

# Jazz's Far-Reaching Riffs Resonate at Columbia

By LYNDA RICHARDSON

For centuries, great minds have searched for a way to describe and understand the soul of American culture. A Columbia University professor and his colleagues think they have found that metaphor in the spontaneity, improvisation and resiliency of jazz.

"Jazz is the best soundtrack we have for contemporary American living," said the professor, Robert O'Meally, 51, a literary scholar. "Americans' impulse to be casual, to speak in a certain way, to dance in a certain way, is affected by this swinging music and by the people who made it." Mr. O'Meally is the founder and director of the Center for Jazz Studies, which opened last semester on the Columbia campus.

University officials say the nascent program is the nation's first academic center dedicated to exploring the role of jazz in American culture. It is a bold assertion for an enterprise that, for now, sponsors only three courses, which students can take as electives in a liberal arts program.

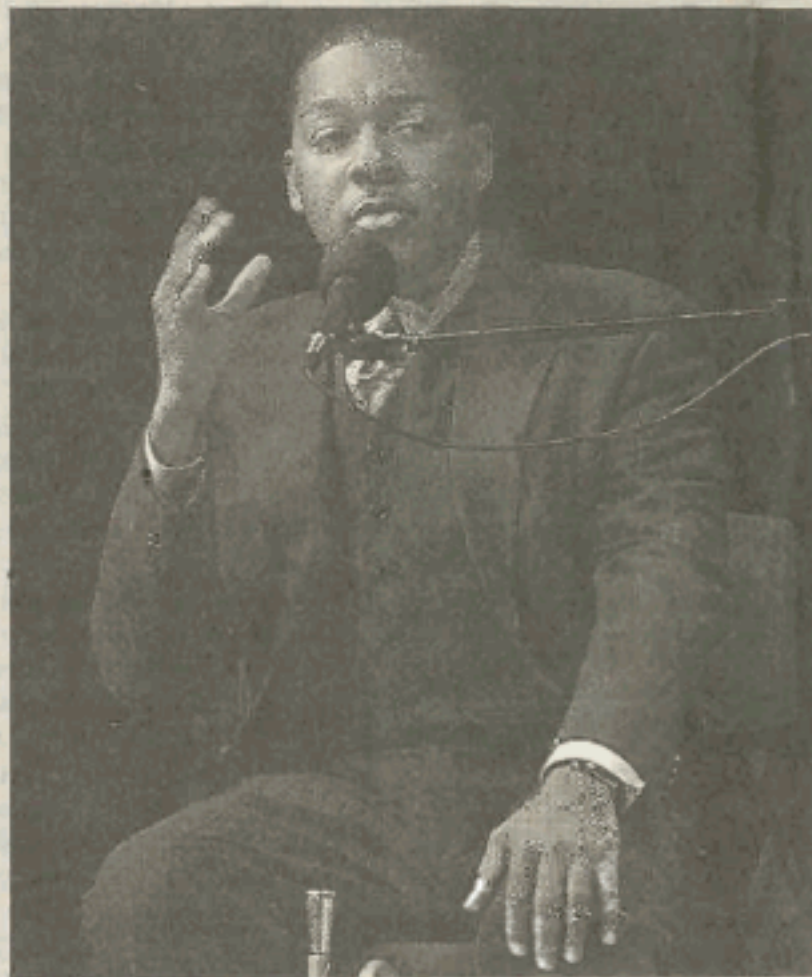
But unlike other jazz programs at major universities, the center at Columbia is not performance-oriented. It is not focused on training musicians, nor is it housed in a music department where students typically study music theory and composition. Its founders hope to go further, to show how the influence of jazz reaches beyond the music.

Columbia's center offers an interdisciplinary program structured within the university's arts and science curriculum; its founders plan a series of courses leading to a certificate of jazz studies for undergraduate and graduate students. Students majoring in political science or anthropology, for instance, could indicate that they had specialized in jazz. A professorship in jazz studies is also planned.

A number of universities across the country have recognized jazz programs. At Rutgers, for example, students can receive a master's degree in jazz history, but the program is run out of the university's music department. Rutgers also has an Institute of Jazz Studies, an archive and research center that does not offer courses. According to the International Association of Jazz Educators, Columbia's approach is uncommon and, by lending jazz a sense of academic legitimacy and import, sends a powerful message about an art form only a century old.

Bill McFarlin, the association's executive director, likened the center's ambitious effort to the elevation of the jazz program at Lincoln Center, which in a decade has become the nation's flagship jazz organization.

"Having one of the nation's leading academic



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

Robert O'Meally, left, the founder and director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University, and Wynton Marsalis, during an inaugural lecture series at the center.

institutions place such a high priority on the study of this music and its impact on American culture can be compared to the impact felt when Jazz at Lincoln Center was placed on a par with the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera," Mr. McFarlin said.

The other night, Columbia's new jazz studies center presented a discussion on Louis Armstrong as part of its inaugural lecture series. The conversation was between the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who is the artistic director of Lincoln Center's jazz program, and Stanley Crouch, a critic. Mr. Armstrong was celebrated as a cultural icon, a musician whose trumpet became more emblematic of the United States than the image of Yankee Doodle Dandy.

Mr. O'Meally, the moderator, used the sold-out occasion to announce that the center, which operates out of Mr. O'Meally's small office on the sixth floor of Philosophy Hall on the Columbia campus, was settling in.

"Jazz represents to me a gesture toward perfection when it comes to our democratic ideals," said Mr. O'Meally. "It suggests we have a culture in which people are insistent on

individuality but at the same time we are struggling to work together."

The center, which received a \$300,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, offers its three courses in collaboration with the university's English and music departments. In the fall, Mr. O'Meally teaches a course called "Jazz and American Culture." This semester, the center is offering a graduate seminar on Miles Davis taught by John Szwed, a visiting anthropology professor from Yale University, and a lecture course on Louis Armstrong by Phil Schaap, a historian and record producer.

During his class, Mr. O'Meally touched on everything from the use of jazz in Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" to the jazz aesthetic in paintings by Jackson Pollock and Romare Bearden, to the jazz music of Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway in Betty Boop cartoons.

Jennie Wasserman, who was one of Mr. O'Meally's students, she said she found the range of jazz a revelation. "His course brought in everything from literature to the visual arts," she said, "anything in culture touched by jazz, which is everything American."