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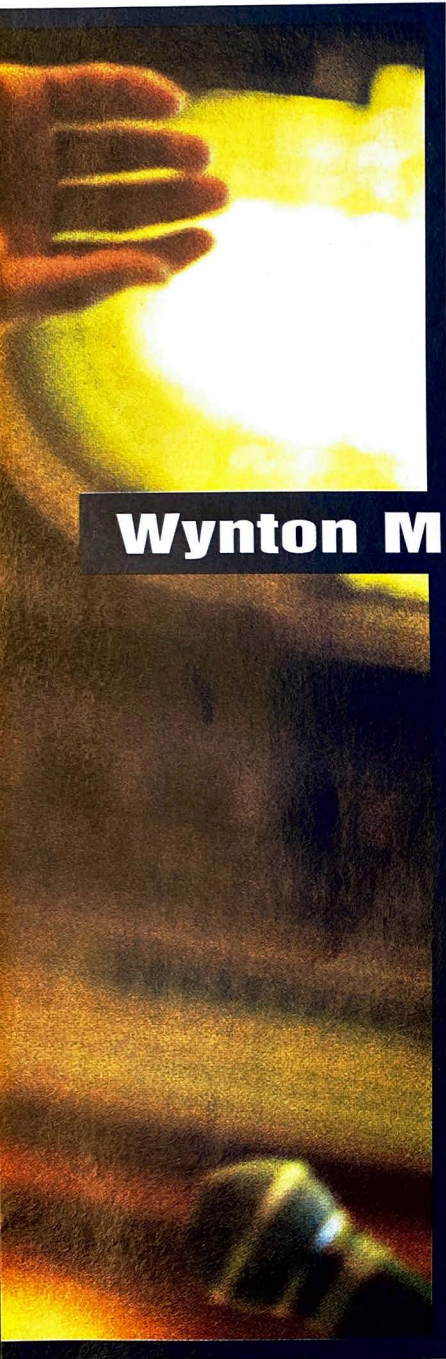
'My Home



Wynton Marsalis shrugs off controversies, retires his septet, hits the highway, then heads to the recording studio — all without missing a breath.

is

By Carl Vigeland



Wynton Marsalis

FRANK STEWART

Take your time." That's what Wynton Marsalis always says to the musicians on his bandstand. At a New York City recording session for his acclaimed big-band suite, *Blood On The Fields*, he reminds vocal soloist Miles Griffith to do just that during the work's moving climax. A few weeks earlier, at his septet's final theater gig in the historic Shubert Theater in New Haven, Conn., alto saxophonist Wes "Warm Daddy" Anderson plays an extended blues solo, and from just offstage, ever so quietly, ever so slowly, you can hear Marsalis' voice almost singing, "Take your time, Wes. Take your time."

A week later, when the septet concludes its last nightclub gig at New York City's venerable Village Vanguard on a rainy Sunday night, Marsalis waits until nearly three a.m. before starting the third set, and then talks for 15 or 20 minutes before the band begins the 40-minute first movement of *Citi Movement*. The band plays encores until nearly five, and afterward Marsalis visits with some Japanese jazz fans for half an hour, patiently answering their questions about the blues.

It's almost dawn when a friend drives him back to his Midtown apartment, with its panoramic view of Manhattan and the Hudson River and portraits of Ellington, Armstrong and Blakey on the walls.

"All right," says a weary Marsalis to an overnight guest. "Let me get you a blanket and some sheets." He looks for the light switch.

"We played some music tonight," he continues, with unintended understatement. "Yes, indeed."

Then he says goodnight and disappears into his bedroom, its floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with musical scores and CDs. For a few hours the place is quiet. No phone calls, no messages from the Lincoln Center jazz staff, no musicians coming by to rap or play some ball. Nothing moves save for the small perpetual-motion pendulum on the piano next to the scores of Bach and Bartok and Ellington. A notebook of manuscript for a newly composed section of a Lincoln Center Chamber Orchestra commission lies open on the piano's music stand. It's scheduled to premier in May, a week after the premier of a new Marsalis collaboration with dance choreographer Twyla Tharp at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Take your time.

A few weeks have passed. Sitting at the piano, the chamber orchestra score before him, Marsalis is on the phone with another of the friends who call constantly when he is home. Many are musicians who have performed with Marsalis. Long after they leave his band they stay in touch, calling for advice about gigs or recordings, about living on the road, about life. Pianist Marcus Roberts has been calling Marsalis for more than a decade; they may talk for just a minute or, if it's late and no one interrupts, an hour.

the Road'

Whoever calls is apt to hear Marsalis share the piece he's writing. Today, he relays part of the new Lincoln Center work over the phone. "What'd you think of that?" he asks, and then plays another section and asks the same question. He wants a response. If he's writing a part for saxophone, he might call Wes Anderson and ask him right on the phone what he thinks.

"Check this out, Warm Daddy."

Once, in a West Virginia motel following a college gig, Marsalis wanted to hear how a section of his *In This House, On This Morning* sounded. So he knocked on the wall of his hotel suite. Anderson knocked in return, put some clothes on and came into Marsalis' room carrying his horn. They had a six a.m. baggage call to leave for the next stop on that tour but worked on the music until the small hours of the morning.

Marsalis wrote *In This House, On This Morning* on the road within the same year (1991-92) that he completed both *Citi Movement* and another dance commission, *Six Syncopated Movements* (the latter in collaboration with New York City Ballet Director Peter Martins). When Marsalis began writing *Citi Movement* for his septet, he was soon to turn 30; *In This House, On This Morning* (also for septet) followed a few months later. When *Six Syncopated Movements* (for small ensemble) was first performed, he was just a few months past his 31st birthday.

The intense pace of that schedule continued with tours throughout Europe and overseas; two new classical recordings, including a re-recording of repertoire from Marsalis' first classical release in 1982; various video projects, including the four-part series *Marsalis On Music*, produced by Sony for telecast this fall; and the publication of a book, *Sweet Swing Blues On The Road* (W.W. Norton & Co.), with photographs by Frank Stewart.

When Marsalis announced last fall that his septet was disbanding, there was some joking about his taking early retirement. Yet after his closing Vanguard gig and before the *Blood On The Fields* recording sessions, his "retirement" took him on tour with Elvin Jones to Japan. He also approved the final edit of *Joe Cool's Blues*, a new recording on which his septet alternates takes with a trio led by his father, Ellis, on music from the Peanuts cartoon special *This Is America, Charlie Brown—The Wright Brothers At Kitty Hawk*. He reviewed several more scripts for a National Public Radio series, *Making The Music*, and began the score for a Broadway musical based on *On The Waterfront*. In between, he led a Lincoln Center tribute to Louis Armstrong, continued the very successful Lincoln Center series of youth concerts he began two years ago and planned national and international tours for the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Then, following the recording, he went on the road again with a new quartet, appearing in 29 American cities.

'My home is the road," says Marsalis. "Every day on the road is a homecoming."

It is a homecoming that inspires a wide range of emotions, all of which find a place in Marsalis' music.

"I love the vibe of the streets when we leave New York for the

airport, no matter what time, no matter what season," he says. "I don't stare out the window daydreaming or feeling sad. I talk to the driver. One driver I know real well and I like to kid him, but I talk to whoever it is.

"And then we're crossing one of the bridges out of Manhattan and you look back and see the skyline and you know in a few hours you're going to be waking up and this will all be a memory, a part of all the other memories you have of all the other goodbyes, all the people and places, all over the world."

Not just goodbyes. Greetings, too.

"There was a man who worked for an airline, who said he recognized me as we were sitting down in a plane leaving from Chicago," Marsalis laughs.

"You play saxophone, I know you," he said.

"I nodded. And he asked me, 'Who you with?'"

"Wynton Marsalis," I replied. "Yeah? He on this flight, too?"

"He's supposed to be. But I think he's late. I think he might miss his flight."

The touring schedule can be hectic, but Marsalis refuses to rush through anything.

"Since I was 17 and left New Orleans for Tanglewood, Mass., on a summer day after high school, I haven't ever had a break. You know, just sitting around. I can truly say I've never spent a day that way. But performing on the road, I don't like to go too many nights in a row in different places without a night off, which we usually spend traveling and I'll do some composing. You have to stay

fresh, especially when each gig is different. And every gig is different. We never do the same gig twice, in fact, 'perform' isn't really the right word for what we do because that gives a sense that we're going through a program we've rehearsed, tune by tune, move by move. That isn't what it's like at all."

To understand what it's like you don't literally have to go on the road with Marsalis. You can listen to the music. The road is in the music, Marsalis' sense of the road and the thousands of people he has met in 15 years on the road, people from all walks of life.

People like the boy in Monterey, Calif., who was told by a nightclub manager that he was too young to be admitted. So Marsalis went outside to talk with him, and later, the next time the band was in Monterey, he called the boy and gave him a trumpet lesson.

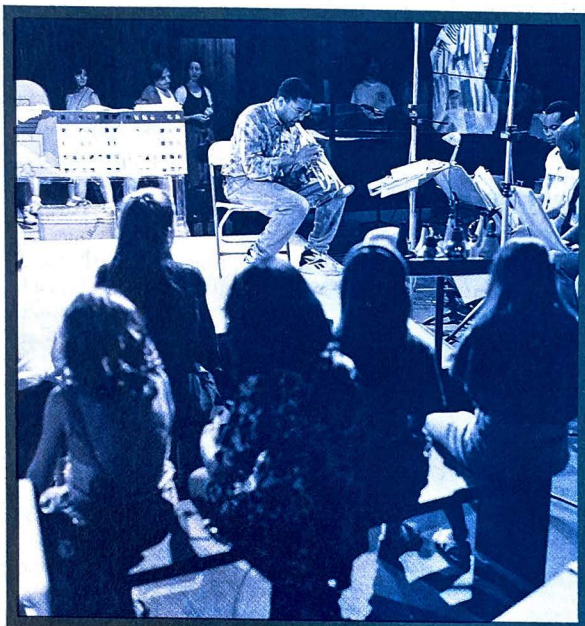
People like D.J. Riley.

"D.J. first came to a gig when me and Branford were playing at Berkeley," Marsalis recalls. "That was a long-ass time ago. That was more than 12 years ago.

"D.J. came backstage in his wheelchair. His body was so small. He had these little legs that just dangled there. And an enormous head, or it seemed enormous in comparison to the rest of his body.

"We started talking about music, and it was very apparent that D.J. knew what he was talking about. He knew all sorts of shit. About Coltrane. Miles. Monk. And we talked about politics and books. About the world. He was enormously intelligent, and he picked up on everything you said.

"He lives now in Los Angeles, where he's been going to graduate school. He gets real sick sometimes; he had pneumonia one year, but he always recovers and gets around again. Travels all over. Home to New Jersey. And he turns up where we're playing in



A taping of *Marsalis On Music*, a video to be telecast this fall

FRANK STEWART

California. He comes to all our California gigs. 'Reach for the stars,' D.J. says. 'That's the only thing you can do.'" But sometimes you're trying to avoid stones.

Generally considered the most prominent player in jazz, Marsalis has long been a lightning rod for criticism. Early in his career, he was accused of being aloof. In recent years, he has come under fire for his role as artistic director of the four-year-old Jazz at Lincoln Center, a year-round program that Marsalis founded and played a crucial role in building, beginning in 1987 with his involvement in the institution's summer jazz series. In particular, critics have targeted his hiring practices, his choices of commission grants and his use of Lincoln Center as a podium for his views on jazz.

Marsalis doesn't hesitate to take issue with his critics. Last summer, he engaged in a face-to-face public debate with author James Lincoln Collier over interpretations of Duke Ellington's music and accusations of cronyism at Lincoln Center. And he's been quoted extensively in the New York press defending his actions and viewpoints. But in general, Marsalis remains philosophical about the controversies surrounding him.

"It's a little like being on the bandstand," he says. "You don't have to like everything the other musicians play. It's the fact that they're playing that counts."

The analogy broadens to Marsalis' sense of American democracy, which he frequently cites to explain jazz at the countless workshops and lectures he presents wherever he tours. To Marsalis, the foundation of both jazz and democracy is dialogue, learning to negotiate your own agenda within the group's. "Jazz is like a good conversation," he says. "You have to listen to what others have to say if you're going to make an intelligent contribution."

The late light has darkened to dusk, the streets outside fill with cars carrying people home. For the past week Marsalis' band has been in the same New York City building every day and every night, first to rehearse and then to record a single piece of music: *Blood On The Fields*, a long work of 20 sections scored for big band and three vocal soloists. The piece encapsulates an entire history of music for big band; it gives form and meaning to an entire epoch of a people. Slavery is the specific subject of *Blood On The Fields*, but man's enduring desire for freedom is its universal theme. In text and music, *Blood On The Fields* tells a profoundly affecting and compelling story.

As the second-to-last day of the lengthy recording session comes to a close, soloist Miles Griffith stands behind a partition in the center of the auditorium of New York's downtown Masonic Hall. He is about to sing three lines, entitled "Calling The Indians Out," on which the entire work turns. The text is also by Marsalis.

Oh! Anybody, Hear this Plaintive Song

Oh! Who wants to help their brother dance this dance

Oh! I sing with soul, Heal this wounded land.

"Wake people up, Miles," says Marsalis, conducting the piece from the center of the 15-piece band. The casualness of his dress—a Georgia State University sweatshirt and a purple baseball cap—betrays the vigor and difficulty of these sessions. During breaks he sings an old Earth, Wind & Fire hit in duet with vocal soloist Cassandra Wilson or spars verbally, on microphone, with one of the other musicians about the use of body oils and colognes. But with a sudden shift of tone and concentration, he becomes dead serious, exhorting the band during one take to remember that the particular section of the piece they were playing then "has got to have power—we're in church during the time of slavery."

Now, Marsalis faces the horns, and the partition blocking off Miles Griffith stands behind them.

"This is the most important part of the piece," Marsalis says. "This is where the piece goes from the most general to the most specific, where it moves from tragic to optimistic." Marsalis sings

the part. Then he asks Miles to do it again.

"Good," Marsalis says afterwards, then turns to bassist Reginald Veal. "That was some bad shit you were playing there, Veal."

Marsalis asks for one more take. Before it begins, he speaks again to Miles through the microphone.

"Take your time, Miles," Marsalis reminds him.

The room, with its ornamental columns and colorfully painted woodwork, fills with the sound of Miles' deep voice, its timbre evoking the emotion of the music. As he did when the piece was performed live at Lincoln Center and broadcast nationally, Griffith raises his arms as he sings, as if giving a benediction.

Silence follows the final note.

The spell is broken by the speaking voice of Marsalis' long-time Sony producer, Steve Epstein.

"Wynton," Steve says. "I need you on the phone." He wants Wynton to pick up the internal phone by the music stand so they can speak privately about the take. He detected a few high notes from the band that he fears were not up to pitch.

"I don't care," Marsalis can be heard saying. "I don't give a fuck."

A different, embarrassed kind of silence follows. Long ago, Epstein learned not to be bothered personally by disagreement in the studio. In fact, he knows this kind of exchange is healthy. "It happens all the time," he says over the loudspeaker.

Relieved, everyone breaks into laughter.

"And that was a great take," adds Epstein.

"Seven o'clock," Marsalis announces, meaning the time he wants everyone back. "Thanks a lot."

When the musicians return, they stay only a short while before someone mentions it's trumpeter Marcus Printup's birthday. The entire band plays improvisations on "Happy Birthday" for 10 minutes, and then Marsalis dismisses everyone but Veal, drummer Herlin Riley and Michael Ward. He wants to work with them on the violin riffs Ward plays after Griffith's stirring solo.

Many of the lights are off. Dinner has been served long ago, but the dregs of some morning snacks remain on a tray.

Finally, Marsalis turns to Ward and asks him to play. They stand close together, with Veal and Riley behind them. Never hurrying but constantly urging, Marsalis coaxes Ward into the feeling he wants here. After several stops and starts, Marsalis is silent. He closes his eyes, touched by the haunting sound of Ward's violin. Ward and the other musicians continue to play, uninterrupted, and Wynton's body begins to move with the rhythm and spirit of the music. He begins to dance.

DB

Carl Vigeland and Wynton Marsalis are co-authors of the book *Jazz In The Bittersweet Blues of Life*, to be published next year by W.W. Norton & Co. To research the book, Vigeland went on the road with the Marsalis septet for a year.

EQUIPMENT

Marsalis plays a custom-made Raja trumpet by David Monette. It includes an integral mouthpiece that makes the trumpet a single structure.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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|---|--|
| CITI MOVEMENT—Columbia 2-53324 | YOU WON'T FORGET ME—Verve 847 482 (Shirley Horn) |
| IN THIS HOUSE, ON THIS MORNING—Columbia 2-73220 | LINCOLN CENTER JAZZ ORCHESTRA: PORTRAITS BY ELLINGTON—Columbia 53145 |
| BLUE INTERLUDE—Columbia 48729 | MEMORIES OF LOUIS—Red Baron 48629 (Teresa Brewer) |
| SOUL GESTURES IN SOUTHERN BLUE (Vol. I, Thick In The South; Vol. II, Uptown Ruler; Vol. III, Levee Low Moan)—Columbia 47975-7 | PONTIUS PILATE'S DECISION—RCA/Novus 63134 (Delfeayo Marsalis) |
| STANDARD TIME VOLUME 2, INTIMACY CALLING—Columbia 47346 | THE BEAUTIFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN—Columbia 46990 (Branford Marsalis) |
| TUNE IN TOMORROW—Columbia 47044 | I HEARD YOU TWICE THE FIRST TIME—Columbia 46083 (Branford Marsalis) |
| STANDARD TIME VOLUME 3, THE RESOLUTION OF ROMANCE—Columbia 46143 | AS SERENITY APPROACHES—RCA/Novus 63130 (Marcus Roberts) |
| with various others | DEEP IN THE SHED—RCA/Novus 3078 (Marcus Roberts) |
| JOE COOL'S BLUES—Columbia 66880 (Ellis Marsalis) | THE PROPER ANGLE—CTI 79476 (Charles Fambrough) |
| TANGENCE—Verve 314 526 588 (J.J. Johnson) | |
| LUSH LIFE—Verve 314 511 779 (Joe Henderson) | |