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Jazz



WYNTON MARSALIS

confronts his image

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WYNTON MARSALIS

by Eric Snider

eager to deliver

The new Prince of Jazz has an image problem. Some three years ago Wynton Marsalis was being touted as, at least, a brilliant young trumpet stylist and, to some, the savior of acoustic jazz. Now, at 23, he is finding that this mantle is a heavy one, indeed. No, the critics will not be kind forever, and as the principal spokesman for a new batch of acoustic artists, his words are being held under close scrutiny.

Adjectives like cocky, pompous, and arrogant are beginning to circulate about Marsalis. He reads virtually everything that is written about him and gets regularly frustrated about what he considers to be misconceptions regarding himself and his music. This is a young man coming of age who wants to be both controversial and accepted—and he's finding that the two can't consistently be reconciled.

That the New Orleans native is a virtuoso musician can hardly be challenged. He seems capable of delivering any kind of trumpet sound imaginable—from the clear-cut precision of his classical work to the inventive dexterity of his jazz playing. He has also most certainly acted as an inspiration—ray of hope—to a legion of young musicians who have found their best mode of expression to be acoustic jazz. His records sell in serious six-figure numbers today, a nearly impossible feat for those who choose not to cross over. He is a strong concert draw, playing for healthy fees and commanding handsome ticket prices.

The nucleus of his band—his brother Branford on saxophones, pianist Kenny Kirkland, and drummer Jeff Watts—has been together for about two and a half years. The group's newest member, Charnett Moffett, is a confident seventeen-year-old bassist who Marsalis informs, "has been coming to my house since he was fourteen." The band's sensitive, spontaneous interplay is finely tuned, but unfortunately, much of it is lost on an audience of non-musicians. A Marsalis concert is a classy, serious affair—a bit subtle, but substantial nonetheless.

If this interview sounds at times combative, be assured the mood was good-natured. The interviewer wanted answers—and, often times, answers to these answers. Marsalis was eager to deliver.



"I didn't come to New York to be famous, that caught me by surprise."

JAZZIZ: I was wondering if you spend much time evaluating each performance. Do you closely scrutinize each night or do you just figure that's what happened, so be it.

MARSALIS: When I'm not playin' I listen to what everybody else is playin'. And plus I'm playin' it every night so I know how the stuff is supposed to sound. I get pissed off sometimes, but it's like we're having conversations, man. Some nights you don't have something to say.

JAZZIZ: How about last night, for instance.

MARSALIS: Last night was a pretty good night. See sometimes we have a problem 'cause we're young and we play overly energetic. We don't play with enough intelligence sometimes. We just be goin' off. We sound like a bunch of horses runnin' wild.

JAZZIZ: It seems that most of the audience responds to the faster stuff.

MARSALIS: I don't like shit to be wild all the time. I don't hear that. People like to hear shit that's just wild sounding. [For] me personally, wildness is cool for a minute, but I like construction. Even the wild stuff has got to be constructed for it to be hip. For me, it can't just be cats up there blowin' and bashin'. There's rhythms going on, polyrhythms that resolve a certain way.

JAZZIZ: Let me switch up here to more difficult territory. You have become such a phenomenon over the last few years. You sell a ridiculous number of records for an acoustic jazz musician and you're just 23. Why do you think it was Wynton Marsalis who made it, when so many before you had tried?

MARSALIS: I don't know man, I can't answer that.

JAZZIZ: I suppose that's for other people to figure out, but you don't have any ideas?

MARSALIS: Maybe being young. Playing with Art Blakey and Herbie [Hancock]. People wanted to hear a young cat play the music instead of bullshittin'. The fact that I'm sincere to a certain degree. I mean we really are trying to play—so that you have to read the interview when you listen to the music. I just think a lot of it is that I was young and I talk shit in interviews. I don't know, the timing was right too, I guess.

JAZZIZ: What was the hardest part of becoming so big, so fast, so young?

MARSALIS: Dealing with the way the people around me were changing as it was going on.

JAZZIZ: What do you mean?

MARSALIS: I got a lot of publicity and stuff. I made sure that I didn't change—because I didn't come to New York to become famous, that caught me by surprise. At first it was guys on the scene saying, "Hey Wynton, boy, he's playing." All the cats were saying, "Yeah, Wynton Marsalis, he's a bad little cat." But then when I get all the publicity it's like, "Man, he ain't shit."

JAZZIZ: Call it straight out jealousy?

MARSALIS: Jealousy or whatever. It might not be jealousy.

JAZZIZ: So you just came to New York to play...

MARSALIS: I didn't think about anything. I didn't even know how people got record contracts. You gotta realize, man, I'm from New Orleans and I came to New York when I was 17. So I didn't come up there thinking about record contracts and doing interviews and being known. When I was growing up, there was nobody above me [in years] that was doing that, so the reality of doing it was never in my mind. When I was in high school I never said, "Let me practice so I can be a star, so that I can get awards." 'Cause I didn't see anybody getting awards on trumpet for playing the kind of music that I wanted to play.

It's painful to realize what's goin' on. Sometimes I wish I didn't know what was happenin'. Just in society and music and stuff. Pheeewwww. The shit is out there, man.

JAZZIZ: How so?

"I'm not against pop music. That's the problem I've always had in the press is that that view has never been properly expressed. They think I'm trying to set jazz on top of other stuff. It's already on top. It's already what it is. Pop music doesn't have musicians like Charlie Parker or Duke Ellington or Monk. I don't have to establish the idea, that's already been done."

MARSALIS: It's like being put under a microscope by some inept scientists. What happens with jazz musicians is that they're always being made into some wild, noble, savage-type figures. That's the height of a jazz musician's fame to the public perceptions and to the people who write about the music. It's like Tarzan or something. Jazz musicians are treated like some weird breed of savage. That's like when I do interviews, cats always make the point of using "cats" and "shit" and "fuck" in the interview. The image that that portrays.

I read almost all the articles about me, and a lot of stuff in general. And I'll read that cats are really disturbed because I wear suits on stage. People feel that negroes are supposed to be a certain way—from the ghetto, which is just a misuse of a term that started with James Baldwin trying to impress his Jewish friends in the 1940s. So now black people are from the ghetto, which has nothing to do whatsoever with the black community. You're whole thing has to be geared toward some low-level, trying-to-be-hip, iambic pentameter rhymes. People can seriously ask me a question like, "What do you think of the significance of rap records?" I say, "You people must think I'm an idiot." They're gonna ask me the significance of somebody rhymin' about how hard it is on the street. They're trying to elevate rap records to the level of profundity.

JAZZIZ: A lot of critics like to lionize the stuff. They like to make it...

MARSALIS: Heroic. They like to make bullshit heroic.

JAZZIZ: Like some kind of gritty street poetry or something.

MARSALIS: And it's some bullshit. "Makes me feel like goin' under hahahahaha." C'mon, man.

JAZZIZ: Comment on a story that I read. Herbie Hancock

was quoted as saying that he had to go up into the hallowed halls of Columbia Records and intervene on your behalf so that they wouldn't shove you into some crossover project. What happened?

MARSALIS: He didn't do that. I intervened for myself. I can't stand that he said that. He supported me, though, he took my back. They were trying to convince me to do some bullshit. But I knew I wasn't gonna do it. I said, "My name ain't goin' on nuthin' that's not what I want it to be. Period."

JAZZIZ: Given your apparent vehemence on the subject, even if Herbie did intervene, it really wouldn't have made any difference.

MARSALIS: It *wouldn't* have made any difference. He just backed me up. By that time we'd been on the road already, and he knew what I was thinking.

JAZZIZ: When you signed with Columbia, was this matter discussed?

MARSALIS: Everything was discussed. My contract clearly stipulated that I had artistic control over what was happenin'. I didn't need anybody to save me, man. In jazz, they treat the record company like it's some mysterious monster. They're just business people trying to sell your product and make money. They never tell somebody what to play. They just suggest you play something that they can make more money from.

JAZZIZ: At the time, the established way to make money as a jazz player was not to play acoustic jazz but to play a more

pop-oriented style.

MARSALIS: That's for them. But I have a philosophy about stuff, man. I'm not here just to be *here*—and to make enough money to buy a Rolls Royce. My goals are not economic goals.

JAZZIZ: Whether you like it or not, you've become a spokesman for the new breed of acoustic musician. Yet as much as I respect what you're doing in music, you seem to look down on crossover music—the people who are incorporating other music to try and create a different kind of jazz expression, for good or bad. You seem to make a blanket rejection of that approach.

MARSALIS: That's not what I'm doin'.

JAZZIZ: Well that's the sense that I get—that none of the fusion stuff is valid.

MARSALIS: I think everything is valid. Everything has a position. But it's our responsibility to know what that position is. First of all, that stuff is not jazz. We have to determine what the terminology is gonna be. We can't have "Jazz A," and a "Jazz B" and a "Jazz C." But the terminology has got to be clarified so that other musicians will know what they're dealing with.

JAZZIZ: So your position is that if you want to claim the term "jazz," then you have to play it a particular way. I go along with the people who say that "jazz" is an operative word for music that has as its basis improvisation. And it doesn't matter if they're using a whole roomful of synthesizers.

MARSALIS: That's right, that's a very good description. But most fusion music doesn't use improvisation as a basis for the music.

JAZZIZ: I don't necessarily agree that it's all like that.

MARSALIS: I said "most" and an instrument has nothing to

do with the music. A synthesizer is just an instrument.

JAZZIZ: So you don't have any problems with the synthesizer.

MARSALIS: Hell, no. I never said that. A synthesizer is an instrument that can do 50 times the work of a regular instrument. Like a tractor or something. Like a computer. A computer does whatever a man can do, but faster.

JAZZIZ: Can you see using one?

MARSALIS: Definitely. But when people think of synthesizers they think of pop music. I would have to use it in the context of my music—it's just another instrument. I was thinking of working on some film music with one.

JAZZIZ: Getting back to fusion music...

MARSALIS: Out of all the fusion bands that are supposedly so great, who is producing music with the social and thinking quality on the level of guys like Monk? And how is that music going to let people who might have that degree of expressiveness get what they think about life out through their music? And if it's capable of doing that, give me some examples of people who have done it.

JAZZIZ: Well, Weather Report comes to mind. Their sound is rooted in improvisation, but it incorporates other ideas.

MARSALIS: But that's when they first started playing. Now they sound like shit. Even they don't think they sound good. [Joe] Zawinul's writing so much of the music. Wayne [Shorter] is all in the background. I have every Weather Report album ever put out.

JAZZIZ: Well, I'll concede there's been a decline lately, but at the pinnacle of what they were doing...

MARSALIS: They were great. Definitely.

JAZZIZ: Another guy, although you could make an argument that much of his music is more written, is Pat Metheny.

MARSALIS: I think he's saying something, and I like him, personally. But a lot of people are trying to say that that's a real new-type sound. That stuff is not that new-sounding. I think Pat Metheny has a clear-cut vision of what he wants to do. He's a good musician and he's doing what he thinks he has to do, so that makes his music valid. But what I'm against is that the people writing about the music don't know enough about the music they're writing about. You should have a clear-cut view of what each type of music entails.

JAZZIZ: So, I'm going to surmise from this that you have a live-and-let-live attitude which so far, Wynton, I haven't seen. I don't know whether it's the way I'm reading the articles or the way they're written, but I haven't been able to see much tolerance in your attitude.

MARSALIS: It's the way the writers are treating me. Because they get affronted by the fact that I know—sometimes I get into battles with cats almost, 'cause they wanna prove to me that they know more than I do about music. You have to understand, I have Pat Metheny's albums—I know the tunes on his albums. I have Weather Report's albums, I have the Crusaders albums, I have Michael Jackson's albums, I have Prince's albums. So all that shit [about me being closed-minded] is just garbage.

JAZZIZ: My view is that a lot of music that is made up of different elements, hybrid music, is as valid and exciting, and oftentimes more interesting, than the purist type of thing.

MARSALIS: What pisses me off is that we shouldn't have a term like "purist." That's a term that makes me mad. That's a term that stems out of the critics' ignorance of what the music is all about. Since the beginning of jazz, people always tried to bring jazz down to pop music, because people could not accept that negroes could do art. Anybody who believes that the music that Bird and Monk and those guys were playing was what was happenin', and that's what should be developed, is labeled a purist.

JAZZIZ: Yet the term "purist" to me is someone who perpetuates a tradition that is undiluted by outside elements. And I think that pertains to your music.

MARSALIS: That's what the term means. But it's used in an incorrect fashion. It has a negative connotation.

JAZZIZ: You're 23 and you've got such a long career ahead of you. The three jazz albums you've put out have had approaches that have been...done. Part of the tradition in jazz—and you seem to have a healthy respect for jazz tradition—has always been that at certain intervals, the right player comes to the front and says something brand new. Those people become the legends.

MARSALIS: All right, check this out. I'm gonna do something I don't normally do. You know the tune on my record *Think of One* called "Knozz Moe King?" Who's done a tune like that? Name a specific album and a tune like that.

JAZZIZ: Can't

MARSALIS: Conceptually, that tune doesn't go to a specific key. It goes to one sound, which is F. During the entirety of the "head," it never reaches the tonic. The tonic is the solo. So that means that when you're soloing you can solo in any key you want. Now that's something that Miles and them didn't do. They played mostly on modes. Trane and them played on modes.

JAZZIZ: So that tune is more open than using modes, but it still has structure?

MARSALIS: Yeah, 'cause the tonic is not hit during the "head" of the tune. Now who would notice that.

JAZZIZ: Not me, man (laughing).

MARSALIS: "Think of One." Who would do Monk's tune in an arrangement like that? Who's used stop time in a small band like that?

JAZZIZ: That stuff is pretty subtle, and the perception is that Wynton is retreating stuff that was done in the '60s.

MARSALIS: That's written about me all the time and it pisses me off, man. 'Cause that's trying to say that we're trying to look back on something. What we're playing is more modern than this other shit that's goin' on. Just 'cause you take an instrument that can make different tones and notes, that doesn't mean that you're gonna play some music that's modern.

JAZZIZ: Using synthesizers doesn't make it modern.

MARSALIS: What makes it modern is when you think of something new.

JAZZIZ: The thing about it is that your innovations at this point are on a subtle level.

MARSALIS: Well, I'm 23 years old.

JAZZIZ: You've got Charlie Parker and those guys that made a complete overhaul of jazz. And you've got Miles who went through a lot of things, like bringing in rock.

MARSALIS: Yeah but that ain't nuthin' to be proud of being the originator of.

JAZZIZ: A lot of people found it valid at the time. They thought it was the kick that jazz needed.

MARSALIS: Because he did it. That made it valid. What made it valid was that Miles did it. That's how powerful he was at that point in time. He was capable of defining what was hip—and that's real power. 'Cause he had done such a strong body of work before that, there was no reason to think that he would do some bullshit.

JAZZIZ: You seem to have such respect for the jazz legends. Do you want to take your place in that group of legends, and what do you think you'll need to do to get that kind of recognition?

MARSALIS: I don't know. Whatever I do the people won't know what it is. I'm trying to develop as a musician, and that's a very slow and gradual process. It's difficult, man.

You have to understand, I can't be put up against Miles, or against Clifford Brown. 'Cause that's who I listened to when I was growing up. And it makes me feel glad to know how great they were. Louis Armstrong, I'm not trying to run away from that greatness, and run into a hole and find some little sounds that nobody has made so I can say, "Well look at me, I'm original, too." What my job is, is to deal with that body of work, and the stronger it is the harder it is.

I used to wear a Miles T-shirt in high school, man. I'm not trying to prove that I'm equal to him. It's like Dizzy. "Well Dizzy, I got my name in *down beat* so now you and me can talk on equal terms." Dizzy and Miles were playin' more trumpet in the 1950s than I'm playin' now. They're like my daddies in music. I have the ultimate respect for them cats.

JAZZIZ: Even in light of some of their recent projects.

MARSALIS: I don't care what it is. They were so great, they could do anything they want now. If they go out playing bazookas, it's cool.

JAZZIZ: Okay, I'm satisfied. Now I've got a whole new question. Right now, jazz is not the music of 23-year-olds—young people in general—of course including young blacks. How do you feel about that?

MARSALIS: I feel that's sad. It's the same way I feel about illiteracy being so high. I make it a point to go to high schools and do clinics whenever I can. I'm not even talking about people hearing what I'm playing. Charlie Parker did what he did 40 years ago. Who has heard that? Nobody. You think people in America know who he was? Nobody.

JAZZIZ: I wonder why that is?

MARSALIS: We don't have the people that are responsible for continuing the philosophy that produced the musicians.

JAZZIZ: But there seems to be a strong group of young musicians keeping things going, even though it's tougher. Because as far as I'm concerned, vocal music and popular music will always be the music of America. It's easy to comprehend. But guys like you are having some effect in resurrecting some interest in the music.

MARSALIS: I see what you're saying. But pop music to me is like candy. Candy is great and you love candy...

JAZZIZ: But it makes you sick after awhile...

MARSALIS: Most people don't get sick, but you can eat candy all day 'cause it's sweet. But you have to eat food, man, you have to have a meal. You cannot exist on the sweets of the world. I love pop music, man. If I turn on the radio I'll be singing every song in two days. 'Cause it's like saccharine, man, the tunes are designed for you to like 'em. But our problem is that now pop music is being elevated to the level of real food. That's all I'm against. I'm not against pop music. That's the problem I've always had in the press, is that that view has never been properly expressed. They think I'm trying to set jazz on top of other stuff. It's already on top. It's already what it is. Pop music doesn't have musicians like Charlie Parker or Duke Ellington or Monk. I don't have to establish the idea, that's already been done. □

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