

So far, even Marsalis isn't good enough for Marsalis



Jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis sets his musical standards high.

Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis has set his standards so high that he's put down almost every jazz musician to emerge in the last 20 years — and Marsalis is only 21 years old.

Asked the other day which musicians were making significant advances in the music, Marsalis shot back: "Nobody. The last thing that really sounded new was what Ornette Coleman was doing in 1959."

Jazz history Marsalis-style runs something like this: First Louis Armstrong established himself as the greatest at a style of trumpet playing that has been around New Orleans for some time. Then Charlie Parker and the group of musicians that coalesced around him pioneered bebop with its expanded harmonic language and more complex rhythms.

"And out of (bebop) there were a few little schools all around, cats playing modes, cats that played cool. But they were all basically playing what Bird and the cats had set up," said Marsalis.

The next innovator was Coleman, who expanded the harmonic language again by doing away with chord changes and bar lines and loosening the rhythmic structure of jazz somewhat, although Marsalis credits the Coleman rhythm sections with little progress.

WHERE THINGS went wrong, he said, "was cats trying to imitate Ornette Coleman and

Wynton Marsalis appears at 8 tonight at Ann Arbor's Hill Auditorium. He will conduct a free workshop at 4 p.m. at the Trotter House, 1443 Washtenaw, Ann Arbor.



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taking the wrong element of Ornette Coleman ... (he) was a genius on a level but a lot of stuff about music he didn't understand and he was too stubborn to learn ... that took away from his program and all the people that followed him."

That's a view that discounts a generation or two of musicians, not to mention a large body of music that has won over the bulk of critics who vote in forums like the Downbeat Critics poll. It's also a music that has won a substantial audience — but not a mass audience.

Marsalis' criticisms are not that unusual. There have always been detractors who say that jazz died with the end of the Swing Era, or the end of the Bebop Era, or the advent of the Third Stream or the advent of fusion. But those statements usually go hand in hand with the notion that jazz should have stopped evolving at some juncture.

By contrast, Marsalis is for evolution. He just can't stand what has evolved. To that end, he also discounts the attempts of the avant-gardists to come to grips with the jazz past — attacking their playing ability and technical knowledge. There are no kind words for contemporary European classical jazz. "That stuff that sounds like Schoenberg with some blues licks thrown in," is the way he sums up those artists.

"YOU HAVE to take the elements that everyone played before and attempt to come up with something," Marsalis said. "I have to sit down and figure what Tony Williams was playing on all those hard-a-- tunes ... and hear the chords that Herbie (Hancock) was playing and understand the phrasing that Ornette was laying down ... try to get the swing that Trane (John Coltrane) and them were getting, trying to understand what (Charlie) Mingus was talking about ..." and on it goes.

Marsalis' playing is nothing short of phenomenal. He has a crystalline tone and precise attacks that lose nothing during the most heated tempos. At the same time, he avoids much use of the broad vocal-like effects, the smears and growls, that many trumpeters have come to use extensively.

Marsalis' strengths are evident on the recently released Herbie Hancock record "Quartet," which was recorded in August 1981 when Marsalis was touring with Hancock's group. He's more relaxed but no less exciting on his date with his father, pianist Ellis Marsalis, on one side of the album called "Fathers and Sons," on Chico Freeman's "Destiny Dance" and on his only record as a leader, the self-entitled "Wynton Marsalis."

So far, his form hasn't made the kind of breakthrough that he faults others for not having made; so far, he's only returned to the point where he feels they went wrong. On "Wynton Marsalis," he handles standards like "Who Can I Turn To?" with aplomb and ventures as far as an outright homage to Coleman.

But most of the music recalls the relatively polite experimentation one often encounters on Blue-note label recordings of the mid-'60s and among the musicians associated with Miles Davis.

"I'm just trying to learn how to play," he said. "If I can learn how to play, I know I will (move the music forward). If I don't learn how to play, someone else is going to have to."

JAZZNOTE: The band Roomful of Blues has been together since 1970, with a concept of blues that is more Kansas City circa 1940 than southside Chicago in the 1950s, more horns and swing than guitars and rocking. Their records were good enough, but the last two years of manic touring have made an enormous difference for the band. The band makes its Detroit debut Saturday night at the City Club, Park and Elizabeth, music starts with the Blue Front Persuaders at 10 p.m.; and at 10 p.m. Wednesday they play at Rick's American Cafe, 611 Church St. in Ann Arbor.

CODA: Bassist Shoo Bee Doo's current quartet, featuring pianist Earl Van Riper, saxophonist Robert Barnes and drummer Ali Mora, is holding fort 5-9 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays at Axles, 20401 W. Eight Mile ... Meanwhile, pianist Chuck Robinette and Uncle Orrin the Banjo player raise funds for cancer patients and their families at 8 p.m. Saturday at UAW Local 182, 35603 Plymouth Road at Wayne Road. Donations of \$15 are requested.