JAZZ MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR

WYNTON Marsalis

If everything had gone according to plan, Wynton Marsalis would have taken a long, deep breath in 1997, stepping out of the public eye for a sorely needed sabbatical.

Having spent at least the past decade touring and recording incessantly, having presided over the Jazz at Lincoln Center program—as well as a 26-part National Public Radio series (*Making The Music*) and a four-part public television series (*Marsalis On Music*)—the man was ready for a break. "I was tired, and I needed to assess what I was doing," says Marsalis, 36. "And the cats in the band had gotten tired, too. But things didn't work out exactly as I had planned." That's putting it mildly, for the past year turns out to have been one of the more momentous in Marsalis' life, and not only because he became the first jazz composer to win the Pulitzer Prize in Music, for his epic vocal-instrumental work *Blood On The Fields*.

The subsequent release of *Blood* in a three-CD boxed set (on Columbia; see "CD Reviews" Sept. '97), the national television broadcast of highlights of the piece (on PBS' *Sessions At West 54th Street*) and the perpetual expansion of his schedule of concerts and student workshops (with Marsalis apparently unable to say "no" to appearances that interest him) set the stage for another important development: The readers of Down Beat magazine have conferred a double honor on Marsalis, selecting him Jazz Musician and Composer of the Year. Coupled with his double win last August in the Critics Poll (in the Composer and Trumpet categories), Marsalis clearly has enjoyed a remarkably high profile for a man who wanted to kick back and relax (though he may be constitutionally incapable of doing so).

The critical element in all this activity is not so much Marsalis' accumulation of awards but his emergence as a major American composer working in jazz and blues idioms. For if Marsalis first captured the world's attention in the mid-1980s as a trumpet virtuoso equally conversant with jazz and classical languages, his impact appears to have shifted to his role as a composer who brings elements of jazz improvisation and blues melody and harmony to increasingly ambitious, classically tinged scores.

To Marsalis, the transformation began exactly a decade ago, though it was so subtle and discreet most listeners didn't notice it. "I think it goes back to the first time I ever wrote a song really with chord changes on it—I mean, with a lot of changes," says Marsalis. "The song was called 'In The Afterglow,'" from the 1987 album *Marsalis Standard Time, Vol. 1*. "That was the first time I wrote something with a certain type of traditional [chord] progression. Before that, I would write stuff that was modal, with chords on it.

"But 'In The Afterglow' got me to try to break out of writing the typical type of New York-scene tune and trying to experiment with form, with modulations, with developing themes in different keys, with different grooves. And once I had [drummer] Herlin [Riley] with me, Herlin would start working on the grooves and interpreting the themes, and that's when my [composed] music really started to evolve."

Like Duke Ellington, his primary inspiration as composer, Marsalis was beginning to build formal compositions through spontaneous interplay with his instrumentalists, most notably Riley and Marsalis' pianist at the time, Marcus Roberts. But that process, and Marsalis' nascent voice as composer, didn't really become apparent until his breakthrough, 1989 recording *The Majesty Of The Blues*. Here, Marsalis finally broke free of a somewhat slick and impersonal post-

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bebop musical vocabulary, finding a more autobiographical sound in the bluesy chords, rhythmic backbeats and plunger-muted phrases one associates with the South in general, Marsalis' native New Orleans in particular.

In works such as the 1991, three-CD *Soul Gestures In Southern Blue* (which Marsalis had conceived as part of a four-CD set to have included *The Majesty Of The Blues*), the 1992 CD *Blue Interlude* (with its spoken narrative) and the 1994 *In This House, On This Morning* (an instrumental evocation of a Sunday church service), Marsalis had managed to create extended jazz compositions that combined traditional musical forms with modern, bracing dissonance.

ALAN NAHIGIAN

Blood On The Fields simply upped the ante on Marsalis' ventures in composition, the gorgeous voicing of his septet on the aforementioned recordings now extended to the full palette of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. That *Blood On The Fields* addressed nothing less than the horrific passage of African slaves to the shores of America, and the terrors and triumphs that were to follow, made the piece the most ambitious and audacious of Marsalis' career as composer.

"The subject matter was something that I had thought about, basically, since I could think," says Marsalis. "I remember reading a book on Frederick Douglass when I was five or six. But before *Blood On The Fields*, I never had written for a large ensemble, and also I never had written that many words," adds Marsalis, whose poetic libretto recalls the more lyrical passages of his book *Sweet Swing Blues On The Road* (W. W. Norton & Co.).

"With the range and the amount of music in *Blood On The Fields*, and the different styles and grooves, I had to try to unify all this material. So I wrote—and rewrote—the overall form of the piece, figuring out how the key-schemes and how the themes were going to relate to each other, how certain themes were going to appear and later reappear, when to use certain grooves and tempos. All that was written down on paper long before I started [to compose]."

Though the work's ascent on the Billboard jazz chart (where *Blood On The Fields* placed in the Top 10 for several weeks) and its appearance on the PBS television broadcast probably bolstered Marsalis' self-confidence as writer of libretto and score, the Pulitzer Prize was historic.

"I'm very happy about Wynton getting the Pulitzer—he's a magnficent musician—especially since they didn't give it to Duke [Ellington]," says trumpeter Clark Terry, an Ellington alum who remembers well the Pulitzer board's decision not to give Ellington a prize that the music jury had recommended in 1965. "Ellington didn't say a great deal about it at the time, but I'm sure he was hurt by it. Things were a little different in those days, and I'm glad that Wynton has shown how times finally have changed."

To Marsalis, the Pulitzer "says something about the changing recognition of the esthetic achievements of jazz music, which in turn helps the entire nation, because jazz is an American art form. I mean, it may be that a certain group of people at one time in this country may not have liked who the music came from—but the time for that is over."

The Pulitzer board has acknowledged as much, explicitly changing the rules for next year's competition, presumably to include jazz and other non-classical idioms. Though the award previously honored "distinguished musical composition by an American in any of the larger forms, including chamber, orchestral, choral, opera, song, dance or other forms of musical theater," the new wording eliminates the classical buzzwords, giving the award simply "for distinguished musical composition of significant dimension."

And while the instructions previously required that "all entires should include ... a score or manuscript and a recording of the work," the new instructions ask simply for "a score of the non-improvisational elements of the work and recording of the entire work." Improvisation—an element integral not only to jazz but to other non-classical musics—now explicitly has become part and parcel of the Pulitzer Prize in Music.

The world of music clearly is changing in radical and previously unexpected ways, with Marsalis' award symbolizing important shifts in American culture. Yet Marsalis' triumph, like his previous ones, has sparked some criticism from particular writers and musicians, who bemoaned this turn of events.

"Once you get to really know the musicians, it's obvious that we're all striving for the same thing," says Marsalis. "When we're growing up, we have different upbringings, but we all have a common bond: music. Now, once jobs start to be distributed and articles start to be written, all these things take place that drive musicians into different camps and into different ways of thinking. But deep down in the heart of those musicians, they're all basically the same person who went to those Saturday morning lessons.

"And every time the status quo is challenged [as it was with the Pulitzer], we have to go through a growing process that's painful. But that pain is just a part of what being out here in the world is about."

Like his father, jazz pianist and educator Ellis Marsalis, Wynton clearly brings a missionary's fervor to a music that tends to be marginalized in American culture. For those who find this facet of the trumpeter's work a bit zealous, perhaps it's worth noting, as veteran Chicago composer/bandleader William Russo does, that "at this point in his life, Wynton could be spending his time with a golf pro, a masseuse and all the rest of the entourage. Instead, he wakes up early in the morning to go teach kids in school, then plays concerts at night."

Why does he do it?

"You'll come into a school, and you'll be talking with kids who've got your album, and you've seen these kids since they were 12 or 14," explains Marsalis. "And they're playing, working so hard, and you're playing with them, and then you play a bunch of hard music together in concert, and their parents are in the audience, smiling.

"Then you finish, and everyone feels this incredible rush of emotion.

"And those vibrations you feel afterwards, those are very, very hip." **DB**

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