

Wynton Marsalis

PROFOUNDLY GRATEFUL

By Allen Morrison // Photo by Andrea Canter

Wynton Marsalis, the world's most articulate advocate for jazz, is momentarily at a loss for words.

Asked what it means to him to win the DownBeat Readers Poll as best trumpeter for six consecutive years, he starts to speak, catches himself, cocks his head and thinks. Measuring his words, he finally says, "I'm always happy to win something, and I'm not unhappy if I lose." Then he adds, "Those other trumpet players can play, too."

It's not false modesty. Marsalis obviously takes great pride in his accomplishments; he just doesn't want to gloat. Meeting over sushi at a midtown Manhattan hotel, it's apparent that he'd rather talk about Jazz at Lincoln Center than about himself. In any event, "himself" has become inseparable from JALC, now celebrating its 25th anniversary season with Marsalis at the helm.

He occupies a unique place in American culture. More than a master trumpeter and prolific, Pulitzer-winning composer, he leads one of the most impressive ensembles in jazz, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, as well as his own quintet. He is a brilliant arranger, and a tireless educator and proselytizer for the arts.

But perhaps most critical is his role leading New York's most important jazz institution. With a 2012 budget of \$43 million, Board Chairman Robert Appel describes JALC as "the largest nonprofit in the country devoted to jazz—and growing." As managing and artistic director, Marsalis is the impresario behind hundreds of concerts of new music every year. At the same time, he's one of the world's foremost conservators of jazz, a keeper of the flame. The JALC Orchestra honors and reinterprets jazz from every era, from decades-old New Orleans standards to the postmodern present. Marsalis manages it all according to his credo that "all jazz is modern."

Directing a staff of about 100 from an office building a couple of blocks south of JALC's Frederick P. Rose Hall theater complex in New York's Time Warner Center, Marsalis occupies a surprisingly modest office. Other than a few knickknacks and family photos, the only feature to distinguish his workspace is the presence of a Steinway upright piano.

He continues to champion the giants who invented the language of jazz, in all its dialects. When asked to cite those musicians, living or dead, whom he thinks are underappreciated, he immediately cites a former quintet-mate, pianist Marcus Roberts. Who else? He considers. "Ray Nance," he says, giving a nod to Ellington's long-time trumpeter, who played the classic solo on "Take The 'A' Train." Anybody else? "Jelly Roll Morton. People know his name, but they should check out his playing on the Library of Congress recordings."

Marsalis, of course, is a famous champion of Louis Armstrong, whose influence can be felt in much of his work. "How could you not be?" he asks. "Tony Bennett called me about two weeks ago. I got on the phone and he said, 'I just wanted to tell you, thank you for talking about Louis Armstrong. Because he was truly *what he was*. And it's important to keep the memory of him alive in our culture. Take care.' And that was it."

In the same way Armstrong popularized jazz with a mass audience yet kept his artistic integrity, which he displayed every time he picked up his horn, Marsalis has worked hard to bring jazz to wider audiences through every means at his disposal: international touring with the JALC Orchestra, broadcasts, recordings and a wide variety of JALC educational efforts that include the national

"Essentially Ellington" competition for high school jazz bands and a "Jazz for Young People" curriculum for middle school students. JALC's next frontier for expansion is to open jazz clubs overseas modeled on its own Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola. The organization recently opened Jazz at Lincoln Center Doha in Qatar. This club, which offers a view of the Persian Gulf, is the first of several planned JALC outposts.

Marsalis has also found another, especially effective way to broaden the appeal of jazz—a series of high-profile collaborations with hugely popular artists, including Willie Nelson, Norah Jones, Eric Clapton, Paul Simon and, most recently, Bobby McFerrin.

Simon, whose series of concerts earlier this year combining his own band with Marsalis and the JALC Orchestra was a highlight of JALC's season, calls Marsalis an ideal collaborator. "I'm just crazy about Wynton," Simon says. "I suppose everybody is. He's very easy to work with."

Despite differences in musical styles, the two artists connected on a deep level musically. "Both our fathers were musicians, so we both grew up with music," Simon explains. "We were both surprised that we have as much in common as we do. It's not so much that the repertoire we've listened to in our lives is overlapping. It's the way we listen that's similar. When I was trying to explain the music I'm writing, he understood what I was talking about. It's not always easy to understand the way African rhythms are played. You really have to listen; otherwise it doesn't sound right. And Wynton is a very good listener—like any great musician. Music is listening. He's like that musically, and I also find him like that intellectually—he's very curious about all kinds of things."



Wynton Marsalis performing at Dakota Jazz Club in Minneapolis, 2009



And he thinks in a very clear, insightful way.”

All three nights of Marsalis and Simon’s collaboration were recorded. Simon is not certain if an album will be released, but he’d welcome it. “I’m pretty sure that we’re going to do it again,” he says. “We’ve talked about doing some concerts, maybe in other cities ... continuing the collaboration. We’ll see how far we can take it—how much we can meld the two sounds.”

A 2011 collaboration between the trumpeter and guitarist Eric Clapton—Wynton Marsalis & Eric Clapton Play *The Blues: Live From Jazz At Lincoln Center* (Reprise)—resulted in a second Readers Poll win this year for Marsalis, in the category of Blues Album. The album’s selections, including a wide variety of blues styles (including jump blues, Southern slow-drags, traveling blues and a terrifically soulful guest vocal by Taj Mahal on “Just A Closer Walk With Thee”), are arranged for a 10-piece band based on the instrumentation of King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, plus electric guitar and piano. In his liner notes for the album, Marsalis writes that Oliver’s 1923 recordings “forever established the blues as a centerpiece of jazz.” Describing the collaboration as a “pure joy,” he cites Clapton’s courage in coming to New York to “front a band that you’ve never played with, in a form of music you don’t normally play ... and sing almost all of the material After all of that, Eric told me, ‘I’d rather play the rhythm parts than play any solos.’ That’s why I love and respect him.”

The love and respect was clearly mutual. Calling Marsalis a genius and a “wonderful leader,” Clapton expressed his gratitude in comments from the stage: “I want to say how much it means to me to play with this bunch of guys. [Marsalis] has encouraged me ... to try to find my way into this thing. Because jazz to me was always forbidden ... it’s a language that’s ... very sophisticated, has humor and depth,

and speaks to everybody on the planet. And so, for me to be able to come in here and try to make my little jingly stuff work inside this ... well, you know, it’s a triumph of a kind!”

“He was very serious about it,” Marsalis recalls. “He picked the tunes. I arranged them. We rehearsed them very diligently. He loves the music; he’s been listening to it and studying it his whole life.”

This fall, Marsalis opened the 25th anniversary season of JALC with a first-time collaboration with singer Bobby McFerrin and the JALC Orchestra in a program of tunes that held special meaning for McFerrin, arranged by Marsalis and other band members. Launching into a Ted Nash arrangement of “Scarborough Fair,” McFerrin noted the presence of Simon in the audience and invited him to come up on stage to sing it with him. Simon, caught by surprise, reluctantly agreed, even though it was unrehearsed. “Well, it wasn’t a train wreck,” he joked later. “Bobby McFerrin is a brilliant improviser, and I’m ... not.”

The silver-anniversary season will include more collaborations, historical tributes and a national tour by the JALC Orchestra. Among the highlights will be career retrospectives for Joe Henderson, Eddie Palmieri and the 90-year-old Toots Thielemans; and mini-festivals celebrating John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Chick Corea and *Birth Of The Cool*. Contemporary artists like Brad Mehldau, The Bad Plus, Bill Frisell and Madeline Peyroux, among others, will be showcased. And the JALC Orchestra will perform Marsalis’ Pulitzer-winning *Blood On The Fields* for the first time in New York since its 1994 premiere.

Looking back on the accomplishments of the past 25 years, Marsalis says, “I’m proud that a lot of our great musicians who passed away loved the institution and dedicated a lot of their time and energy to it. And that we had the

chance to send them out right. Benny Carter, Gerry Mulligan and John Lewis are three who come to mind.

“I’m proud that we still have 11 of our original board members,” Marsalis noted. “They are still deeply engaged after all we have been through.” Under the leadership of Marsalis and his board, JALC grew from its beginnings as a summer concert series called “Classical Jazz” in the late 1980s into a co-equal constituent of Lincoln Center in 1996. Frederick P. Rose Hall, the world’s first performing arts center engineered expressly to enhance the presentation of acoustic jazz, opened in fall 2004, despite the difficult New York City economic climate following the events of Sept. 11.

“It was a heavy lift,” Marsalis says.

“I’m proud that we were able to build this quality orchestra, with younger musicians who had not played in the big band tradition playing with the surviving members of Duke’s band and the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis band. Then we were able to develop our own tradition. And I’m proud of the level that the orchestra plays at, so consistently, and such an unbelievable range of music. They learn music very quickly and play under the most enormous pressure.”

Trombonist and arranger Chris Crenshaw, who at 30 is one of the younger members of the JALC Orchestra, says, “Wynton is all about integrity and originality. That’s his main thing. And about bringing whatever you have in your palette to the bandstand. We have 10 arrangers in the band, and he likes to give them the opportunity to bring in arrangements and to do original compositions.” He cites Nash’s “Portrait In Seven Shades,” Vincent Gardner’s “Jessie B. Semple Suite” and his own “God’s Trombones,” all of which were given their premieres by the orchestra. When they write for the band, Crenshaw says, the arrangers like to challenge each other’s technical chops, writing parts that are difficult to play. “It’s all in fun

and to serve the music, though, and it always comes out good," he says with a chuckle.

These days Marsalis is focused on expanding the audience for jazz. So, does he think it is growing?

"We need a revamping of our education system—and [that] takes time," he says. "When I was younger I thought it was like a 20-year problem," he says. "Now I see, maybe it's a 100-year problem, maybe it's 75 years. Some of the things necessary for ... people to educate themselves, to assess and absorb their culture, are not done in the lifetime of a person. With Jazz at Lincoln Center, we look at it like a cathedral—we're laying the foundation and maybe one part of a wall. That's it. That's what our job is."

Yet he thinks the audience is continually growing: "If you take all of the jazz records sold, and all the times somebody clicks on a Coltrane [track online] ... and count all the people who have interfaced with jazz in some way in the last year—I'm sure it's more people than it was in 1980." He admits some of that is due, of course, to the digital revolution, which made access to jazz much easier. "But the rest of it is due to the quality of the playing."

Does Marsalis believe the quality is higher than it's ever been?"

"Thelonious Monk's playing is," he says. "You see, you can interface with the whole history of it. Duke Ellington is still available to you. It's all a part of jazz. And I think that the audience will always be expanding. Because I think that the playing is on such a high level that people will always gravitate toward it."

He sees a need for a change in the way musicians are educated as well, saying that jazz studies programs don't always prepare students to play for real-world audiences. He talks about striking the proper balance between staying true to one's artistic self, on the one hand, and not starving, on the other.

Marsalis likens it to the nation's political system. "It's a fundamental problem, not just of jazz," he says. "It's a fundamental *national* problem. We need to understand the nuances of arguments, and argue points back and forth. The question that confronts us all is: Do you go the route of cheap populism and hit these touchstones that we all know, like, 'My father was a hardworking man ...' or 'It's all about the kids.' It's all bullshit. It's populism. It keeps me from having to tell you something. Or I can try to really communicate to you."

Marsalis relates this to a problem he sees in music education: "You play for people. So the question is, How do you get people to want to hear what you're playing, besides by cheap populism? Not just jazz educators, but cultural educators need to take a different approach. Things like the blues and swing, things that grip an audience—those need to be first on the agenda."

Marsalis is eager to elevate the conversation in the United States, but he's less than com-

fortable with the idea that he is the main spokesperson for the state of jazz. "I don't believe in a 'the,'" he says. "It's America; there's a lot of people. I'm one of the voices. I try to inform myself, but there's so much I don't know about the music. Other people know. I work with people who know a lot more: [jazz historian] Phil Schaap; and many of the musicians in our band, for example, Vincent Gardner."

As honored as Marsalis has been over the course of his long career, he also has endured his share of criticism. "That's life," he says. "And our music is like that. Part of life is you

get critiqued. And it can be unfair. And it can stick, whether it's fair or not. But to have the opportunity to participate—that's a blessing. So for that I'm profoundly grateful. And that gratitude overwhelms all other statements.

"That's why if I have to stay up till 4 or 5 in the morning for a year to write a piece—I'm grateful to do that. A lot of people wish they could do something like that, have that kind of isolation. I have that opportunity. It's all gravy. And *that* I truly believe. I never pull my horn out and don't think, 'It's gravy.' The chance to do this—it's a blessing." **DB**

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