

Wednesdays with Wynton on Instagram Live

Episode 7 – May 13, 2020

00:01 Madelyn Gardner: Hi, everyone. Welcome back to Wednesdays with Wynton. My name is Madelyn Gardner. I'm the PR and External Comms Manager for Jazz at Lincoln Center, and thanks for coming by again for another "Wednesdays with Wynton". Wynton will be joining us in just a moment for a Q&A here on Instagram Live, so if you guys wanna go ahead and start asking any of your questions down in the comments, I will try to get to as many of them as possible. And so Wynton will be joining us in just a moment. Before he does, I wanna remind you that we have a ton of global, online free events and educational happenings on jazz.org. So if you head to jazz.org right now, we have master classes, we have educational classes, we have live streaming concerts so we hope you can join us for all of those. And also today, and every Wednesday, we release concerts from the Jazz at Lincoln Center vault. Today, we released on our YouTube page Abyssinian Mass. It's an amazing concert, I hope you guys can go check that out. And yeah, I think Wynton will be joining us in just a moment.

[pause]

01:11 MG: Also, go ahead and ask a question and let us know where you're from, any music you've been listening to, what your name is. Feel free to talk to each other in the comments, too. Maybe you'll make a new friend. Who knows? And here we have Wynton. Hi, Wynton.

01:35 Wynton Marsalis: Hey, now. What's going on? What we talking about?

01:37 MG: How is it going? Oh, no. You've been dropped. Hold on one moment.

01:49 WM: Okay.

01:49 MG: There he is, hello.

01:50 WM: There you go. There's always a little excitement in here some kind of way. Good. How you doing?

01:54 MG: Oh, yeah.

01:55 WM: How you feeling?

01:56 MG: I'm good, I'm good. I was just talking about Abyssinian Mass that's out of our vault concert today, and I have to say one of my favorite concerts that I've personally seen at the hall. So I was wondering if you can kick things off by talking a bit about that concert? How it came to be?

02:12 WM: Well, I've spoken with Reverend Butts about celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the Abyssinian. Of course, a great congregation, great tradition, and he's a phenomenal pastor. We had a meeting, I sat down, we went through the form of the mass. I'd done an earlier piece called "In This House, On This Morning". I think it was in 1992. But I sat down with the Reverend, I went through all the forms of the mass and it was so interesting, just his observations on how it is a dialogue with God and the different parts of the service and what they mean. Of course, being from that tradition, I knew the mass and all that. I was just trying, once again, to re-learn the material.

02:56 WM: I went back and worked on a lot of different things, did a lot of research, and we came up with a... The theme is the House of the Lord is a House of Prayer for All Nations; it's in keeping with my general theme and belief of the kinda unity of everybody and non-sectarianism, non-tribalism. And he agreed with it and gave me a great education, and I just sketched it out and started to write it. And we got tremendous support from David and Thelma Steward. They supported that project, which was a source of great pride for us. And we went on the road. And we were well-received.

03:33 WM: Damien Sneed is my man. I taught him when he was a kid in high school, but he came and he sang every part for the choir. And so you met the one person to sing every part: Soprano, tenor, alto, bass, how much music that is. Then he went on to conduct it. It took us a while. The first iteration of it was a lot of struggle, sometimes the music is so difficult at first, that the second time we did it and Damien came and it began to take on the characteristics of what it was. And, yes, it's a blow for trumpets. And we went on tour, we finished, we thought about the one difficult part we had. We said, "Well, let's just think, we don't have to play this one tomorrow." But it's a lot of fun just with the choir and the extended family all around you. It was a great tour, the singers... this big family community feeling and yes, a lot of...

04:27 MG: That's a great way to describe it, too, because, I mean, personally, I'm not a very religious person, but I found myself being very spiritual while watching it. It really connects, you connect watching it.

04:37 WM: Yeah, I tried to put a lot of that spiritual traditions into one. I had the one thing that's like the Muslim call to prayer. I got a lot of recordings of the prayer and you see the different modes and different things they use in different regions.

[music]

05:00 WM: I wanted to make sure I wasn't being cliché and really follow some of the modes that they did. And I had other different types of call and responses, uses of... Caught some really abstract things, like the one that Vince sings: "Father please come sit with us now." Used a kinda triadic construction of melody that's very unusual. And lots of very traditional things. Put all the stuff together and, yeah, it's a blow.

05:29 MG: It's a lot of fun. And for those just tuning in, we're talking about Abyssinian Mass,

which we just released on YouTube today from the vault. It's a concert that was performed, as Wynton was mentioning, they did a tour of it and then performed it in, and the one's that's on YouTube, 2019 in November at Rose Theatre. So you can enjoy a full concert today. And so I thought we can go in and get into some questions. And to kick these questions off, I have one question of my own that I thought that these viewers would enjoy. In this past Monday during Skain's Domain, you talked a bit about improvising. So when the Q&A part, a gentleman asked, "How do you... He gets nervous in front of people and how do you focus on improvising and being able to play those notes sounding good, but also going with the flow?" And you talked about the fundamentals of improvising. So I thought maybe people here might be interested in that.

06:20 WM: Well, I think you always wanna learn how to play blues, if you improvising in our style. And that's always just...

[music]

07:03 WM: You just play around with stuff, and you find two or three little notes that you can play and learn the blues progressions. A very easy progression, it's one chord.

[music]

07:18 WM: Go to the four chord.

[music]

07:23 WM: One chord.

[music]

07:26 WM: Five.

[music]

07:28 WM: Four.

[music]

07:29 WM: One.

[music]

07:30 Wynton: Now the thing about that, any kind of mode or sound can fit on that progression. So, you can play...

[music]

07:58 WM: And then you just start...

08:00 MG: Oh, it's that easy? [chuckle]

08:03 WM: You start making up stuff... It's good to learn some lyrics to some blues on one of the Skain's Domains, Hamilton de Holanda said something great, he said, "Learn songs and different... If you learn a lot of songs, you know a lot of music." so... You don't start with W.C. Handy and you go to opposite ends of the spectrum. W.C. Handy, Ornette Coleman. Ornette wrote blues. WC Handy wrote Blues. W.C. Handy or Roy Hargrove, take your pick. It doesn't matter who you use and just start to put everything in between, because the modern music, you put everything together. The modern music has no segregation. The segregation was before the Civil Rights Movement. After the Civil Rights Movement, the thought is not segregated young versus old, new versus old, west versus east; that's old thinking. After the segregation, the thought is a continuous loop, a cycle, and a world of information that is connected, so your challenge is to see how it's connected. And that's the change. And that's also what was in the Abyssinian Mass. How are these things connected?

09:06 MG: Amazing. Look at that, we have our own personal concert, too. That was incredible.

09:10 WM: Yeah. You know, the blues is a good way to start. Now also, the blues are lyrics. So good lyrics, I remember I was going into Memphis once driving and a guy was playing some blues and he was singing, "That's all right, baby. Baby, that's all right. That's all right, baby. Baby, that's all right. That's all right, baby. Baby, that's alright." So if you just start with that kind of sound, and then you just go from that, go from the sound of the song and you have to trust in hearing something, also. We always kinda want a theory. You gotta do it how you start off if you a baby, the babies don't start learning a language with a theory. They listen to the sound and they start to babble it and sing it and then they start to fill it in with words. That is the best way to learn improvisation. Start with listening and then just start imitating and playing and you're gonna hear stuff.

10:06 MG: That's fantastic. Start with listening. That's... And it's interesting starting with the same thing, over and over again and letting it take you over.

10:13 WM: Let it soak in. You wanna learn how to cook something, just stand there and watch somebody do it. You'll learn more. There's a lot in that silence, in that learning. There's a lot in that. You learn a lot, much more than you'll learn if you start from the theory. Theory is last.

10:29 MG: Someone just comes and starts simple and go from there. That's good.

10:33 WM: Yeah, figure your own theories out. Don't start with a theoretical understanding of a thing that is something because the theory is applied after the thing. If you learn Western harmony, you learn don't have parallel fifths, but you study Bach's chorals, which is the foundation of a lot of rules, you can find parallel fifths and say, "Well that's Bach. The rules don't apply." Most times, you don't find those fifths, but I'm saying learn a sound of the thing and then you won't learn the

limitation of a theory first. Theoretical thinking is limited in the face of the thing that the theory is about. And it doesn't matter how complex it is. Everything from the theory of relativity, quantum entanglement, whatever it is that that theory is describing, the thing itself is much more nuanced and complicated and sophisticated than that theory is.

11:29 MG: Incredible. People are saying thank you very much, a little mind blown emoji because that is. It's the simple... Sometimes we forget, you know?

11:38 WM: But it's something we all know 'cause it's not... We would rather a person show us something than to read what they have to say about it.

11:47 MG: Right.

11:47 WM: If you stand next to a person doing something, if somebody shows you, "No, you catch it like this." When you see, "Oh, okay. I see."

11:58 MG: I love that. I'm gonna try to incorporate that into a lot. You can incorporate that into a lot of things in life too.

12:02 WM: Come on. You know. You know how it is.

12:04 MG: All right, we've got lots of questions here. Okay. Do you find any of your fundamental beliefs are challenged right now in the moment, what we're living in right now?

12:21 WM: Yeah, my fundamental beliefs are challenged by how we lived every day, anyway, so my fundamentals were always challenged. And a lot of the things that I do, amongst the stupider things that I did in my life, they challenged my fundamentals more than what I'm seeing. So we all have a set of fundamentals that we know to be true and we compromise them on occasion. And I feel that the greatest challenges to our fundamental beliefs are our own attempts to reconcile our own stupidity with what we knew we shouldn't have done. So I feel that more, all of the kind of dysfunction we're seeing pretty much... I mean, you could see it's kinda... You could see that, so...

13:10 WM: Yeah, I find it... I'm still trying to see how we come out of it, to know what's challenged and what's not. It's not a thing I can know right now 'cause we're still in the middle of this. The ignorance of a lot of our responses are predictable and that's because of how we have abandoned our political process, me included. How we don't participate in things. If we think about the investment we have in our government, how much money we've spent on taxes and everything, then think of how little involvement we actually have; and that, once again, I apply it myself, first. And I have to hold some responsibility to myself. And I have not participated on the level that I... I complain a lot, I've done that. But I pay and I don't try to really make a change. I vote. Okay, I do that but this is gonna require much higher level of our participation, because there's something about when you're in a crisis. Now is not as funny being a fool.

14:12 MG: Right.

14:13 WM: You can laugh at a fool, who's going for Congress? "Oh, let's vote for the donkey." It's funny, and we put jokes and we crack jokes, and all of that kind of stuff is funny until your life depends on their decisions. Then all of a sudden, what was a joke to you, "I'll vote for this" or "Let's bring someone and show up there in blackface," or "Oh, we're having a good time." No, we're not having a good time, so we're all responsible. And myself, I look at first my level of participation was less than it should have been, so I'll see if there's more going forward, but it needs to be more.

14:50 MG: It's a good thing to take away from this. I think there's always something, not even a light at the end of the tunnel, but there's always... We're worrying something now. What can we do to better the world and ourselves? 'Cause I think those kinda go hand-in-hand.

15:03 WM: Right, an opinion is easy to have, but to solve serious problems...

15:09 MG: Opinions are easy to have. That is very true.

15:12 WM: It's easy to express, too, if nothing is gonna happen to you. Now, you could be in some places where it's hard to express them 'cause it's a heavy price comes with talking. We, however, we can talk as much as we want and get online and... To a certain degree, depending on the sophistication of the information, but if you got barbershop-level information, like what I have, you can talk as much as you want.

15:38 MG: Right. [chuckle] Well, speaking of that, we have a lot of our questions reeling in. Did Pops' singing inspire you as much as his trumpet playing?

15:50 WM: Yeah, once I realized who Pops was... Yeah, Pops is such a genius. And his singing, the way stretched phrases and the freedom in his sound and his playing... Pops' genius is unimaginable. The depth of his understanding. I was once in Argentina, I was talking to a friend of mine who was a musician. He said, "Man, I heard somebody playing a trumpet on a tango. I was thinking, I've never heard anybody play that good on tango music." It was Louis Armstrong.

16:17 WM: We were once playing on a bus going through Brazil, we're driving. I think Belo Horizonte, some kind of town, we were on the road. And we were playing in the bus and we were jamming and we roll the windows down 'cause some cats were working on the highway. And we rolled the windows down and started playing for them and it just looked like a road crew. And when we finished playing, one of the people on the road crew said, "Louis Armstrong." [chuckle] We started... Pops has a kind of universal... People universal understanding of him and his singing, yeah unbelievable. Got perfect pitch, just always in tune, his phrasing, and the human quality of his singing that he showed us how you could get so many different emotions out of phrases and create things.

17:06 WM: Just the Stardust that he put on us with all the ways he stretched words and changed words and changed... The Hoagy Carmichael to through Louis Armstrong's 70th birthday party in the Shrine Auditorium. And Hoagy, who wrote Stardust, loved Louis. He, as a kid, he would check

Louis Armstrong out in Chicago. And yeah, Pops. You can't say enough great about Louis Armstrong.

17:31 MG: Well, and speaking of the greats, this Saturday would have been Betty Carter's... I believe it was 91st birthday. And talk about a legend, a great, who fostered an entire community of jazz players. If you can talk a little bit about your relationship with her and also... We released on Blue Engine, *The Music Never Stops*, which was our first real vaults concert that we released. So, if you wanna talk about her, that concert, the album?

18:04 WM: She used to mess with me all the time, called me the "Prince of Jazz." But in terms of just her genius and just her... First, Betty Carter, just her integrity. In the time that I was 18-19, 20-21, cutting in on the New York scene, Betty was the ultimate integrity, Art Blakey, Betty. And Art Blakey loved Betty. If you go see Betty play, I think the greatest concert I've ever seen was Betty Carter. There was somewhere in Germany, I was in my early 30s. I went to see her. Oh, she was just on fire that night.

18:37 WM: If you think about, when we started Jazz at Lincoln Center, Betty was always there for us. Dorthaan Kirk and WBGO. Also they have a big fund raising weekend, everybody support them if you can. They were a foundation for us and Betty, Dorthaan... We needed Betty to do something, she was always in there. And when she did *The Music Never Stops*, she raised her own money. She had big band arrangements, small band, trio music. She had standards, her song she wrote.

19:06 WM: She had such an original style and she wrote these songs that had forms that connected in different ways. And she was an unbelievable teacher. So if you think of any box you wanna check of what was needed at that time, she exhibited a genius and a thoroughness. Thorough originality, artistry, absolute seriousness about the music. She hard on musicians, and we needed that. She'd teach the drummers how to play and they have legendary stories where they're laughing about her. And she was hard on me, too. We used to always...

19:33 WM: She would mess with me all the time. One time I got sick of her messing with me, and I called her and cussed her out. Me and her was going at it as she looked at me, she said, "If we heard that type of passion coming out of your horn, we would hear something." [chuckle] Coming from the tradition, I loved her so much in terms of when I wrote the 12 Principles for our organization, the number one thing is embody the music you serve and the example for that was Betty Carter. So the first record we put out of the group of recordings we're putting out now is Betty Carter. For me, she's like the end-all and be-all of something, and it all starts with her integrity, and her belief in what the music can do and is about. So, yeah. I could talk about her forever. I really... The respect I have for her is... I don't know what else to say.

20:21 MG: She's incredible. I think my favorite fact about her is that when she wanted to start up her career again after taking care of her family, she wouldn't get signed... She wasn't getting signed and she's like, "I'm gonna start my own label." That's really incredible.

20:35 WM: That's right. Did a great record, "*The Audience with Betty Carter*", she had to, that's an

example of her integrity. At that time, nobody wanted, the integrity was not... It's always trouble when you wanna have that in music, especially when something touches on an agreed upon corruption. As these kind of agreed upon corruptions that we know is corrupt, but we all agree, we like it. And if you are a person who stands outside of that at a time when a corruption becomes very popular, you going uphill. And she was willing to go uphill and was uncompromising. She was strong, so you know, yeah, I loved her and her artistry, I mean, it speaks for itself. The song "Bridges" just, I mean, that whole concert meant a lot to her, that she put on it, and our concert... To have somebody put on their own concert, raise their own funds, rehearse the band, have original music, give a retrospective, sing on that level. I mean she's...

21:38 MG: And for those just tuning in, we're talking about, Betty Carter's birthday is this week, and would have been 91 years old. We're talking about the "Music Never Stops" album that Blue Engine Records released. You can stream it online this weekend, too, to celebrate. If you wanna stream that and wish Betty Carter a "Happy Birthday" feel free. We also... We've had a lot of questions people asking what do you think the music industry and concerts are gonna look like after, well, I had to say after COVID-19, but when the world starts opening up and when events start happening again, what do you think that might look like?

22:09 WM: It's gonna look great. It's like, somebody keeps you from doing something, then you have the chance to do it. What is it gonna look like? You're gonna be doing it. It's like what did drinking look like after Prohibition ended? I don't... Just kinda thought of, I don't see changes. People are gonna want to go out and be around each other. I do think people, we need to be aware of the motion toward computers and cyborgs, and we have to be aware of the motion away from people. Because if you have a company, people become expendable and it starts with something you wanna do. You can work for home. Okay, once I have you at home, I don't have you in an office building. Now I don't have you in an office building, man, all of a sudden, I don't have all these pinching costs, and I don't have on this health insurance. Now, you're a freelancer. I can send your job out anywhere in the world, you're competing now with a... So beware.

23:10 WM: That's my only thing... A lot of times, things seem like blessings, but they're not necessarily... But I think that we will find, if we fight for our kind of rights and our humanity, we'll find a happy balance, because I do embrace tools. I think it's great that we have this tool to communicate here, and I do think as we... Tools are fantastic as long as we use them, but we have to always be aware of abuse of tools. It's like, you go to the doctor's office and everything is a chart or a graph, you need that doctor to look at you. So yeah, you want the graph, you want the chart, you want the numbers, but you don't wanna go in and just look at graphs, charts, and numbers because there's another... The way, those things all interact is always different. Now, the interesting thing about COVID is how it interacts with different people, different ways. That is a set of things generally is, but it's not always.

24:03 WM: So if you're one of those people isn't that not always category, it's important to you. I never want to just seed everything over onto well, this is the direction everything is going now and this is what the computer says, or AI is the new thing, and this is... We have to keep things in check. You have to always have oversight and overview and human judgment and human understanding,

human compassion, human reason, these are things that keep us out of the kind of animal kingdom. Dog eat dogs survival of the fittest because intelligence is a very powerful, powerful weapon when weaponized. That when you can use your mind and then conceive of and you prey on large groups of people... We have to constantly push that humanity button, and that reason and we have to reach for that human mythology in the arts because everything is a cycle. So we do have to be aware of that, the desire to create a class of rulers and workers.

25:02 MG: Right, and... Sorry go ahead.

25:06 WM: No, it's important to understand that once humanity is not foremost on people's minds, and there's whole categories of people who are... Who don't have a feeling of humanity, not on purpose, they're born with different levels of empathy and empathetic understanding. So, once I begin to separate you into generations and the races and into genders, man, you gotta realize I have you separated now. Now, I can take that separation and use it as a wedge to separate you from your own best interest. So we just have to keep our minds on it, and understand that it's not a given that our humanity will always be the thing that wins out, we have to fight for that all the time, and that's why I love Betty Carter, because she was always fighting for that in her music, and she was always about the humanity and the substance of things.

26:00 MG: She really was. I mean, it's full circle, right? That's a great example of someone who her whole life believed that, and something that we can look towards, and try to act upon ourselves.

26:11 WM: She really did.

26:11 MG: And during this time too, on that same note, what is the best way to support your music organizations, musicians, and what is best practice right now and how can we continue that?

26:25 WM: I think, get online, donate to people. People need a lot of help, freelance musicians people who're working to get the gig. That June is gonna be murderous because your hope starts to sink, you just... And artists in general, to support the things that you understand just for artists don't be too proud to ask. People been working their entire lives. They don't wanna ask people for things. So reach out to people in any way, big and small, people are gonna come up with things I would never think of. But of course go online donate to people, support them. Set up any independent network. You want somebody to play for you, call them. Musicians, ultimately... We play for the pleasure of the public. And now we have the whole world as an audience. So somebody in Korea might want to hear you play tenor saxophone. And somebody in Korea might wanna hear a certain tenor saxophonist. Reach out to them, get on their website, connect them.

27:26 WM: This is what we see how important these modern tools are. And this is... Do we need a whole cycle of support and help? Like I'm sure there are fans of Betty Carter, all over the world. I will say in Korea, let's just stay on that theme. A Korean film won the Academy Award this year, so you can believe we're talking now, but someone in Korea can see that. And I have a student in Korea who went to Juilliard. Perfect pitch, unbelievable student. And we played in Korea, just two years ago, and I asked him to write out a tune for me, a Korean song. I completely wrote on a song

from... We played it at a concert. I changed one chord. Jaehun is his name, unbelievable ears. So, I changed one chord in the arrangement he gave me, and he came backstage after the gig. He said, "You changed the dominant chord to a sus chord."

[laughter]

28:21 WM: I loved him, I wanted to hug him. I saw him on the train one day, he wasn't doing right in school, and just randomly, I saw him on a subway train and I sat down, I looked up and it was him, and I knew... He was a little older student, I just looked at him, he didn't, he doesn't talk that much. And I said, "You don't want to graduate?" and he just looked at me. It was really a funny conversation. So we went two blocks and before he got off on 34th Street he was just looking at me, we were making faces, I was like... And he was like...

[laughter]

28:51 WM: Then before he got off, he said, "I will graduate." And he graduated. So I just figured about Korea, I just, I don't know, it came to my mind. So how things are connected. Yeah, wherever you are in the world, if you wanna hear a musician from anywhere in the world, reach out to them 'cause they're sitting around and, a lot of people are hungry.

29:10 MG: And then I know that you and the Orchestra and friends of the Orchestra have been taking this time to also do a lot of the collaborations... Virtual collaborations, "Quarantine Blues", the songs that you did for "Memorial For Us All," which is then I know that you have a lot more up your sleeve too.

29:28 WM: Yeah, we're doing stuff. We're working. We're gonna communicate through any medium we can communicate through and when we come up live, we're gonna start playing and we're gonna continue to communicate. We were up online before. Now we have to do it and we will do it and we'll add it to our arsenal. We're not gonna look at it as a either or. Every time you have a new friend don't mean you have to get rid of the other friends. The baby is born, it don't mean your great-grandmother's got to die.

29:54 MG: Right.

29:55 WM: It's a cycle, so we're looking at it like that, and we embrace the time and the change. We don't like it, but we have to embrace it. And we have to.

30:04 MG: Your friend Jon Batiste, said yes indeed. He's here right now and he says "Yep, you see."

30:10 WM: Bat knows... He's from Lincoln Manor so he really knows. If you know where he's from... Bat knows. And you know, it's just... A cycle, you know just hearing from him makes me happy. I was thinking of him actually today, because I was thinking about how computerized everything can become and how the human element is easy to... 'cause human beings, a lot of times,

you're dealing with humans, you're dealing with problems. Like you deal with yourself, you can be a problem to you. Now you have a workforce of people and all of a sudden, you see an opportunity. No you don't need a HR department, you don't need human disputes, you don't need people fighting, you don't have all these things that deal with human beings. Now, you only turn machines on, or now you deal with human beings that are a long way away, man, you're not gonna see them, you give them some work and they give it back to you and it's much cheaper and it's much more efficient. And I was thinking about Bat's Stay Human Band, Stay Human, he has that on these things that he sent in. And at first I thought it was kind of funny 'cause he's been having it for years, since he was... He's still young, but he was really young, and I think, yes, stay human, it has a much deeper connotation now. So maybe he heard that way back then.

31:23 MG: Amazing, and I wanna thank everyone, we're about to wrap up, I'm gonna ask one more question here for Wynton. But I wanna thank everyone so much for tuning in, again for another Wednesdays with Wynton, we'll be back next week again. And just as a reminder, you can head to jazz.org. We have a ton of things going on 24/7. We have archival concerts you can check out on YouTube. We have educational classes, we have master classes. So go check that out, I hope you can join us for everything and we... I'm hoping you can play us out here. We have a lot of people asking to play some tunes.

[music]

32:17 WM: Something about Bat. Alright, Lincoln Manor. Y'all take care. Alright Maddie, it's good to see you.

32:22 MG: Alright. Good to see you. See you next week!

32:24 WM: Alright, Maddie.

32:25 MG: Bye.

32:25 WM: Alright, now.