

To A Young Jazz Musician: Letters From The Road

Wynton Marsalis

CHAPTER ONE

The Humble Self

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Dear Anthony,

Today would have been a good day for you to hang with us. We just pulled into Maine for a performance. Did the usual bit: check in at the hotel, head to the venue for sound check, back to the hotel to change for the show. Oh, and look for lobster. I also had a chance to talk to some kids about playing. They were high school age, a bit younger than you. People filled the school auditorium--- dads, moms, brothers and sisters, cousins. All watched the kids in the school's jazz band. Those kids did well. It touched me to hear them play so earnestly, to watch them listen so intently in their effort to get better. And I love the feeling of pride and expectation that pours out of families as they enjoy the results of hard work on display. You should have seen the drummer; fifteen years old. Trying to be so cool we call him Ice. He looked great, but damn sure wasn't swinging. Afterward, I ended up telling 'em the usual: stay encouraged, play with each other, and keep practicing. I wonder sometimes if saying "practice" is enough. Practice what? Talking with those kids brought to mind something someone once asked John Coltrane, "Trane, when do you practice?"

"I only practice when I'm working on something" he replied

Yeah man, you can play tunes forever. Play enough, play every night, and you'll get to blow on a lot of songs. Cats with experience get to know the changes and play lots of different tunes. But you, and those kids in Maine, don't have Coltrane's experience. So practice means practice the "something" Trane talked about. It could be your sound, a deeper swing, solo construction, or just hearing bass lines. The bottom line is practice "something" every moment you can. Don't just sit around and wait for something to happen; that same something is waiting on you.

I spent time thinking about what we should talk about in this first letter, and I came to the notion of humility. You consider yourself humble? Ever really think about it? Let me tell you, humility is the doorway to truth and clarity of objectives for a jazz musician; it's the doorway to learning. Check it out.

When you start playing, you've got to have objectives: What are you playing? Why are you playing it? How do you want to sound, and how will you achieve that sound? When you have those things clear in your mind, it's much easier to teach yourself, and ultimately, that's what you have to do. No one will teach you how to play.

I've been lucky: Early on in my career I spent a good deal of time around great musicians, Art Blakey, for instance. You might ask me, "What did Art Blakey teach you?" And I'd tell you "nothing," at least in the way you probably meant the question. Art didn't say "play your scales" or "play a G on this."

You'd start playing, and he would tell you something like, "You need to be more physical." Or he would come in and say, "You're bullshitting." That was your lesson. What did that mean? Stop bullshitting. That's Art. That's what he taught you. You watched him and he played with maximum intensity all the time.

Today you have more and more jazz musicians graduating from universities. But many of these institutions overemphasize playing scales, patterns, and spelling out harmonies. How many times have you heard of an older cat grumbling that these young kids can't play nothing but fast nothing? That leaves some to question the value of institutional training in jazz when they should be questioning the values of the institutions. Kids are being miseducated into believing that fulfilling a few technical objectives is actually playing. Style over substance. Like a lot of academic writing, piles of big words around small ideas that add up to one response: "Huh?"

If you wanted to study engineering, certain basic, fundamental levels of expertise would just be assumed when you showed up for college. At Jazz U., the meaningless spools of scale, chords, and fast runs that are belabored ad infinitum don't form a curriculum of advanced study. These techniques will not take you where you need to go to develop musicianship and personal direction. They won't develop your conception, nor unleash your personal power.

In fact, it's a question relevant to just about any situation in which you find yourself: How do I unleash my personal power? Most relationships will require you to address the issue of how you participate as yourself without being selfish. And in jazz, personal power is your unique creativity. When you codify, articulate, and project your own hard-earned objectives through an instrument, you unleash *your* personal power.

Let's say you learn a piece in class, and you play it again and again—eight thousand times. You'll be so tired of doing it that every time you gotta do it again, you'll say to yourself, "Man, not this!" And if it's part of a course of study in school, maybe you've done it for two or three years now. It could be twenty-five years. You can repeat something forever or you can look for things. "Things" are possibilities, and possibilities never run out. That's why the music lives on. Consider the rhythm section alone. They can slow down. They can speed up. They can be solo-specific and change grooves. And you, playing with them, you realize the different things you could do on your own. You can interact with your drummer. You can modulate to another key. You could do a million things with it.

Or you can do nothing with it and twenty-five years from now, you will go all over the world and play with people who play the same basic form that has been played since the late 1940s. Melody, a string of two long solos, then you'll play a long one (even though you know better), then a bass solo. Everyone will play his or her own version of the common vocabulary. So start now, don't accept this for yourself. Unleash the unlimited freedom in the music for your unique articulation. Don't just stand up and play clichés all the time, all night, the same patterns. Use your ingenuity and your creativity.

To do this, you must develop some objectives. When you have objectives, when you understand what you're trying to do, then you're free to try things when you play. They might sound sad at first, but you have an idea—you're working those things out. It's important to realize that in order to be different, you have to do something different. The first inkling of difference comes with thinking a different way. Then, make sure that that thinking reflects how you truly feel.

Let's rap about your favorite musician for a second, Charlie Parker. When Charlie Parker used to play jazz at the Philharmonic with other all-star musicians, they would always play these obnoxious riffs

behind him. He didn't like it, but they did it anyway. Why? Maybe, unconsciously, the others didn't want to hear Parker's playing because it stoked a kind of anxious competitiveness in them. They didn't want to deal with the weight and power of what he played. They weren't purposefully thinking, "He's playing great, let's cut him off with this riff." Maybe it was the psychological impact of being on the bandstand with a musician of real genius.

Parker had specific components in his art: Midwestern root music; the Kansas City blues; and a fleet-footed conception of melodic virtuosity, absolute technical clarity; and a way of playing the shuffle rhythm in a manner distinct from Lester Young. Bird was a great musician and he had a different mind for music, but the bottom line on the vocabulary and the objectives was clear. That's why so much of Charlie Parker's early material is the blues, the American popular song, and originals that have that song form.

But at a certain point, all of the foundation work became unimportant to his acolytes. How can I explain? Well, when somebody puts on a two-thousand-dollar suit, you tend to look at the suit and not the person. Charlie Parker's surface style was fast, and it had a certain type of flash to it. Underneath, the soulful melodies, the blues, that Midwestern swing, and other early elements required to successfully carry that sophistication were not as apparent. You see, the flash blinded you.

When root objectives are lost, it becomes impossible to give birth to new things. The best that you can hope for is to create another form with an entirely different meaning. The proof sits before us. For all the talk of innovation, we don't hear as much as we should, given the mountains of talents out here. We need jazz youth to go deeper into the American soil, where all the minerals and nutrients congregate. People are not being moved the way Parker or Armstrong or Errol Garner moved them. The late, great composer John Lewis once told me he would go to hear Charlie Parker and there would be all types of people listening: Longhorsesmen, policemen, people who simply heard his sound and were touched by it. Lewis would be hurrying home and just happen to stop in a club for a second, but Charlie Parker's playing was so gripping it made him stay.

When we teach Charlie Parker, that's what we should focus on. What gave him this relationship to his environment? What gave his playing such power? You need to evoke that or some portion of it to get a good grade. The flashy style can come later. After Parker there came a point where style was elevated over substance, conventions over objectives. Don't confuse conventions with the objectives of the form. For example, after Charlie Parker, everybody started trying to play his melodies on their instruments. Trombone players started playing like Charlie Parker; bass players wanted to play Charlie Parker; piano players wanted to play Charlie Parker. Granted, a lot of piano players sounded great in that style, but one of the strongest advantages of the piano is the capacity to voice separate melodies simultaneously when playing with two hands. Now, because Charlie Parker played with a single voice instrument, no pianists are gonna stride with two hands? Or take the three-horn New Orleans counterpoint. 'Cause Bird didn't do it, was it no longer worth doing? Or not modern? You see, that's the problem with following a part of something as if it's the whole thing. Who are you: a part of a fad, or a jazz musician?

As you grow older, self-knowledge becomes one of the hardest things to acquire. In our context, as jazz musicians, it's more difficult than you think—to know what you will play; how your playing will evolve; how to play with others. Much like those cats playing with Bird, quick to riff. Something said, "Get in Bird's way." Thus, "Mess the music up." The first level of mastery occurs over

self. And the first test of mastery over one's self is humility. True humility. You look at yourself and say, "Man, I don't want to be sad anymore. I want to learn how to play." Humility has nothing to do with me, your friends, your lady; and it's in such short supply out here, man.

Do you know how you can tell when someone is truly humble? I believe there is one simple test: because they consistently observe and listen, the humble improve. They don't assume, "I know the way." Of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of musicians that I've worked with, I've seen true, continuous development in eight or nine. That's in twenty, twenty-five years, man. In most of my experiences with musicians, I hear them when they're fifteen or so and I think, "How did that happen? How did you start with this much ability, this much genius and this much creativity and end up here ten years later?" Man, it's hard out here.

Understand something, Anthony: You will hear the same thing over and over again, but you have to develop the requisite humility to learn, to love to learn. Humility engenders learning because it beats back the arrogance that puts blinders on. It leaves you open for truths to reveal themselves. You don't stand in your own way. You realize: It's all about you. Your learning won't live or die with your school or me. You have to become the center of your education. Once you accept that, you'll understand that learning means figuring out what you need to do to get where you want to be. I hope I'm noting beating the point to death. But I have to make you understand the importance of your personal involvement in your own growth and development.

Some people don't show up for class. In truth, they don't want to go to school. But that has nothing to do with any teacher. It's your own time and opportunity lost. What if the commitment was a job? You might have been told to show up at 9:00 A.M., or hand in paperwork by Friday. And you don't. So they fire you. Your employer is not going to have much interest in asking, "Why didn't you show up on time?" That's for your parents, or people who love you with such intensity that they feel a sense of personal loss when you bullshit.

Real life won't work that way. A jazz musician's life won't work that way. People don't know, or care, about your issues. They spend hard earned money to go out and enjoy some music that they want to hear. So it's incumbent upon you to figure out: "What do I want to do? Will it kill me to learn how to play this difficult music and develop my voice so that I can play something provocative enough for people to want to spend their time listening to me? What do I have that I can present to people that will make them feel better about being alive?"

This is a tough thing we do, a tough road we travel. It determines your respect and commitment; it lives through your humility. Man, listen: Whether you're a grizzled veteran, a nineteen-year-old like yourself, or in high school like those kids back in Maine, as jazz musicians we are engaged in the same thing—grown folks' business. So treat it seriously, man. 'Cause it damn sure will treat you seriously.

In the spirit of swing.