

**LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON**

# Following In The Footsteps Of Fame



*Continuing family tradition motivates talented offsprings*

The polls were closed and the wait was finally, mercifully, over. It was official. Wilder was the people's choice. He'd done it. He'd won.

Not the governorship of Virginia. That election was history—literally. The victory Gov. Wilder was savoring this time was, in some ways, far sweeter than his own. For this victory was his son's. His namesake's. This victory belonged to L. Douglas Wilder Jr. who, in May 1992, became a member of the Virginia legislature—the very place where, more than two decades earlier, his father had begun his own historic political career.

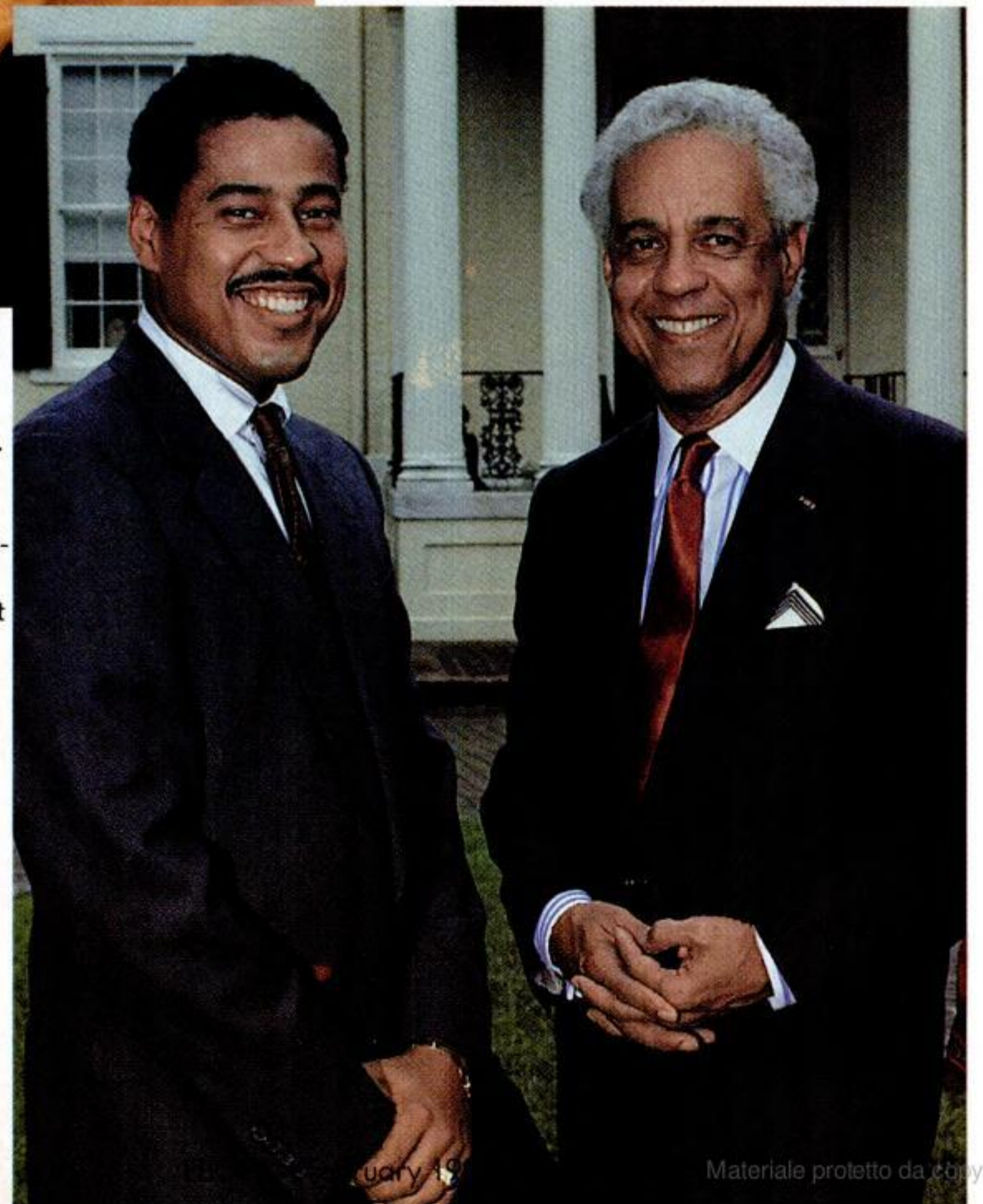
"I was with my father the night he was elected governor by less than one-half of

**H**E will never forget the night. Not ever. After weeks of campaigning, weeks of pounding the pavement to take his case to the people, election night had finally arrived. At his campaign headquarters in downtown Richmond, all eyes were glued to the TV as the news anchors recited the latest voter tallies and, with them, their predictions of the night's winners and losers.

Only the recurrent ringing of a telephone—L. Douglas Wilder calling for an up-to-the-second update—shattered the soft hum of conversation: *How was he doing?* Wilder wanted to know. *How much of the vote was in?* *How much longer before a victor would be declared?*

By 7 o'clock Wilder had his answer.

**Continuing the legacy,** recording star Gerald LeVert (above, left) and Va. Rep. L. Douglas Wilder Jr. (right, left), pose with their famous fathers, O'Jays lead singer Eddie Levert and Va. Gov. L. Douglas Wilder.





## LIKE FATHER *Continued*

1 percent," recalls 30-year-old L. Douglas Wilder Jr., who, like his father, is also an attorney. "You talk about a nail biter. My nerves were shot. My father, however, was the calmest person in the room. But here's the irony. The night of *my* election, he told me he was more nervous than he had ever been. That has always stood out in my mind."

What surely stood out in the governor's mind a week later, as he watched his son take the oath of office, was that mysterious yet undeniable truth that

other notable fathers have also come to see in offspring who excel in the same calling: the son also rises.

It was, for example, noted educator and jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis who sparked, shaped and nurtured the musical interest and talent of his internationally famous son, Wynton.

"When I was just a kid, he used to take me to all the gigs with him," the 30-year-old jazz trumpeter says of his father, who not only heads the department of jazz studies at the University of New Orleans, but also recently released his own

album, *Heart of Gold*, on Columbia Records. "I used to love hanging out with him."

Shockingly, however, he says he hated the music. "It was just too complex for me," says Wynton, who used to keep the books for his father's band. "I liked what was on the radio and that's *not* what they were playing."

That the most celebrated jazz trumpeter of this generation would find anything about music in general and jazz in particular perplexing is almost incomprehensible. And though Wynton credits his father with showing him how to understand the intricacies of the music he once found so complex ("My Dad has always been a person who stressed how to look deeper into the meaning of things through scholarship"), the elder Marsalis is intensely modest about his role in developing the mammoth musical talent of four of his six sons: Wynton, whose eight Grammys speak for themselves; Branford, who recently made history by becoming the leader of the *Tonight Show* band; Delfeayo, who composed and produced several cuts on *Heart of Gold*; and 16-year-old Jason, whose drumming is showcased on his father's album.

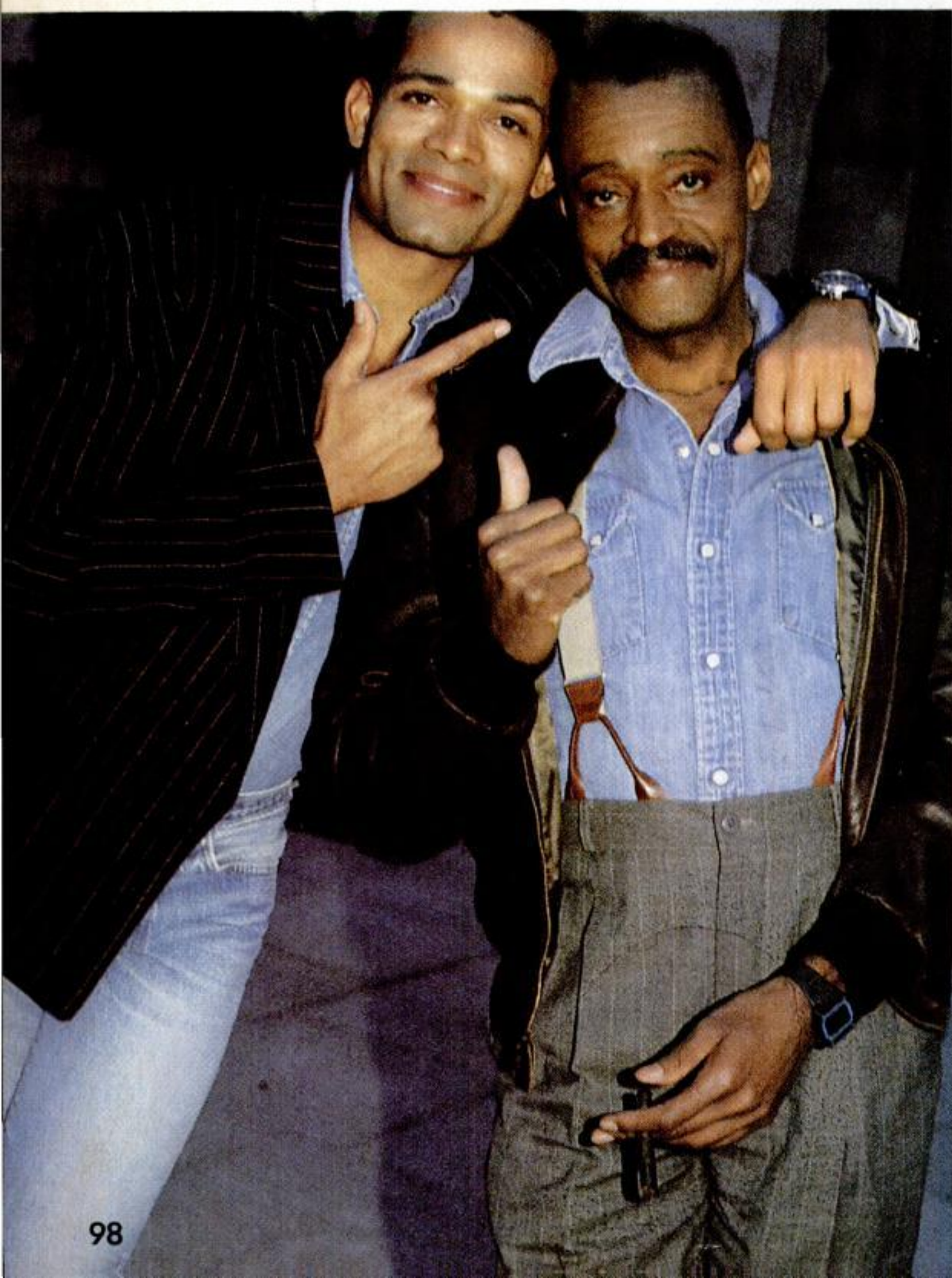
"All I did was make sure they had the best so they could be the best," says the patriarch of the first family of jazz. "They did the rest."

Not exactly, says Wynton. The truth, he says, is that while he is accorded the honors and the glory, his father is still guiding his way. Just recently for example, he was writing a ballet for the New York City Ballet. He wanted to compose a song using elements of three others from the early 1900s but, because he didn't know the melodies, he couldn't make the song come together.

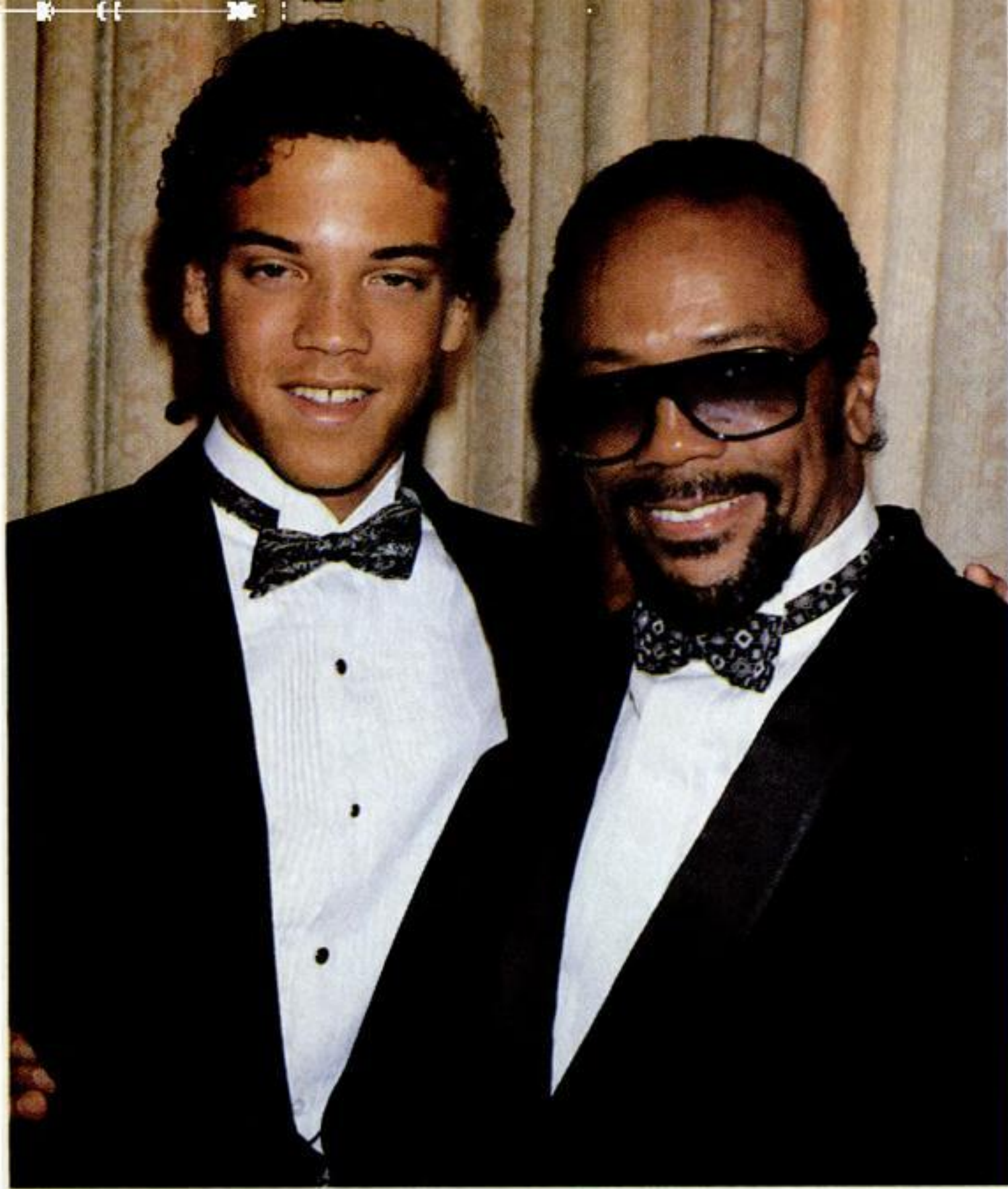
"I called my father and he just wrote out all of the songs," says Wynton, the amazement still ringing in his voice. "He's like a library of information I can always call on."

Count on, too, say these celebrated sons. "If there is one thing I know in this world, it's that my father will always be there for me *no matter what*," says recording star Gerald Levert of his father, Eddie Levert, who has been the lead singer of the legendary O'Jays for more than three decades. "Unlike a lot of other people, I know my father doesn't want anything from me or for me except to be the best."

By Gerald's own admission, however, that knowledge was a long time coming. "I've been singing since the age of 11," explains Gerald, lead singer of the R&B trio, Levert, whose three gold albums



**Proud papas**, pianist Ellis Marsalis (top, right) and director Melvin Van Peebles (left, right) set example for celebrated sons, Wynton Marsalis (above) and Mario Van Peebles.



Composer-arranger Quincy Jones (right) says his namesake, composer-arranger Quincy Jones III, "has a great sense of musicality, both melodically and rhythmically."

## LIKE FATHER *Continued*

and six No. 1 hits introduced the 26-year-old singer to stardom almost from the day in 1985 he formed the group with his younger brother, Sean, and grade school buddy Marc Gordon.

"I used to *beg* my father to take my tapes to the record companies and get me a deal. His answer was always the same: not until you learn the *whole* business—writing, producing, and management."

To say that Gerald took his father's advice badly would be putting it kindly. "I used to be so angry with him," he confides. "I was like 'Why are you trying to hold me back? You're one of the O'Jays. I don't have to do this. You can pick up the phone and get me a deal.'"

Eventually, says Gerald, that's exactly what his father did—though not until he was satisfied his son was prepared not merely to follow his example, but to set his own. And now that he's a successful producer and writer (for such stars as Anita Baker, Stephanie Mills and James Ingram), manager (he has five groups including The Rude Boys), and entrepreneur (he owns the hot Cleveland night spot Vert's), Gerald says "I thank my father every day for not letting me do it the easy way and insisting that I earn my own way."

Actor/director Mario Van Peebles had a similar experience when he was about to enter Columbia University and his father, famed author/actor/director Melvin Van Peebles, advised him to major in economics.

"I was feeling like he was always try-

ing to tell me what to do instead of just helping me get into the business," says Mario of his father, whose 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* became the biggest-grossing independent film of the year. "And I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, 'You know, you can major in birdwatching if you want, my brother. But know one thing: I got mine. I'm trying to help you get yours.'"

To this day, Mario says he is still thanking his father for that advice, advice he acknowledges continues to shape the personal and professional contours of his life.

Two years ago, for example, when Mario directed the hit film *New Jack City*, it was his knowledge of economics as much as his directing skills that helped him turn the low-budget sleeper into a monster hit. Made for \$8.5 million, the film earned more than \$20 million in its first three weeks and became the fourth highest-grossing picture of 1991.

"I think it is really cool that if you look at history, 20 years after *Sweetback* opened in two theaters, his son's movie opened in 825 theaters," says Mario with obvious pride. "There was a theater in L.A. showing *Sweetback* and *New Jack* side by side. I have to say, that was *very* cool."

What is even cooler, says Mario, is how his father gave him a roadmap to manhood, yet insisted that he navigate the journey himself; how Melvin demanded he discover his own gifts, his own talents *alone* so that now, as a grown

man in his 30s, he never has reason to doubt them. Or himself.

"When I was younger, I wanted my father to pick up the phone and help get me into show business," says Mario. "And he said he would 'help' me by giving me some free advice: 'Early to bed, early to rise, work like a dog and advertise.' Obviously, that wasn't what I had in mind. But now, when I look back, I can see how important it was for me to learn to eat off my own plate first, to know who *I* am. Otherwise it would be easy for me, and others, to get it confused."

There isn't the slightest possibility of any such confusion now, says the elder Van Peebles. "When Mario is working, one of the things you can see is that people trust his judgment because no one feels that Daddy made him," explains Melvin who, this spring, will star in Mario's next movie, *Posse*, the story of a group of Black soldiers who become outlaws after deserting an army unit when they are ordered to fight battles that will ensure their death.

Like Mario, actor/director Kevin Hooks grew up watching his father, acclaimed producer/actor/director Robert Hooks, break new ground in the entertainment world. It was his father, in fact, who co-founded the renowned Negro Ensemble Company and, later, the Black Repertory Company in the nation's capital.

It was on his father's TV series, *N.Y.P.D.*, that Kevin made his acting debut at the tender age of 9. Not long after, he captured the nation's heart when he co-starred as the son of Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson in *Souther*. Now "thirtysomething," Kevin has put his acting on hold and is continuing his father's legacy as a widely respected director.

The directing bug first bit the younger Hooks while he was starring as a high school basketball player on the series *The White Shadow*. He apprenticed during the run of the show and, when it ended in 1981, he got his big break directing NBC's critically acclaimed series *St. Elsewhere*. And this year he got the chance to showcase his talent on the big screen directing Wesley Snipes—and his father—in Warner Bros. multi million-dollar hit film, *Passenger 57*.

The exchange of wisdom and insight is not, however, a one-way street. On the contrary, it is often refracted from son to father. It was, for example, Quincy Jones III who first introduced his legendary father to rap. "He's really schooled me about the nuances of hip hop," says the multiple Grammy-winning composer-arranger-producer of his namesake. "As a producer, Quincy III has a great sense of



Reporters crowd around Ewing and Gregory Hill (l.) a fugitive known as "The High Rise Bandit." Hill turned himself in to Ewing in 1984 after escaping from Cook County Jail. A skilled pilot, Ewing often uses his airplane to find and bring in those fugitives who have fled Chicago.

## **RUSS EWING** *Continued*

and an easy smile, Ewing doesn't look like a guy who can successfully chase criminals. For one thing, he's "60-something," an age that makes him an oddity in local television news and street reporting. "I stopped counting after 50," he says, offering no further specifics on his exact date of birth.

But he does chase criminals and report the news very well, and his feats lead many to wonder how he manages to pull it all off.

"If I learned anything important, I learned it from the streets and the people who adopted me," he says. "They taught me to treat everybody right. That's it. You can succeed just by treating everybody right."

Ewing's equal treatment extends to everyone. His best sources, he says, are the people too often overlooked by society and many reporters—bus drivers, beat patrolmen, government clerks, prison guards, nurses, gangbangers and an occasional prostitute. "People in the streets are good sources," he says. "If

you let those people know that you like them and respect them, you'll get some of the best stories in the world."

**"Here's a major city police department, and here's this unarmed guy with nothing but a microphone who brings in more major criminals... than most of the police chiefs combined."**

—*LeRoy Martin*  
*Former Chicago Police Superintendent*

Some of Ewing's best stories could very well come straight out of a television episode of *America's Most Wanted*. On one occasion, for example, he and Gus Savage, a former congressman, allowed themselves to be exchanged for hostages taken by a pair of robbers who eventually surrendered.

Acting on a tip that a bank was about to be robbed, Ewing had a TV crew on hand to film the heist and the criminals' capture. He even won the trust of convicted mass-murderer John Wayne Gacy during his murder trial by sending him chicken sandwiches. The sandwiches led to a series of interviews and a book on the controversial killer.

Bank robberies, hostage situations, murder—the work isn't exactly safe. While admitting to being cautious, Ewing says he's never felt real fear. "If I did, no one ever knew that," he says. "Any reporter worth his salt knows how to keep his mouth shut."

If not outright fear, Ewing has had his tense moments. One fugitive, for example, pulled out a gun while talking to Ewing and began shooting at the ceiling. "I wasn't afraid for what he would do to me, but the guy had been drinking and was shooting a loaded gun," Ewing recalls. "So I said, 'Hey, that looks like fun. Let me try it.' I was trying to get rid of the bullets."

Once Ewing got the gun, he shot up the remaining bullets and a short time later, the man turned himself in.

Another harrowing situation almost turned Ewing into a felon. The case involved a woman, he says, who was wanted for two murders. After hiding in a Chicago housing project for five years, she agreed to surrender, if Ewing would first arrange for her to see her two children in Alabama.

"So I put her in my airplane, and we flew to Alabama," Ewing says. "She met her children, got all emotional and decided not to come back. Now, I'm sitting there realizing that I've taken this fugitive across not one, but *four* state lines, and that I just might be in some [legal] trouble."

