

By Lynn Norment

**A**T TIMES it seems that Wynton Marsalis is ubiquitous. Go into any music store and you can find a number of his 40 recordings. Turn on the television, and you may catch one of his specials on PBS or watch an interview on a news or entertainment program. On radio, you can enjoy his music on your local jazz station, or perhaps catch his special on National Public Radio. Computer savvy individuals can sign on to a Net interview with the popular music man. In numerous and varied publications across the country, there are photographs of him lecturing, performing, talking to kids.

While his public persona appears to be everywhere, the 37-year-old bachelor makes an effort to keep his personal life out of the limelight.

"I never really talk about my personal life," says Marsalis, leaning back in a green upholstered chair in the library of his New York condo. "I know



# Wynton Marsalis:

it's interesting to read about peoples' personal lives because I wonder about that myself when I read about people. When your personal life is simple, it's easy to talk about it. When it's complicated, it's better to be quiet.

"Yes, my life is complicated. It's better for me to be quiet, to be silent. Largely, I am silent." He smiles.

Perhaps contributing to his "complicated life" is the fact he is an in-demand bachelor but also a proud father of three sons. Marsalis' two older sons live in the New York area and show an interest in music. Jasper, his 3-year-old son by actress Victoria Rowell, likely will follow.

In his private environment, this music maestro exudes gentility and charm that harks back to his Southern upbringing, but a worldly edge reflects 20 years in New York City and world travel. Subtle sensuality is reflected in his smile, his eyes, his expressions, his body language. No doubt women find him intriguing and appealing. In East Coast creative circles and among the Hollywood set, Marsalis is known to be quite a ladies' man. Yet he seldom is photographed with dates at perfor-



mances and other glittery events.

The private Wynton Marsalis, like the public musicmaster, is intense, straightforward, never at a loss for words. Many compare his diverse and enormous output to that of the legendary Duke Ellington. He shrugs it off. "I have tremendous respect for him and what he represented," Marsalis says. "Duke wrote 1500 songs and recorded 800 albums . . . I mean, I loved him [he pauses], and he loved women. That's one thing you can say about Duke. And women loved him."

When asked if that statement can be made concerning himself, Marsalis says: "I don't know. I love women. I don't know if they love me."

Since he emerged onto the jazz scene in 1982, Marsalis has become a well-loved and vocal force in the music world. He has distinguished himself as





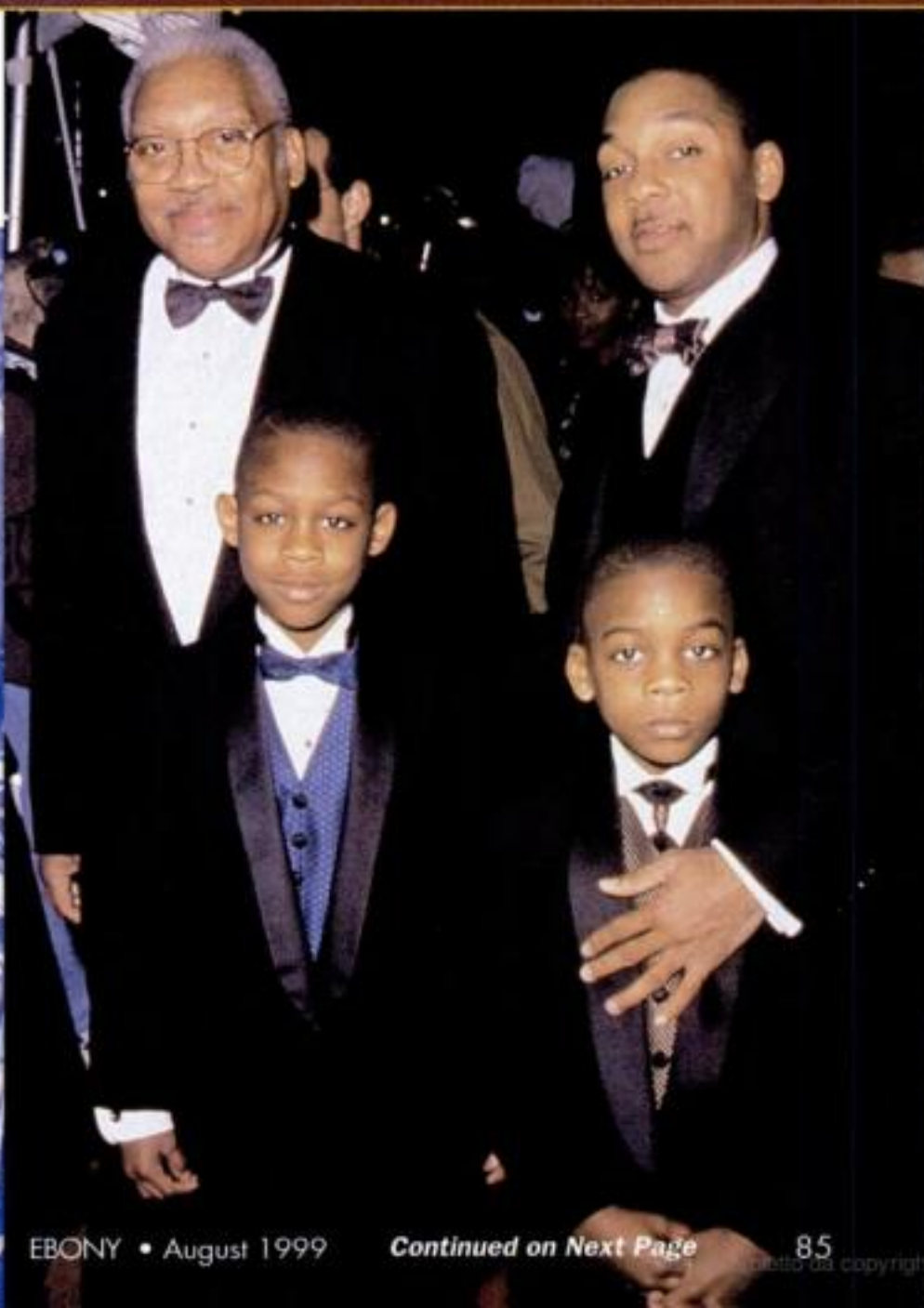
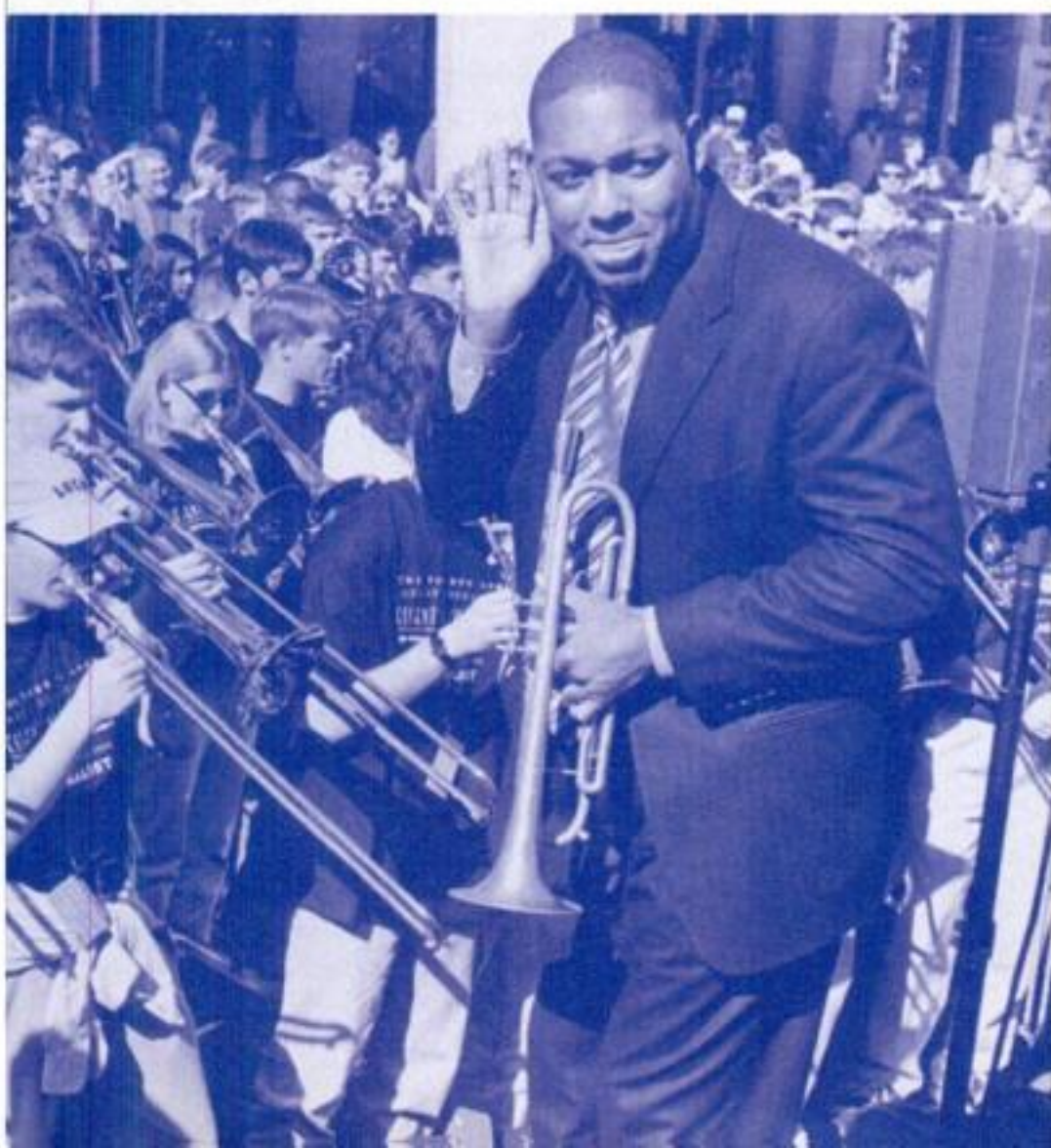


one of music's most talented and prolific artists. This year alone he will release nine CDs, in addition to a six-CD box set—an unprecedented creative output. He is the only jazz musician to be awarded the coveted Pulitzer Prize, and he has won eight Grammy Awards. Moreover, he has assumed the mission of taking the art form to the youthful masses and elevating jazz to new levels of awareness and appreciation.

Wynton's large Upper West Side apartment is adjacent to his beloved Lincoln Center, where he is artistic director of the jazz program. In his library, Marsalis seems to be relaxed, yet you are aware that many thoughts are crisscrossing his fertile mind. As always, he is tastefully dressed, this day in an earthy tan sweater and matching slacks. He is warm and friendly, yet you feel that at least part of him is else-

## The Private Man Behind The Music

**Wynton Marsalis**, artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, is familiar to fans around the world. Yet, the famed trumpeter is very private when it comes to his personal life. At left, he sits in the library of his Manhattan condo. Below, he listens to young musicians, and (at right) he and his father, pianist Ellis Marsalis, share a night out with two of Wynton's sons, Wynton and Simeon.







With the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, Marsalis acknowledges response of the audience after performing his Pulitzer Prize-winning composition, *Blood On The Fields*, accompanied by vocalists Cassandra Wilson and Jon Hendricks (left, front). He generously praises the talent of fellow musicians, including saxophonists Wessell Anderson, Walter Blanding and Victor Goines; trombonist Wycliffe Gordon; drummer Herlin Riley; pianist Eric Reed; and bassists Reginald Veal and Ben Wolfe. Marsalis, an advocate of music education for young people, appears on the children's television show *Sesame Street* (below, left).



## WYNTON MARSALIS *Continued*

where, perhaps on that melody he awoke with earlier. He says music constantly "comes to me," that he awakens each day energized with music on his mind.

The built-in wooden shelves in the library are crowded with books on diverse subjects. There is a keyboard and other musical elements, as well as plenty of mementos and awards. A telescope stands near the windows that offer an expansive view of the Hudson River and New Jersey. Down the hall in the living room sits a grand piano; at the other end is his sons' bedroom with a private bath. Throughout are works of art, some with musical themes. There are portraits of Duke Ellington and Frederick Douglass. A Romare Bearden collage graces a wall in the living room, while Haitian art is among the accents in the dining room.

He says he and his sons often have "jam sessions" in the apartment (Wynton, 11, plays the piano; Simeon, 9, the clarinet), and that he misses them when he's on the road. "My kids don't live with me, so I'm not like the fathers who are there all the time," he says. "Of course, I love my kids and I'm always taking them to stuff, teaching them how to play ball. I play with them. I do not try to be hard on them or to force them into anything. I just try to keep exposing them, like taking them to the museum. They don't always want to go. I take them to concerts. I take them on tours just to see cathedrals. But I want them to play ball, too, and to be with their friends.

"Even though I don't like rap music, I don't tell them not

to listen to it. My daddy didn't tell me not to listen to any type of music. He was like, 'Man, play in the funk band. You make your own choices.' And I don't try to keep any of that from them, not the profanity, the cussing . . . I don't try to treat them anticeptically. I don't want them to have a watered-down experience . . . You make a mistake; that's what happens. You pay for it. I want them to have spirit and that fire."

These qualities certainly characterize Marsalis, and they also are traits he likes in women. Marsalis reveals that he prefers to keep company with women who are intelligent and spirited. "I like women with a lot of fire and who are real intelligent and soulful," he explains. "Soulful is just somebody who makes you feel good. Soulful. They heal you. They want to give you something that's going to make you better. They'll be honest with you. Tell you s--- you don't feel like hearing. And they are funny too. I like bullsh---g a lot. Musicians in general are real funny. The most startling example of that was Miles [Davis]. Miles and I didn't get along. He was very funny. He had a reputation for being just mean. He was mean, but he was funny, too. And when you're around jazz musicians, you're laughing most of the time. They're always saying something funny . . . Even if it's that kind of dry humor or sarcastic wit. I like laughing."

Asked if there are physical traits he prefers in women, he says, simply, no. "There are so many beautiful women, so many different standards of beauty. And there are so many different ways to be beautiful," he elaborates. "Sometimes people just have that glow with them, that spiritual glow. And that real life energy. The only thing I don't like is a real dark kind of negative energy. The negative-energy people have an interesting quality, too. A lot of times men use that type of negative energy to make you come under their power. I don't mean in any kind of sexual way. I mean, like negative energy, by always putting somebody down, making them want to try to please you. A lot of people who are bosses have that type of quality. I don't really respect that . . . negative vortex.

"But I like a woman who is intelligent. Real independent. Single-minded. My mama is like that—real, real intelligent, and fiery. I like that soul, I like the intelligence, that independence, that competence. I like that humor."

Marsalis says he has no immediate plans for matrimony, though he regrets he did not marry early in his career. "That sounds crazy. I wouldn't have had a chance to do a lot of what I did do," he adds. "You never know how your life is going to fall. But I think it's much easier on people who are married. You have to struggle a certain kind of way to nurture your





**At home,** Marsalis demonstrates his artistry with a framed poster of the legendary Duke Ellington in the background. Marsalis says he would love to see more people, especially African-Americans, integrating jazz into every aspect of their lives.

## WYNTON MARSALIS *Continued*

relationship, but you've got somebody who is in your corner all the time . . . Sometimes I feel real, real lonely, even though I always have people around me. Since my kids have been born, I don't really feel as lonely."

No doubt, a woman would have to be exceptional to hold Marsalis' attention. And she would have to understand that his music is his life, his first love. This year alone he will release 15 recordings, eight in a series titled "Swinging Into The 21st." The set will span the music of Thelonious Monk and Jelly Roll Morton (two new "standards collections"), classical, big-band works, ballets, music composed for TV and movie projects, and the *Marciac Suite*, which Marsalis wrote for the annual Marciac Jazz Festival in France. Every August he visits the small hamlet, his "second home," to perform and teach master classes. The recordings draw inspiration from around the world—the U.S., France, China, Brazil, Cuba—and from a broad spectrum of musical genres, including blues, tango and bossa nova. Last spring, Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra released a tribute to Duke Ellington. In December he will release a six-CD set of live performances at New York's Village Vanguard.

"The 20th century was a century of communication," he says. "You had the tools of communication—the telephone, radio, TV, and finally the computer, the greatest, most powerful tool of communication we've seen so far. I think the issue in the 21st century is going to be integration . . . Music is an ultimate form of communication because it's so abstract. It also stretches across cultural boundaries."

In the next millennium, more music genres will be integrated, he says, recalling how much he enjoyed jamming with local musicians at a party in Brazil. Another example of this "integration" is the blues, which he calls the universal coefficient. "If you go through the blues, you can find a little something in the roots of all people," he says. The blues, he adds, is the common thread that runs through all of his music.

The second of six sons born to Ellis and Dolores Marsalis, Wynton has been exposed to music all of his life. His father is an accomplished pianist. Three of his brothers also are in the music business: saxophonist Branford, trombonist Delfeayo (who has produced several of Wynton's recordings) and drummer Jason (who plays with pianist Marcus Roberts). Wynton began studying the trumpet seriously at age 12, and in high school, he performed with jazz, funk and marching bands, and with classical orchestras. In 1980, after moving to

New York to attend the prestigious Juilliard School, he joined Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers and signed with Columbia Records. Over the years, he has sold almost 8 million records worldwide. That is quite a feat for a jazz artist.

While his days are filled with meetings, rehearsals and lectures, he devotes late-night hours to his writing. "But it's not really work. The creative process, it possesses you," he explains. "You're compelled to do it. It's almost like being addicted to something. It comes to you. I wake up in the morning and I have a lot of energy. I get ideas and stuff I guess when I'm sleeping."

This year, Marsalis says he will work exceptionally hard. "I want to give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to have a voice and be able to express it; I'm fortunate to be out there and have people come to hear me play and like my music. I want to demonstrate my gratitude by really trying to deal with music on a very serious level."

Marsalis is delighted when couples tell him that their child was "conceived" or "born" with his music as a backdrop, and he wants jazz to become more integral to the lives and fiber of all people, but especially to African-Americans. "We have a great legacy in music, which really needs to be understood and developed, and our ignorance of our own history, our own music, really hurts us," he says. "The Black American's rejection of jazz is really an indication of our rejection of ourselves. And that is also a reflection of the way we have chosen to express ourselves in this time."

Wynton is confident that well into the next century, jazz will continue to thrive. "Now it's international music," he explains. "It came from Black Americans. That was our gift to the world. Now this gift has been seized by the world . . . Our music is not a fad, and our music also has a relationship to African music and to European music, in the inception of it." Marsalis emphasizes the importance of exposing young people to jazz. "Music education is a great thing for your kids. It's worth the sacrifice," he says to parents.

For the most part Marsalis is cooled out and mellow, but over the years he has been riled, and he also has stepped on some toes himself. He says during early interviews he would be hot and fiery, and many times his words got more attention than his music. He recalls the time Miles Davis referred to him as "the police," referring to his criticism of the way jazz was played. "I don't mind a battle or a fight," he acknowledges. "That lets you know you're alive. There's nothing wrong with a good battle." He explains that sometimes "battles" progress out of the verbal arena. "I'm getting a little too old for that [physical confrontations] now," he confesses, "but even when I was growing up, I've never been averse to that. Yes, I'm hot-headed. I'm older and much calmer now."

He acknowledges that some things still anger him. "I see the potential of all our kids just going down the drain," he says, referring to the music and other cultural arts today's youth prefer. What makes him happy is doing simple things to show that he is glad to be alive. "It could just be flirting with somebody at the bus stop," he explains. "I was at the bus stop the other day, about to cross the street. A bus pulled up next to the curb, so I was real close in the face of this woman. She had a little girl sitting next to her. We were so close it was kind of uncomfortable. She looked at me and I said, 'Is that your daughter?' She said, 'Do I look old enough to have a daughter like that?' I said, 'No, but you're cute enough.' She just laughed. She was smiling as the bus pulled off."

Both the private and public sides of Wynton Marsalis leave a lot of people smiling and feeling good. After all, he is a jazz musician and, like he says, they do like to laugh. □