheet music of Duke Ellington so that young Americans can learn the music of their nation's greatest composer, can study the art of America's greatest artist. Among the scores of students in each of hundreds of schools, one day one of them will write something that approaches "Koko" or *The Tattooed Bride*, that others will play the alto saxophone with the transcendence of Johnny Hodges, the clarinet with the elegance of Jimmy Hamilton, the trumpet with the lionine fire of Cootie Williams. And as that happens, Wynton will always have the makings of a big band; one that he can keep on the road for 250 dates a year, always there to play his latest composition, always ready to record—and that, as I see it, is the master plan. DB

WYNTON MARSALIS' EQUIPMENT

"I like a sound that is focused in all registers so that the notes fall in place where they are supposed to be," explains Wynton about the horns made for him by Dave Monette of Chicago. "I like a heavy horn, almost so heavy that I'm tired when I'm done playing. I like a big mouthpiece, deep and round with a big hole. The throat is big and so is the cup."

The horn Wynton has been playing since December is a Monette STC 2 B[♭] trumpet with a Monette STC B-2 mouthpiece. The tuning and bell curves are perfect half circles—a Monette innovation—and it is unfinished as are all Monette horns. Monette is building a new horn for Wynton—his 11th—with several unusual design features such as ovate tuning and bell curves and an unconventional bracing system that makes the trumpet almost twice as heavy as a conventional horn.

WYNTON MARSALIS SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The following have been released since DB's last cover story on Marsalis, Nov. '87. He maintains that he is not the "E. Dankworth" on Marcus Roberts' *Deep In The Shed* (RCA/Novus 3078) as is widely assumed, but that Dankworth is a British trumpeter a friend of Courtney Pine's, who doesn't play in public much. Sure.

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| as a leader | with Frank Morgan |
| THE RESOLUTION OF ROMANCE—Co-lumbia 46143 | MOOD INDIGO—Antilles 791320-2 |
| CRESCENT CITY CHRISTMAS CARD—Co-lumbia 45287 | with Marcus Roberts |
| THE MAJESTY OF THE BLUES—Columbia 45091 | THE TRUTH IS SPOKEN HERE—RCA/Novus 3051 |
| LIVE AT BLUES ALLEY—Columbia 40675 | with Various Artists |
| PORTRAIT OF WYNTON MARSALIS—CBS 44726 | EPITAPH—Columbia 45428 |