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Wynton Marsalis: Jazzman on the Run

By PETER WATROUS

SOMETIME during the last year, those of us who were on the mailing list of Columbia Records ran for cover. It was raining CD's by Wynton Marsalis. By the end of 1999, Mr. Marsalis had released some 20 hours of music on 15 CD's, a heroic effort called "Swinging Into the 21st" that still has not emptied Columbia's vaults of his material. There has

never been anything like that sort of effusion in the history of jazz, and to achieve it Mr. Marsalis cut his earnings per album from \$1 million to \$100,000.

The move produced some head scratching among jazz industry watchers, who wondered what could possibly have inspired it. Some thought it might be a way of getting Mr. Marsalis out of a contract, making him a free agent in the marketplace; in fact, Mr. Marsalis has been without a contract at Columbia since 1998. Others speculated that Mr. Marsalis was trying to upstage his

brother Branford, who had been appointed creative consultant of Columbia Jazz. Still others saw an effort to block the release of work by rival artists on the label. And some believe Mr. Marsalis has a need to be in the news and wanted to define in his own manner the changing of the millennium.

Whether any of this conjecture has a basis in fact, the deluge of 15 CD's provides an opportunity to assess Mr. Marsalis's career, its laudable ambition as well as its flaws. Over the last 20 years, through his considerable skills as a conservator and popularizer,

he has become the public face of jazz in America. Privately, Mr. Marsalis has used Duke Ellington as a standard against which he judges himself, and he has produced an immense amount of

work for someone who has not yet reached 40. Like Ellington and John Coltrane, he seems to be willing himself into greatness. And like a man suddenly conscious of his mortality, Mr. Marsalis seems intent on pouring everything he knows into his art.



Jack Vartoogian

Wynton Marsalis at the Village Vanguard.

The upshot is that while showing the breadth of his knowledge and interests, he has not always achieved what he set out to achieve.

Mr. Marsalis's penchant for being the

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