Wynton Marsalis

America's Most Powerful Jazz Artist Talks About His Latest Work And Lashes White Critics And Gangsta Rap

By Lynn Norment

It is a rainy spring morning in New York City, the kind of drizzle that reminds you of a movie setting or lyrics in a bluesy song. Wynton Marsalis, the acclaimed trumpeter and jazz czar of Lincoln Center, breezes into his apartment on the Upper West Side, having already run a number of errands. This is one of only 40 to 50 days he is home this year, so he has to make good use of his time. Marsalis spends the other 300 or so days on the road with his band, taking his jazz music and message across the country and around the world to people of all ethnicities and ages.

Today, he is not hurried, not harried, not impatient, but warm and personable as he positions himself com-

Wynton Marsalis, while just 32, has established himself as jazz's most powerful advocate. Here he leads an orchestra in performing his work, *Blood On The Fields*, at Lincoln Center in New York, where he is artistic director of the jazz program.

Materiale protetto da copyright

At his home on New York's Upper West Side, Marsalis works on a composition. Below, the trumpeter, who has released 32 recordings and won eight Grammy Awards, rehearses an orchestra for a performance.

MARSALIS *Continued*

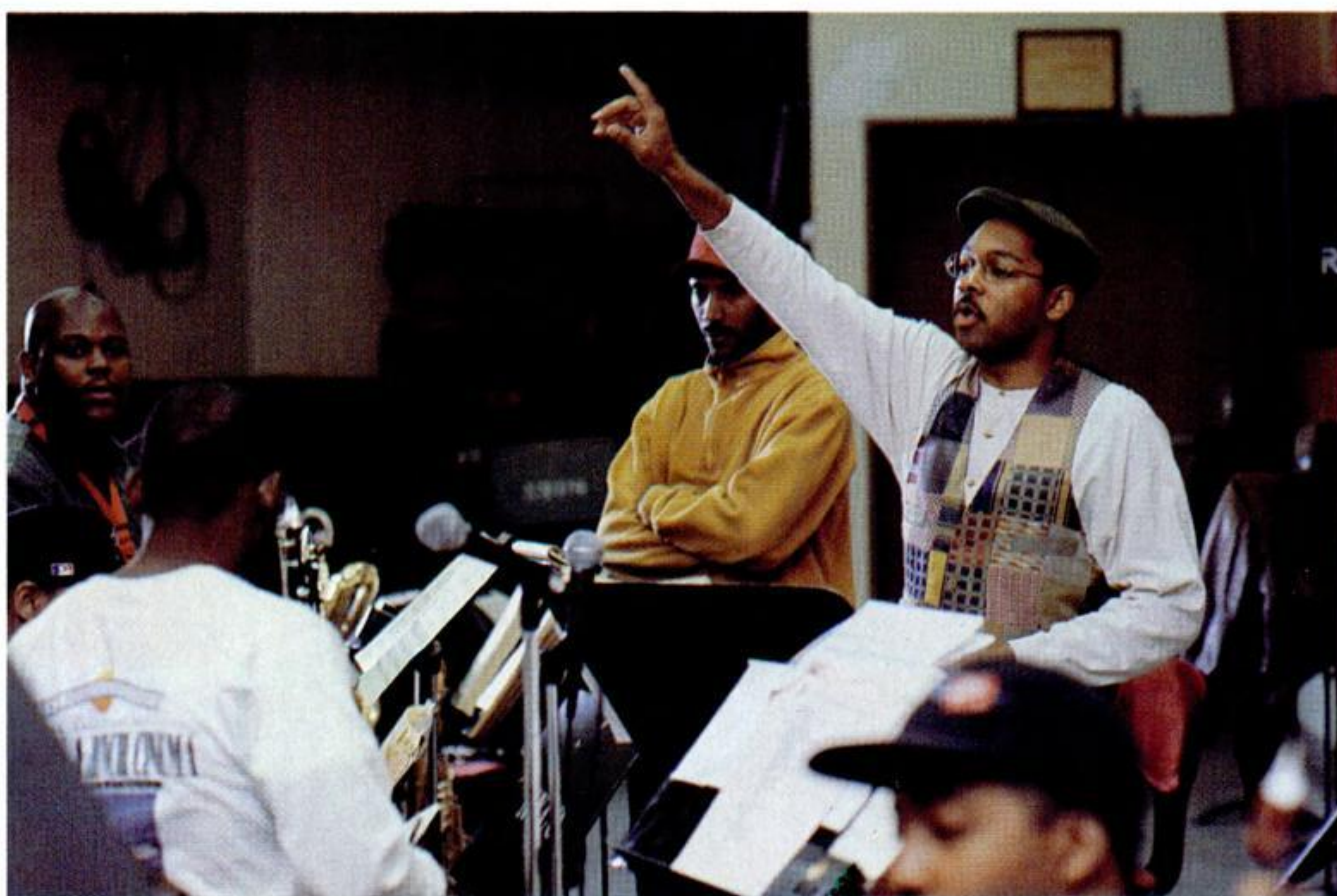
fortably at a black baby grand piano. Dressed casually in plaid flannel shirt, blue pants and a green felt cap, he graciously offers tea to visitors. Could this be the Grammy Award-winning musician who often is portrayed in the media as a snobbish, arrogant, single-minded jazz fanatic with no tolerance for differing views?

Yes, he is one and the same, but the portrayal is biased, to say the least.

Since his brilliant debut on the jazz scene in 1982, Marsalis has generated the kind of love-hate response that is characteristic of stormy love affairs. He has attacked White critics for presuming to define a Black art form and Blacks for not supporting the same. And though controversy seems to continually swirl about him, the fact that the 32-year-old jazzman is dedicated to his art is never lost. "I love being a jazz musician," he says. "My whole life I wanted to be a jazzman. . . because it just seems like jazz music is the real soul of the Afro-American."

As a child growing up in New Orleans, Marsalis, like his brothers, experienced jazz intimately under the tutelage of his father, noted pianist Ellis Marsalis. His brother, saxophonist Branford Marsalis, 33, is musical director for *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, and a younger brother, trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis, has produced and recorded jazz.

From the beginning of his career, Wynton has been dedicated to preserving the "great heritage" of jazz music. "No. I have to be honest with you," he says when asked if Black Americans are more supportive of jazz today than a decade ago. "I mean I love my people; it's not a matter of being against my people. The whole source of our power comes from the Afro-American experience. But we [African-Americans] don't support jazz any more now than we did 10 years ago. . . .But we are not going to stay lost."



Such hopeful optimism is the catalyst that drives Marsalis to work so hard. If he's not composing, performing or practicing, he's visiting schools and talking to kids about music, respect, education and the importance of pride in their heritage. "And I'm not just hopeful," he says, "I'm always ready to put my own neck on the line for change. No school is too bad for me to go to. . . . I'll try to teach anybody. We are all striving for the same thing, to make our community stronger and richer. That's what the jazz musician has always been about."

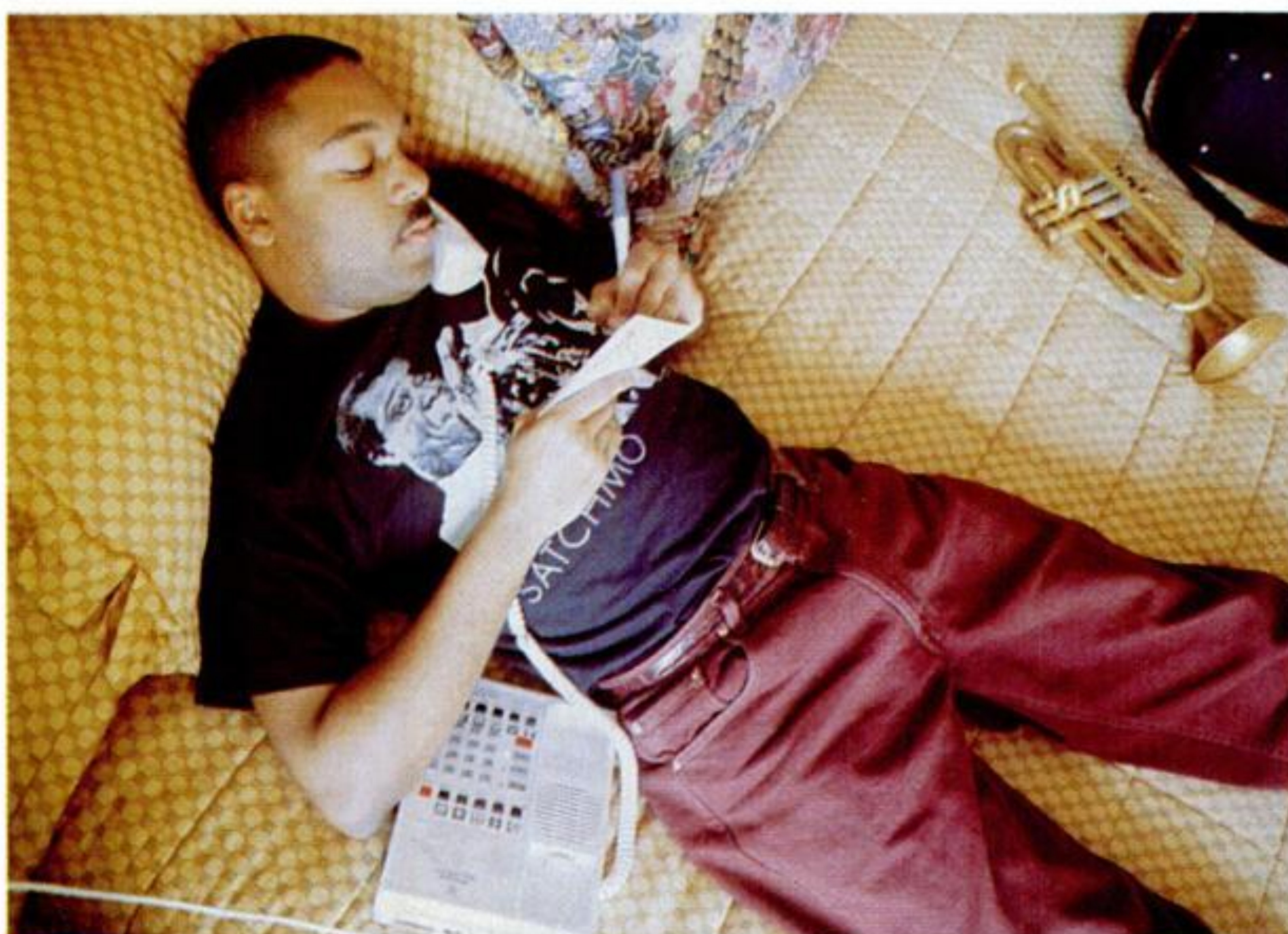
As artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center for three years, Marsalis continues that quest, and he has found enormous success with the program's concerts, film presentations, lectures, young people's concerts, and with its national tours. It is a prestigious $2.5 million program that is important to jazz in New York and the nation, and it requires Marsalis to compose a new work each year. His first commission is presented on the current recording, ***In This House, On This Morning***, which was inspired by the music of the African-American church.

Ironically, Marsalis' role at Lincoln Center is the source of unrelenting controversy. Despite the fact that the performances have attracted sold-out crowds and good reviews, and that officials at the Center have been unwavering in their support, White critics have called Marsalis' vision "elitist,""neo-conservative" and "divisive." They criticize him for hiring his own band, for presenting his own work and for, they say, excluding experimental jazz. The Village Voice published a full-page negative critique, but refused to print Marsalis' rebuttal. The New York Post offered a list of White male critics it felt should oversee Marsalis' decisions.

Marsalis recalls that while he was

Continued on Page 48

Materiale protetto da copyright



Dedicated to educating youth about jazz and self-respect, Marsalis spends a lot of time visiting schools and talking to kids. Here he visits a school in Alabama. At left, the world-renowned jazz artist conducts business via telephone from a hotel room while traveling. He says he only spends 40 to 50 days a year at home.

MARSALIS *Continued*

growing up in New Orleans, his father told him: *If you're going to get beat up, you might as well fight*. The sage words are just as appropriate today. "I grew up with racism and other incorrect things," he says when asked about the Lincoln Center controversy. "I understood that the better you do, the more irrational the attack on you. But I don't allow it to jade the actual world that I live in. . . . I'm not going to bow to them. They can attack all they want." He adds, however, that he does not consider it a racial issue.

Traditionally, he says, the writers and intellectual community that surround jazz have been corrupt. "They have written things about musicians that were inappropriate because they lack the proper respect," he explains. "I don't mind a man saying he doesn't like the way I play, but they call you stupid. I'm not going to be addressed in public by men that way. They have always said jazz was for noble savages, that it is illiterate music. It was Armstrong's cut down toward the end of his career. Duke Ellington's long pieces were decried. [Critics said] John Coltrane wasn't playing jazz." He says White critics feel that a "Black person can't really be Black if what they are doing is sophisticated. It was only a matter of time before I would butt heads with them and it's going to keep happening."

Marsalis stops for a moment to sip from his tea."For 10 years they were saying that I was arrogant and wouldn't talk to people, which wasn't true," he continues."I talk to people every night. I go all over the country. It's been done to me all my years in the media. And it's purposeful. Like this latest controversy is a result of bad reporting."

Marsalis says that if the critics only would ask him or officials at Lincoln Center, they would learn that his contract requires him to compose a new work each year and that White musicians have been hired. And, says Marsalis, he does indeed hire his own musicians, but only because "they are among the finest in the world."

"I'm not going to allow some reporter, who should be coming to our classes to learn what this music is, tell me what we should be doing. That's not going to happen. So they can carp, they can moan, they can all get together and write the same article. But I will never step up in public and act lower than what I was raised to act. And I won't be bowing to them and begging. I'm not going to do that."

What Marsalis is going to do is to continue to compose, record and perform great music and take his message to the masses, especially to youth.

He says his inspiration for the current release, *In This House*, came from his band members, several of whom grew up in the church, and from his own various performances in houses of worship. Marsalis says he's never been one to attend church regularly and participate socially. "But I'm into the whole relationship of man and God," he says. "I think that's very important."

He goes on to say that band members Reginald Veal (bass), Wycliffe Gordon (trombone), Herlin Riley (drums) and Eric Reed (piano) all grew up in the church, and that often they would break into church songs during those long bus rides in between gigs.

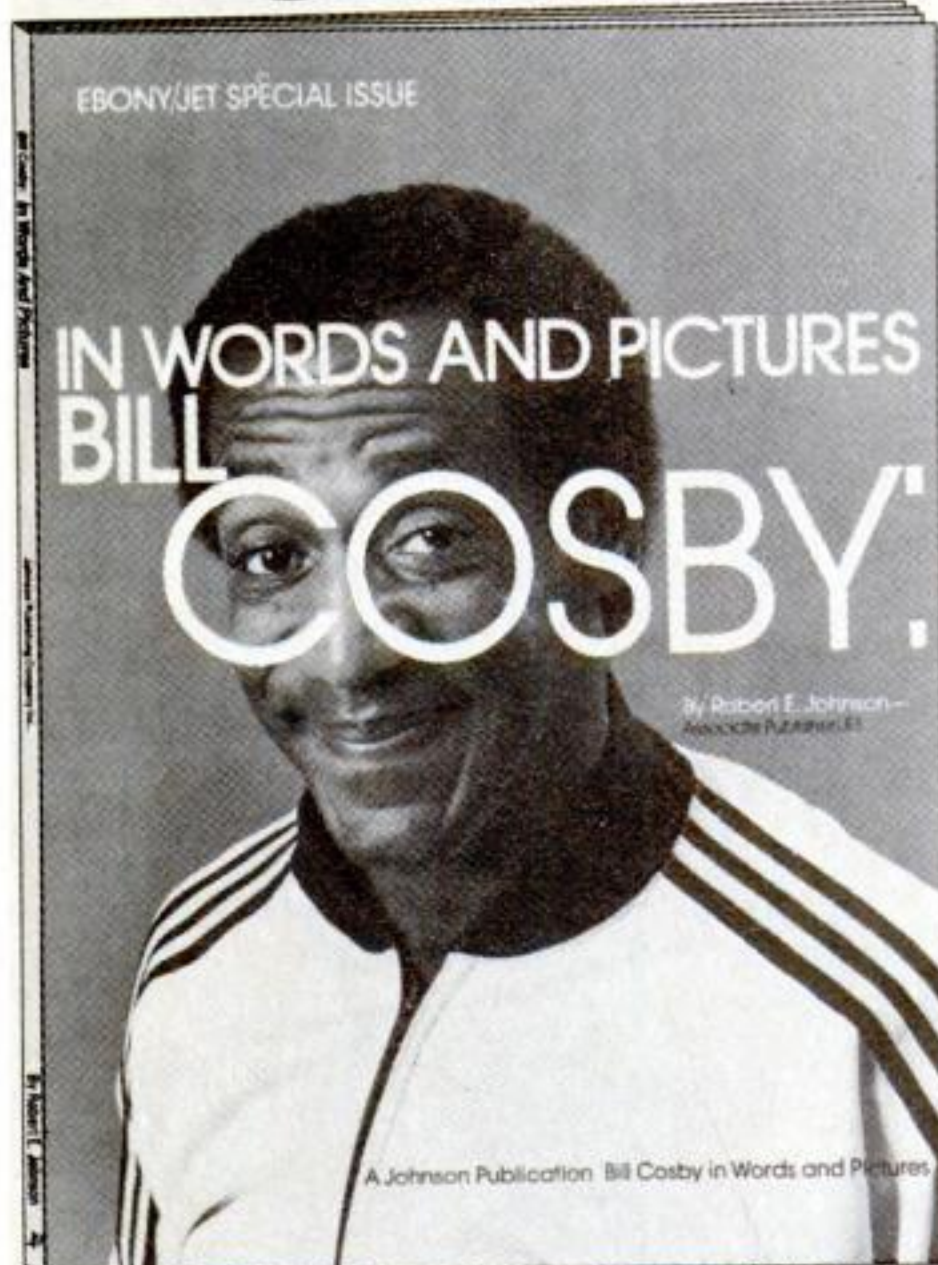
He points out that before he started composing the work, he spent hours consulting with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright concerning the "philosophical implications of the form" of the typical Afro-American church service. He pulls out a notebook and points to his notes. "He explained to me how the form is a dialogue with divinity, a conversation between people and God," Marsalis emphasizes. "And jazz music, and most Afro-American music, is about the dialogue, the quality of conversation, the process of negotiation."

The one thing Marsalis will not negotiate on is what he believes in. "I want to see change in our country," he asserts. "I want to see change and I will do all that is in my power to bring about what I feel is positive change. . . And I don't politick with any group of

Materiale protetto da copyright

Continued on Page 50

BILL COSBY: In Words And Pictures



ISBN: 0-87485-084-3 $12.95

By Robert E. Johnson
Associate Publisher/JET

- **He idolizes his wife, rears his children with concern and "love in its proper place."**
- **He gives extravagant respect and devotion to his mother.**
- **He won't allow his TV daughters to date White boys on "The Cosby Show."**
- **He has startling views on children born of racially-mixed parents.**
- **He voices vehement views on racism.**
- **He supports with time and money Black causes.**
- **He tells why there is a need for Black heroes.**

$12.95/*Plus $1.50 per copy for postage and handling.*
BOOK DIVISION
Johnson Publishing Company, Inc.
820 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60605

Wynton Marsalis (r.) and brother Branford both developed an interest in music as youngsters.

MARSALIS *Continued*

people, Black or White. I'm not looking to be endorsed by people."

That dedication extends beyond music to his involvement in the community. "I believe kids want to be told what to do by adults," he says. "I don't care what's in fashion with them; there are things we all need to learn. As Afro-Americans we have a legacy of pain and heroism, and I feel that the direction we have gone is counterproductive. Whenever you say something negative, you get attacked. I can live with that. It's not said in the spirit of arrogance, as it has been misportrayed in the media many times. It is said in the spirit of wanting to see things get better. All this ignorance and vulgarity and violence is not going to help us."

And neither will, says Marsalis, negative rap music that glorifies violence and disrespects women, which he says lacks grace and soul and is not indicative of the real feeling in Afro-American culture. "We've reached a point where if a Black man makes three intelligent statements, then he's [said to be] kissing somebody White's behind, or he's Tomming or he's not really Black," says Marsalis. "I have to constantly try to get students to see what the issue is. . . .It is up to us, as Afro-Americans, to reclaim the grandeur of our heritage. We have to do that as if we were on a battlefield. We can't apologize or back our way into it, especially by apologizing to kids."

Young people are not to blame, he says, but, rather, the negative media images being sold to them. "In this society the finger is always pointed at Black folks. . . . Everybody has to come together when you have a problem," he says. "It's like the whole question of Black-on-Black crime. The nation allows that to happen. The nation is not outraged over that; it should be."

Marsalis says he grew up in a home where his mother's discipline and his father's example were the guidelines. He recalls playing music with his father when he was five or six years old, after renowned trumpeter Al Hirt, in whose band his father was playing at the time, gave him his first trumpet. Branford was already playing the piano and clarinet. (His brother Jason, now 16, plays drums, and Ellis Marsalis, 29, is in the computer business.)

Throughout high school, Wynton demonstrated his musical gift playing religious, classical and pop music. At age 17, he played with Lionel Hampton's band before enrolling at the Juilliard School in New York. In 1980, while still at Juilliard, he became a regular with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. At age 18, Columbia Records offered him a contract, and since 1982, he has released 32 recordings and won eight Grammy Awards. In 1983 and 1984, he astounded the music world by winning Grammys for both jazz and classical recordings.

Long noted for being guarded about his personal life, Wynton displays warm affection when his two young sons visit. The youngest runs to him crying, "Daddy, Daddy, I don't wanna go," when it is time to leave. When asked about his personal life, the never-married bachelor says: "Well, I really never talk about that, because it diverts the issue. It takes the issue off music. My mother always told me that it's impolite to talk about that, that only a fool discusses his business."

Though some may have other names for him, nobody would call Wynton Marsalis a fool. Rather, he's smart, talented, determined, and he has little tolerance for "whining" and "wallowing." At one time, he says, he was angry, but that was during his youth. "I refuse to allow the collective weight of this history that we're living crush my spirit," he says. "Our music is about freedom, about democracy, about freedom of speech. The central theme in jazz is that you take your freedom and use it to help other people get freedom. Like Harriet Tubman. She was free, and many times over she went back down into the slave regions and got people and freed them. Our society needs more like that."

And more like Wynton Marsalis. □