

Wednesdays with Wynton on Instagram Live

Episode 14, Season 1 – July 1, 2020

00:01 Madelyn Gardner: Hi, everyone, and thanks for joining us for another Wednesdays with Wynton. Wynton Marsalis will be joining us in just a moment, for a casual Q&A here, live on Instagram. Thanks for joining us again for another week. I think this is week 12 or 13, kind of crazy. This will be... After this episode, we're going on a brief Wednesdays with Wynton hiatus for the summer. We'll hopefully be back in September, and until then, we have a ton of really exciting programming we'll be announcing in the next week or so, so stay tuned for that. And in a moment, Wynton will be joining us, and before he does, if you wanna comment your name and where you're tuning in from and start commenting any questions you have for Wynton. Hey, Wynton.

00:53 Wynton Marsalis: Alright, now. What's going on, Maddie? What you talking about?

01:00 MG: Well, I wanted to kick things off talking about... We are just about to announce this little Instagram Live exclusive for everyone tuning in. What Jazz at Lincoln Center's energy output and attention is going to be for the month of July, which is the idea, spirit and meaning of freedom. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

01:19 WM: Which is very important aspect of our music, we always hear about the freedom of improvisation, and just something that since since jazz was born, it's always been a key component of the music. So many great musicians involved in it, down through the centuries. Also, the responsibility implied in freedom. We see people exercising that responsibility all over the world, that in the first Amendment of the Constitution, it's implied that you have to have some type of disagreement to address before elected officials, and it's important to bring your case before the people and make it be for real, and to not... Don't be turned around. It's an important thing, and as we see, by the way the world has picked up on our own situation, don't feel it, that everything that is a protest means violence, or means something negative, that's just something to take you away from looking at the issue and trying to create a better of life for everybody, and let's not forget how new, the thought of things being equitable is.

02:25 WM: It's only a few centuries old, so we... It's something that we have to continue to pursue. And I'm... We're gonna have a lot of different things, music we're gonna put out, readings and things from many sides of the ball park. People tend to think of freedom, meaning only them. Think about freedom as, once you turn it loose, it goes everywhere. You don't control who's gonna seek their freedom or the tenor of the conversation, but it is important for us to remain in dialogue with this most important thing. I always would tell my friends down through the years, laughing, "Let's have the same intensity this way about the championship, or some football games," and I'm a sports fanatic, but freedom is damn sure more important than the last game, so... And it's not gonna... It won't all come from one angle, because there's gonna be many, many people with different opinions

and different view points, all encouraged in our family, to create works, to talk about it, to suggest readings, and it will not only be one opinion or one point of view.

03:31 MG: Well, I know I'm very excited, and I had a little preview of what's to come, so I can't wait for everyone to hear, to see it. And everyone stay tuned. We'll be announcing some exciting things coming up all to do with the idea and theme, spirit of freedom. And on that note, I wanted to bring up something interesting. The ideas and the US Constitution are relevant to the world of jazz as well, a group of diverse musicians, negotiating in time, to create a collective expression that reflects unique personalities and values of each individual, and for the good of everyone. So, as the nation goes into the holiday weekend, can you speak more on both, as a citizen and as jazz musician, speak more on that, on what people could... Maybe headspace should be, or just on that general.

04:16 WM: Jazz has always... It came from what's called now, "street expression," but that's not necessarily what it was. The street was different at that time. But it came from, always that... A kind of desire for a richer democracy. Even somebody like Jelly Roll Morton was really hated because he wanted his publishing rights, and he would talk about things, he started clubs, and so, any flaw in his personality was picked up on, to define him, but if we go through the history of the music, of musicians of all races, we'll find that the most active musicians have always produced music with a certain type of reality. It doesn't mean other people's music is not good, or that this is the only subject you should discuss, but I think that jazz improvisation is our freedom, but the swing is our responsibility.

05:04 WM: So, one thing we laugh about, in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, people spent their lifetime improvising. We play gigs, you might solo one time a night, so when you get down to the end, it's like, "Here's another gig that somebody who could play did not play." And the democracy is how we share our space, and the one thing I'm most proud of in our development, is that, as we've gone along these years, when we get to the last two or three tunes, everybody in the band starts to look around and try to figure out who hasn't played, to create space for them, even if it means giving up their solo. So, I've learned more just from the orchestra seeing how we negotiate each other's space, and I think a good document for us to read, in this time, is Thomas Paine's Common Sense. It's only 80 pages, 1773 or 4, not 1778, and 1970, I don't know exactly... I'm not feeling sharp, so, I'm not exactly right with these dates. And it's a federalist document, and it talks about avoiding the corruption of kings, and to try to understand that true democracy is with the plurality of the people, and this is a great moment, in our reflection, to go into our history and study great documents and important things, and I always try to direct people to...

06:21 WM: You know, more profound kind of thinking and the people who... Things that will help you to understand from any side of the field. Because there's enough people talking in one direction, and it's also important for us to remember that Lyndon Johnson gave a speech in America called, "We Shall Overcome." And that would be like Trump saying, "Black Lives Matter." That's the effect that it had on the nation, because he was a southern politician from Texas. And I'll never forget, my father told me when he saw Lyndon Johnson get elected, he thought, "Well there goes the Civil Rights Movement." He didn't understand at that time that that Southern politician was going to sign

key civil rights legislation and give that type of speech to the nation. So I also direct people to Lyndon Johnson's speech... I think it's 1965. I'm not good with my years today but the speech is called, "We Shall Overcome." It's up online. It's worth reading. You could cherry pick it and read it and pick things that you like. Look at those last few paragraphs though. Now you'd think it was written for today.

07:27 MG: That's... And on that same note too... In the context of jazz and democracy, what's the right amount of tension?

07:36 WM: There's no right amount 'cause tension is not something you control. That's the thing about what is the right amount. There's no right amount. That's the beauty of it. You can try to balance it, so if it's a whole pallet tempted coming your way, you could try to figure out how to... And I always... I always give sports analogies. You know people hate 'em but, 'cause it... Does a quarterback stand in front of a defense and say, "Wait a second now, it's too much of a pass rush," or it's too... Hey, if they can bring some pressure... You be able to try and figure out how you're gonna deal with it. And if you have something you believe in, bring some pressure to the situation. And the more tension, the more it means to people.

08:22 MG: Yeah. Oh, for sure. And I...

08:25 WM: Yeah, I'm sorry.

08:25 MG: I'm sorry. Oh, no, no, no. You go... You please.

08:28 WM: No I mean, you know, we have to realize that competition is not... Because there is competition for ideas, for resources, for space... Because there is competition, does not mean someone is your enemy. But when you're playing a game and there's no competition and you're just beating on... I mean it's like... I remember once a great... Chess grandmaster Maurice Ashley beat me in a game. He had... I mean I can't really play. I try to play. But he... Did he wanna play another game? [laughter] For what? It's like, no, he has to play somebody that's competitive. So when we look around our nation and we see groups of people who are put in non-competitive situations, don't keep beating 'em. I mean, it's just...

09:14 WM: We have a long way to go. And in jazz, we see the greatest figures. We talked about "Jelly Roll." We could talk about Louis Armstrong and realize that just for Louis Armstrong to introduce his self as, "Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Mr. Armstrong." That was a Civil Rights statement at that time. Because that meant not, 'boy' or the other names that he would be called. Or would... Of course, Duke Ellington, "Black, Brown, and Beige." And we... It goes on and on. And I always give to people of all races. Dave Brubeck, "The Real Ambassadors." All of these works are important. And even musicians who are doing things today. All of these works are important. Even... And then works that are not even jazz, whether you like the style of music or not.

09:52 WM: When people have a Civil Rights type of social consciousness, it's important to check it out. And you can choose whether you are... You're interested in it or not. It's your choice. But this is

a good time for this. It's around the election. It's a good... We got a pandemic. We got a lot of crisis, a lot of problems going on. This is a good time to examine who we are. And for us to come home, and see who we wanna be and make the changes we need to make, and tear the band-aid off. And be for real about it.

10:24 MG: And I think that's a powerful thing. And it seems like such a simple thing. Don't beat someone when they're already down. Why are you throwing another punch when someone's already on the floor? But it's something unfortunately that's the... What's the reasoning behind something?

10:38 WM: You know, as easy as in the old days, somebody go home and beat their wife and their kids. Okay. Or you kick the dog. Or you... I remember when I was in elementary school, there was one girl came to the school... There was so much racial tension all the time, but we was always like white against black. But this one girl, for some reason, they decided to pick on her. Oh, they called her every kind of name, and stink-weed, and stink bomb. And for us, me and my boy Gregory, we were like, "Damn, man." Unbelievable cruelty toward this girl. And we never could understand it. She never did anything to anybody. And one time they had done the school and the carport in a different way, and I was running out of the school... I don't know what grade I was in... Fifth grade, fourth grade... I was running in full... You know, when you get out of school, you boom. You taking off. You running. And I ran right into this new pole that they had put there. Boom, it knocked me out. Bam. I laid on the ground, I was knocked out. Everybody stepped over me. They were going the way they were. This girl stayed, and her mama.

11:43 WM: I remember they the only people I seen had a car... It was more raggedy than the car of my daddy... We always had the raggediest cars anywhere. They had a... The raggedy white car. And the girl and her... I never knew her name. I mean I don't remember her name, 'cause then we didn't really socially... That's just what it was. But the mama drove me to my house. And then it was segregated, so if you had somebody white bring you somewhere people in my neighbor was like, "Man, you in trouble." And then the lady was so nice. The mama was so nice... Called me baby... "What you need, baby?" Took me home. And I reflect on her. I don't even know why. I started to think about her. Just why were people so mean to her? And it goes with childhood. And it starts... It's just... For some reason... She had freckles, her hair looked a certain way. They call her a witch, or whatever. I don't know. Stupidity what they were doing. We of course were not in any position to be participating in none of that. But it's just...

12:38 WM: You wanna ameliorate anxiety, you don't want your anxiety to take your anxiety out on somebody who will give you more anxiety, so it's easy to go kick your pet or do something that, you know, [laughter], 'cause if you kick the wrong person, you gonna be much more anxious at the end of that exchange, that's why. That's why we do it. A big country go jump on a little bitty country, man, you know. That's a waste of firepower.

13:06 MG: Well, and I'm also sorry that you hit that... That image of you hitting your head on that pole. That wasn't... That's not something you...

13:11 WM: [chuckle] Hey, let me you something. My mama used to always tease me, say, "Boy,

you lost your mind when you ran into this... To that pole." So whatever she'd be messing with me but, I didn't hit it, I ran into it like "Boom!" [chuckle] I forgot to think, you know, I was so used to running out.

13:25 MG: Of course.

13:26 WM: And yeah, that's right, it was a good wakeup call though. I had to lie to all my friends and say some dudes jumped on me. "Man, he jumped on me over on Taylor Street." They're like, just...

13:35 MG: You should see the other guy. [chuckle]

13:36 WM: Yo, maybe you should've saw them. Oh yeah, you can't tell somebody something like that, "He ran into a pole." Come on.

13:42 MG: Well, I also wanted to bring up, you brought up Jelly Roll Morton? And we have the concert from the vault today, if everyone tuning in after this wants a really great concert to go watch and listen to. We release from the vault today, it was a 2017 concert with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and Wynton Marsalis, and it's the Fantastic Mr. Jelly Lord. So it's a really great concert with never before heard arrangements of tunes like King Porter Stomp, Jungle Blues, Black Bottom Stomp and The Pearls. So I don't know if that was a really fantastic concert, and I hope you wanna speak a bit about...

14:18 WM: It was great. You know you had concert with our younger musicians playing. Isaiah Thompson played, I think who all we had Michael Thomas playing all kinds of piano. We had Church Swing, he was playing all kinds of a piano. I'm trying to remember all of who we had playing.

14:43 MG: It was a lot of people in here together too, it's a fantastic concert.

14:47 WM: And they played... They've been playing on such a high level. Our younger musicians came up and played all kinds of piano, and it was great to see them tackle this, Joel Wenhardt played, and we wrote arrangements. I don't think we played The Pearl 'cause that was my arrangement and I did it too late, so we never played that one, but I know I looked down and I saw Endea Owens' name in our list, I don't know if she's listed, she is an unbelievable... Endea plays with so much feeling, and she teaches with so much feeling. I had done a session, a film about autistic kids, and Endea came and played and her beat and her swing were so heavy. She was swinging a studio even in a booth. So I wanna just shout her out and talk about Rodney Whitaker, the great bassist who I first met in Detroit when he was 15 or 16 years old.

15:35 WM: Every time I talked to him he was older than the first time I met him with Marcus Belgrave, and Rodney had called me when he first heard Endea, she was... I guess she was a young teen too. He said, "Man, we got one out here," and he was not lying about the feeling she plays with. And with Sullivan Fortner was playing, another one on the piano, see I get these thoughts

come to me, Sullivan, we called him Jerry Swing. He was just unbelievably great. So I'm so proud of all my young musicians play on such a level. Like for me, just to see Endea's name made me happy. You know, because of the depth of the beat that she plays with, and I saw that she is teaching kids, and just the level of reality of her playing. She plays with a great deal of reality, and just also the pride I have in all of them. Aaron Diehl also played on, he was great.

16:25 MG: Sullivan Foster as well... Fortner. Yeah.

16:27 WM: Fortner, yeah. Aaron Diehl is on it, you know he's a fantastic... Was in EE, he's done all kind of great things with Cécile McLorin Salvant. I want to shout also my homeboy, Jonathan Batiste out. I see him. All doin' everything about the... From Kenner, Louisiana. I don't know how somebody even get up outta Kenner. He actually from Lincoln Manor, whew, they countryer than us. There was a good football teams with yellow and black jerseys and stuff to take, but I love seeing what J. Bat is doing and any of our younger musician, Russell Hall, they wowed him in the street in a parade. Everything they doing, I'm so proud of them and them asserting their individuality, and it's a thing that I always would talk about in class as a student, sometimes they don't wanna hear that in the past, about the US Constitution, about rights, about being engaged with the society, about not being afraid of people being mad at you because you express your opinion, even if it's me. It's a point that I make to them, you don't have to agree with me. Be yourself. Find your individuality. If I don't like what you playing, play more of it. You know, I always laugh about Jonathan Batiste, I always told him, "I hate that little..."

17:39 MG: The Melodica... The [laughter]

17:40 WM: I hate that instrument. The Melodica. So at a certain point, I told him, I don't know, he was 17, 18, or something, I said, "Man, I hate that instrument." Then every time I saw him, he start playing it. [laughter] So, you know, you gotta have that type of attitude about stuff.

17:56 MG: I was lucky enough to go check out the... Jon Batiste did the peaceful protest march with music, and I saw Endea playing and Russell Hall, and it was, really, it was a bunch of people out there, it was so... I had this really proud feeling to see all of these... So much of Jazz at Lincoln Center out there, just making their voice be heard and playing. They played for four and a half straight hours marching through the streets. It was a really beautiful thing to see.

18:19 WM: Hey, you know. Hey, I love them, and I always tell them Jazz at Lincoln Center is a part of what you're doing. You are you, before you're Jazz at Lincoln Center. You are jazz above being Jazz at Lincoln Center. You are an American citizen. Larger than all that, and you're a citizen of the planet Earth, larger than all of that. This is your time out here. Express yourself. Do your thing, get out here, participate. So yeah, I can't even describe the kind of pride and the love I have. I see old Joe Saylor out there, playing drums. I think about him when he was... All of them. It doesn't matter who they are, you know, everybody. I see Jared Grimes came in and wrote something for us, you know just unbelievable virtuosity, and we need all of them out here, and we need them to be free and to do their thing. And it's important to be forceful and to be confident, and to express yourself, and you don't have to look around for approval every time you do something, from

whoever!

19:14 WM: That's the one thing I insist on... Why I use the examples I use or like, people who are hard-headed. Being hard-headed is a part of achieving your individuality. You just have to understand where you are in time and space, and make sure you don't talk to... Make sure you respect your opponents.

19:34 WM: That's one thing. We look at so many movies, then if you don't have real life experience, you don't understand, sometimes you're looking at something that can't be talked to the way you want to talk, you got to choose your words a certain way. Sometimes I would talk with my friends, and I'd say, don't worry, just talk to them like you talk to them dudes in your neighborhood and you gonna, be alright. The ones that you don't really wanna mess with, you talk to them like that. Find that level of respect.

20:03 MG: I think that's such a great point. You really, I feel like, unlock a different level of respect when you find your individuality and your voice, and you're able to really say what you mean.

20:16 WM: Yes, right. And then you're able to respect that in other people and not feel like your the only one who thinks something. We all thinking something, we all have beliefs, we not all willing to pay certain prices for it, which sometimes is just common sense, but... And I think too, for... Another thing I was thinking about when we talk about freedom. I'll never forget the series called Wade in The Water, I love the song Wade in The Water it's a song about freedom, but I love the 1994 NPR series. If anybody can get to that. Barney Frank was for real. Just Sweet Honey in The Rock what they did in that Wade in the water, 1994 Public Radio. Get to that series. I remember when I was writing, learning... Trying to learn how to write stuff, I studied that a lot. I go back to the resource material and listen to it. All the early groups and everything, but this was like contemporary music curated with a lot of great information, and it's a lifetime of study went into that, so.

21:21 MG: I'm gonna have to Google that after this, that sounds, it sounds very interesting.

21:24 WM: I think it's 26 hours. I'm not sure it could be 24.

21:28 MG: I hope it's extra two hours 'cause I feel like I'm gonna love it, I want the extra two hours after I'm done with it.

21:33 WM: I'm telling you it is something.

21:35 MG: And I wanted to bring up the wonderful Freddy Cole who graced us every year with his presence at Dizzy's, if you can speak on him a bit, he just passed. But what a force and what a legacy he left behind.

21:47 WM: Freddy is just pure soul. That kind of generation of musicians class always clean all the songs are full of history and feeling. Just the kind of warmth and intelligence, we lost so many

people in this last time. Not all to COVID, just... And I was thinking, I was thinking about Freddy, I was receiving a lot of text messages about him. And anybody who booked him. We would book him, so we loved him, just working with him, we just... He was always in Dizzy's and he just was always soulful. Just always a kinda go-to. Where he just come and just... And we think about Jimmy Heath too. Before we started the lockdown, we were supposed to do a big thing for Jimmy in the Rose. Rose Hall, and I was just thinking man, one of the first things we got to do when we get back. Is we got to get back and collect Jimmy and talk about him.

22:45 WM: So yeah, it's just to kind of soul and feeling of warmth they had is... Every time when we lose them, some more of us got to step up with that same feeling. We ain't gonna have the knowledge, but we can have the feeling.

23:01 MG: And that feeling says a lot when you're able to carry someone's feeling, and soul. I know that's... When you pass that down and...

23:07 WM: Yeah, make that be an objective, not just buying something. Make that be an objective. That's part of what we were talking about in the beginning. If your objective on the bandstand is to make somebody else sound better and it is to give them space to play, you all gonna always be a lot happier. Then it might take them a little while to understand. Wow that's your objective I don't have to play all night because I'ma gonna get another opportunity, it's like when you playing ball with somebody who never passed a basketball, when you get it, you're gonna shoot it. But now if they distribute it, you get it and you don't mind giving it back. Cause you figure, I will give it back, I might get it again. So you go from survival of the fittest, dog eat dog, to playing ball and passing and sharing. The Golden State Warriors have been showing us for the last years, what sharing the ball is about, come on now.

23:56 MG: Something that you said last Wednesday that really sat with me. I have been thinking about, is that story about your brother when you were talking to your mum about we need more food, we need more food, then he puts a bit of his food on to your plate then goes, we have more food now.

24:09 WM: Now, we have more, right? He will put it as a joke, oh, man can I get some more? Now, we have more. Yeah, there you go.

24:15 MG: Yeah.

24:16 WM: Old Branford. We called him bookie in those days. Book.

24:19 MG: Book? Where did book come from? What does that mean?

24:24 WM: Book. Branford, Book. I don't know, we just, you know some... Everybody have a nickname then. Not like people have nicknames too though. Still a lot of good nicknames out here.

24:33 MG: I wanted to... We have a couple of more minutes, I want to get to some questions as

well. There was... How do you recommend people balancing practicing and playing for fun?

24:41 WM: Practicing is playing for fun. So when you practice, make it fun, play dynamics. Play every exercise like it's a piece of music. Do your home tones like that, do your technical exercises, pay attention to dynamics, play it in all the keys, make it fun, challenging for you. It's like some people, they don't wanna work out. Some people get to a work out and they make it fun. They challenge themselves.

25:03 WM: Make up variations on things. So don't separate the practice from just playing, and once that practicing becomes fun, every time you look at your horn, you'll have a good time. Or your instrument. If it's not a horn, your instrument. Even if you sing.

25:20 MG: And talking about trumpets, what are good trumpet solos to transcribe and should you write your own transcriptions out?

25:28 WM: I'm a fan of learning stuff without writing it down first. And I like when you start learning the solos, you have the easiest time to play that have a lot of the nuance. Like I always spoke with Jon Faddis, we talk about, "Man, how did you ever think to try to take a Dizzy solo off the record?" Dizzy's playing is so difficult, so you wanna graduate to that kind of way of playing, but it's always good to start with some early Miles, early Louis Armstrong, 1920s, Hot Fives, Hot Sevens. Not that that's easy to play, it's very difficult to play. But playing with a lot of nuances. And then also just who you like. So many great musicians that play, and we all like different things. If you find yourself attracted to a musician's personality and the way that they play it, learn their solo and learn to sing the solo, and then sing it enough so that you know it and then play it on your own the way you sang it, because so much information will never be written down. The way they scoop a note here, what's the feeling of joy, how they get sorrow in a certain note, a little scrape on something, a little turn right here, laying back. Learn stuff by ear.

26:37 WM: I'm a big believer in the natural hearing is gonna be much more sophisticated and more definitive than anything you write down. You're only writing the surface of a note. So that's my suggestion. Learn things by ear and learn 'em from memory. And listen to 'em so much that you can't help but know 'em. I once heard Tony Williams sing the entire Kind of Blue record on a drive through to Japan. And I swear to you, he sang every note of every solo on the entire record, so that's how serious he was about playing.

27:09 MG: That must have been something to hear.

27:12 WM: It was unbelievable. And in general, the education that he would bring many times, because he studied all the drummers' styles. You should see him sit down on the drums and play what he learned from Elvin Jones, what he learned from Art Blakey, what he learned from Buddy Rich, what he learned from Alan Dawson, what he learned from hearing Philly Joe Jones playing. And he was so specific... What Max Roach did and how he would finish a phrase. It's a master class. Just... A master class in the type of dedication required for mastery.

Wednesdays with Wynton - Episode 14, Season 1

27:41 MG: Wow, thank you for that. And I want to... Before we wrap up, a couple of things. Wynton will be a special guest on The Washington Post IG Live this Friday at 2 pm Eastern time. So you should check that out, that's gonna be a fun one. And I wanna thank you all so much for tuning in. As I mentioned in the beginning, we're gonna take a little bit of a hiatus here, a little summer hiatus of Wednesdays with Wynton. We have a ton of really exciting programming that we'll be announcing soon! And as Wynton mentioned before, the month of July, we'll be talking all about freedom, the spirit of freedom, and in all different ways, all different genres of freedom. So hope you guys will check back, and go to jazz.org and follow us on our socials to see what is coming up. And Wynton, anything else you'd like to say before we wrap up?

28:26 WM: No Maddie, you know I'm not gonna see you here, but we're gonna have a lot more meetings this month [chuckle] so...

28:30 MG: I'm looking forward to that.

[laughter]

28:33 WM: You're saying that now, let's see. [chuckle] Much love to all of y'all. Thank you so much. Let's handle our business.

28:41 MG: Thanks Wynton.

28:42 WM: Right. Yes indeed, Maddie.

28:45 MG: Bye.

28:46 WM: Alright.