

NEXT CHAPTER

With the rapidly approaching debut of Jazz at Lincoln Center's new home and a recording contract with Blue Note, Wynton Marsalis stands at a career crossroads.

It's the Wynton Marsalis you rarely see. Dressed casually—wire-rim glasses, an untucked blue shirt, jeans and gray-rim running shoes—he looks relaxed in the Right Track recording studio in New York. He and pianist Eric Lewis, bassist Carlos Henriquez and drummer Ali Jackson huddle as if they could be discussing strategy for an upcoming four-on-four basketball game. But this is play time of a different sort: rhythm talk in preparation for take 14 of a new Marsalis composition, "Free To Be," a song with a sunny bounce and syncopated skip.

In composing the piece, Marsalis mixed rhythms derived from nursery rhymes, Appalachian fiddle tunes and straight-up blues. Today, the tune swings, but he seeks precision. In the control room, he listens to the playback and opens the discussion again, first by encouraging his rhythm section, then pinpointing intervals where the time lags. He smiles and taps his hand on a table, snaps his fingers to illustrate what's required.

After "rushing the rhythm" on the next two takes, the quartet cruises into take 17 with renewed energy. Marsalis sails into his solo and energizes the band with a roller-coaster squeal and a series of trumpet exclamations. The band clicks in with thunder and dense tumblers. The group breaks, listens to the playback and grooves to the beat with satisfaction.

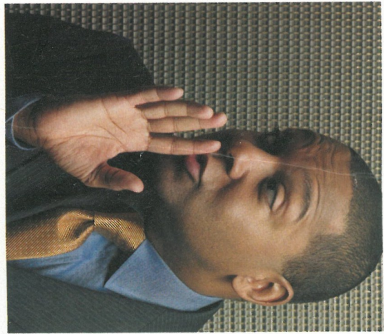


By Dan Ouellette
Photos by Jimmy Katz

These two days in the studio last June makes for eight tracks, including two vocal numbers, one sung by Bobby McFerrin, the other by Dianne Reeves. It all adds up to Marsalis' Blue Note Records debut, *The Magic Hour*, his first small-ensemble recording in five years.

Negotiations to sign Marsalis took nearly two years. The label's new artist was welcomed by Blue Note President Bruce Lundvall, who had signed the teenage trumpet phenom to Columbia Records two decades earlier. When he signed Marsalis to Blue Note, Lundvall said, "I believe that Wynton is on the cusp of an innovative new creative period musically. Blue Note will share a pivotal contributing role in the next phase of his already astounding career."

Yet in a conversation last fall, Marsalis hesitated to disagree with Lundvall's assessment. "The *Magic Hour* is just a continuation of what I've been doing all along," Marsalis said. "I'm just stating my basic proposition about jazz music with my quartet. Crisp? No. Innovative? No. All my music comes from the same source. I don't go through periods. From my first album to *All Rise*, my goal has always been to affirm jazz. Blues and swing. Written and improvised. I keep going in the same direction, exploring different music within the language of jazz. In no way is being at Blue Note a rebirth."



A t 42, Marsalis is inarguably the world's most recognized jazz artist and the artistic director of the music's premier showcase organization, Jazz at Lincoln Center (J@LC). During his almost two decades at Columbia, Marsalis won several jazz and classical Grammys and received critical plaudits for a handful of discs, including 1985's *Black Codes (From The Underground)* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning oratorio *Blood On The Fields*.

Despite all this, Marsalis also delivered a fair number of albums that neither sold well nor were reviewed favorably. And, while his triumphs have been well noted, he has not recorded a classic album or written tunes that are covered by contemporaries and young upstarts looking to cover new material. Is Marsalis destined to be an Antonio Salieri to the Mozarts of the era? A hardworking jazz statesman and mover-and-shaker who built a presenting empire in New York, but never fully realized his potential as a composer?

Some of his most suspect releases arrived in one year, 1999, Duke Ellington's centennial. That's when Marsalis released 15 albums, including "standard time" homages to Thelonious Monk and Jelly Roll Morton, an extended work inspired by Ellington (*Big Train*), classical CDs of film scores and dance commissions and a seven-CD box of five Village Vanguard shows (one for each day of the week). But because of the marketplace deluge, most listeners missed *The Marcia Stite*, perhaps the strongest of his career. It's a collection of songs for septet and quintet that Marsalis wrote to celebrate a tiny farm town in southwestern France, which not only hosts one of the largest European festivals but also prides itself in being one of his biggest supporters. The CD features heartfelt and humor-laden tunes, including the radiant "Sandlows," the most enthralling song Marsalis has ever penned.

After that triumph, Marsalis dug deeper into his other responsibilities, most notably planning and fundraising for the \$128 million Frederick P. Rose Hall three-venue home for J@LC, which is scheduled to open in October in the new Time-Warner twin high-rise complex on Columbus Circle. While he has been touring nearly nonstop

and recording (*All Rise*, released in 2002 on Sony Classical, was an extended piece for big band, gospel choir and symphony orchestra that took more than six months to write), the crux of Marsalis' existence over the past few years has been the new performance and educational facility—the first of its kind created specifically for jazz.

Seven months before the grand opening, Marsalis and J@LC's board of directors had raised \$113 million. "That's unprecedented for jazz," he says. "I'm excited. This is something that has never happened." While the burden to make Rose Hall a reality weighs heavily on his shoulders, he credits the board and the development team for spearheading the fundraising. "I'm just one of many people responsible. I meet with people, make presentations, do concerts and walk people through the new space."

The visionary of the space who drafted the "Ten Fundamentals of the House of Swing" in 1996 to help architect Rafael Viñoly design it, Marsalis plays down the pressures involved in its completion. "I love pressure," he says. "That's never been a problem. The more the better. That's how you see who you are. Anything that's important and requires serious concentration involves pressure. It's like playing a game that you want to win or writing a piece that's difficult. You want to give the extra attention so you don't mess things up."

Marsalis likens the project to building one's own house but to the 10th degree. "He says Rose Hall will fulfill J@LC's twofold mission: to present the finest arts and to promote the democratic nature of the music. "We want the best," he says, "and we always want to make the space accessible to the different communities of jazz. We want it to be flexible to accommodate everything, from film to community activities to music with theater. And we will also do opera."

Overarching the entire project is the music itself. "I just want people to be aware of jazz, to make the music available through recordings and broadcasts, and to produce more jazz musicians who can play," Marsalis said. "Art can always conquer. If it's available to be heard, Rose Hall will be a place to address all aspects of our music, so we don't shut our music away from itself, to suit some reductive, abstract notion of what jazz should be."

I n December, Marsalis had time for an extended face-to-face conversation. It's late in the afternoon three days before Christmas, and Marsalis, clad in a blue knit dress shirt and dark blazer, is visibly tired. His youngest son, Jasper—the splitting image of his dad—sits at a computer playing games. Unlike most elementary school-aged kids who get transfixed by a computer screen, Jasper leaves his seat, smiles, shakes my hand and flashes a shy hello with a meet-and-greet charisma. In contrast, the still boyish-faced Wynton seems weighed down and not eager to field queries.

Marsalis is an enigma of polarity. Depending on the setting, he can be humble or pompous, genial or arrogant, forthcoming or aloof, gracious or fiercely competitive, conciliatory or downright brassy. Today, he just seems exhausted and a tad ill-at-ease. At first, Marsalis answers questions in his laid-back New Orleans patois with one- and two-sentence responses. But he warms up when he talks about his bandmates and the music itself.

Marsalis admits he's a hard worker. He says that in 1999 he chal-

lenged himself to work every single day of the year. "It was just gratitude," he says. "If you're given something, you want to know, what do I really have? At the end of the year, I knew I could do it. It was a great exercise. I felt exhilarated. They'd yell, but my impulse was all about gratitude."

Gratitude is a word to which Marsalis keeps returning. It's his way of saying how lucky and blessed he is to have his position of authority and notoriety. Yet, it seems at times like he also uses the word to cloak ego-inflation and self-aggrandizement.

When told that the word driven could easily be substituted for his every utterance of grateful, Marsalis admits that he's compelled, but again he stresses, not in any exaggerated sense of self-importance. "The music calls me," he says. "I have the gift, the talent to hear it. I get up in the middle of the night because I hear a song and have to write it down. I'm always heeding the call. That's why I've been able to continue to develop and be resilient."

That hasn't been a cakewalk because Marsalis has chosen to wear many hats. He is the jazz ambassador who had an inordinate amount of face time on Ken Burns' *Jazz* documentary, the band leader of a globe-trotting orchestra, a septet and a quartet; J@LC's artistic director who has the final say on all programming decisions; an educator who has spearheaded an impressive jazz program that includes concerts for children and a middle school curriculum; and the go-to fundraiser for the new jazz performance venue.

At a recent J@LC Gala fundraiser concert and dinner, Marsalis performed in support of a bevy of women artists, from pianist Marian McPartland to pop diva Diana Ross, then later glad-handed the crowd. He made the rounds, from table to table, shaking hands and posing for photos. Does he really like doing this? He grins and says,

"I'll do whatever it takes to educate the kids."

At a speech before the National Press Club last fall, Marsalis articulately stumped for increased funding for arts programs in schools. Maybe Marsalis would even consider politics. He laughs at the mention and shakes his head. "Oh, no," he says, citing the scrutiny his private life would undergo. "I'd have to admit to too much."

G iven the demands Marsalis has every day, how does he ever manage to fully invest himself in the music? "Writing is part of the being busy. It's my passion. You do it. You don't find the time to do it. You do it." He contends the songs on *The Magic Hour* weren't hard to write and didn't take much time. "All Rise, with all the horns and the complex forms took six months. Then you figure in the time it takes to distill the information to your bandmates."

The longest track on the album is the suite-like title tune, which Marsalis says started with the concept of playing a "diminished melody against an augmented chord base." He says the composing went quickly. "After doing this for so many years, your experience kicks in. It's like the fiddle influence in 'Free To Be.' I studied fiddle music years ago for four months when I was writing a piece for the New York City Ballet. I absorbed it then." He pauses, then adds with a wide smile. "I love old country fiddle music."

"All that I do is my art," he continues. "All the things I do deal with my music. I'm natural and honest in everything I do. I don't have to make deals. That's how I've been able to maintain my integrity all these years in the music business. I don't have any aspiration to be liked or vilified. All I can do is develop the gifts that I've been given. "I do the things that I can do and what I can't do I don't do. For example, I don't write film music. I've tried but I can't do that."

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One of the Marsalis hats that gets short shrift is his trumpet playing. He says he doesn't miss winning DownBeat's Critics Poll like he did when he was an upstart. But judging by his technique and delivery, today he should consistently be at the top of the heap. In his early days, many of his live performances were perfunctory. Now, on any given night, they can be transcendent.

Last April at the jazz Standard, alto saxophonist Greg Osby joined Marsalis on stage for the first time in a quintet led by Ali Jackson. While the chemistry was lacking in

the first set, the front-line pair cut loose at one point with Marsalis blowing fiery lines that were met by Osby's speedy low-toned sax runs. "It was a great pairing," Osby said afterward. "We prodded each other into areas we don't normally go. Wynton has such a strong personality that you can get drawn into his vortex. He embodies the bravado that great jazz trumpeters should possess."

Another area in which Marsalis has come under attack has been his perceived narrowness of vision for J@LC's programming. He's upset by the accusations. "That's bull-

shit," he says testily, insisting that his booking is the most diverse of any presenting organization. "From the beginning, we've had everyone from Cachao to Bary Carter to Dizzy to Han Bennink and Mishka Mengelberg." Back when J@LC was only presenting six concerts a year, Marsalis says the criticism of programming was ill-informed. "People complained, 'Why didn't they book so and so?' when we had tried but they weren't available."

With an expansive calendar in recent years, the booking has become more adventurous, with evenings devoted to Brazilian jazz, tango, last fall's Steve Lacy-Marshall Solal showcase and most recently a celebration of Ornette Coleman's music featuring Dewey Redman as the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's guest. Part of that can be attributed to veteran jazz impresario Todd Barkan, who has been serving as J@LC's artistic administrator for the past three years. He works closely with Marsalis on the booking, and the pair have already drafted a three-year plan for the performances in the three Rose Hall venues.

"It's worked out extremely well," Barkan says. "We're a team. We alert each other to music that we end up booking here. Wynton loves to swing, but he's like Duke, who ranged far and wide. Wynton has a much broader appreciation of jazz harmonically and rhythmically than a lot of people realize or give him credit for."

If there's one topic that Marsalis has no patience for, it's the allegations made by some insiders at Columbia that he helped sink the jazz ship there with his deluge of CDs (the Columbia Jazz imprint ceased to exist in 2000). Why did he issue so many albums in 1999? "I said a prayer every morning that year. I wanted to put out all the music I had at that time. Plus it was a nine-year and those are very important because you're going in to a new time. I came to New York in 1979 and here it was 1999. It's important to make a statement of intent in a nine-year. It's not a question of sales."

"I had frank conversations with [Sony Music President] Don Ienner," says Marsalis, whose brother Branford was head of A&R at Columbia jazz at the time. "He didn't think it was the most intelligent thing to do. He said that's a lot of records and retail might not want to stock them all. But I had been there for almost 20 years, so Don agreed to release all the albums out of respect."

Suggesting that he contributed to Columbia jazz's demise infuriates Marsalis. "That's totally off the wall. You're putting two things together that aren't related. People can suggest anything. They can suggest that

you're a mass murderer just because some people got killed and you lived nearby."

Marsalis says he's got material for eight more albums right now. Does he think Blue Note would release them en masse? "Yes, in 20 years," he says.

Blue Note Senior Vice President Tom Evered disagrees. "Releasing that many CDs at one time is the past. The topography of the retail world has changed. You have to be much more strategic today to get positioned in the market."

Certainly, Blue Note inherited a much more mature and diplomatic musician than the Marsalis of the '80s when he was known for his brashness that polarized opinion about him. He recalls those times well, especially how he alienated some jazz elders. "That's part of growing up. You can't be a puppet. You have your voice. I remember I was 20 or 21 and doing an interview and I was just firing. I was being honest about how I felt, but I rubbed people the wrong way. Everybody was saying, you shouldn't have said all that. But Dizzy told me, 'What you were saying is true. But he wanted me to be ready for the return.'"

Bassist Ron Carter recalls the teengaged Marsalis who took leave from Art Blakey's band to record Herbie Hancock's *Quartet* album in 1981 with him and Tony Williams. "Wynton was eager and curious," Carter says. "He wasn't brash because the music was so demanding. Plus, he understood that he couldn't be on the top in this band. He seemed to be surprised at the respect we had for each other. That might have been his first awareness of that level of commitment."

While Carter hasn't had much contact with Marsalis in recent years, he feels that he's been placed in a difficult position. "Wynton's been seen as the savior of jazz," Carter says. "But if that were true, there'd be more jazz labels and clubs and concerts. But that's not his fault. People have tagged him. People either love him or hate him. If you say negative things about him, you're seen as Wynton bashing, and if you express positive things, you're seen as kissing ass. Why don't people just let Wynton breathe?"

An insatiable student of jazz, Marsalis recognizes there's plenty of fresh air ahead. He has a long laundry list of things he wants to learn, including understanding the complexities of Don Redman's big band arrangements, new ways to play on the trumpet that will bring shadings and colors to his ballad performance, achieving expertise in playing technical forms. "It's a never-ending depth," Marsalis says. "You can never get deep enough. It's broad, but the deeper you go, the sweeter it is."

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