

THE most beautiful and important thing a people can do is create an art form. An art form can influence your thinking, your feeling, the way you dress, the way you walk, how you talk, what you do with yourself. It has that power because it contains structure, development, contrast, emotion and soul. An art form is complete: it sets a standard for performance and it expresses standards for living.

Jazz is an art form and it expresses a Negroid point of view about life in the 20th century. It is the most modern and profound expression of the way Black people look at the world. It is not like what Black people did in sports, where they *reinterpreted* the way the games could be played, bringing new dimensions to competitive expression in boxing, basketball, and so forth. Jazz is something Negroes *invented* and it said the most profound things not only about us and the way we look at things, but about what modern democratic life is really about. It is the nobility of the race put into sound; it is the sensuousness of romance in our dialect; it is the picture of the people in all their glory, which is what swinging is. Jazz has all of the elements, from the spare and penetrating to the complex and en-

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veloping. It is the hardest music to play that I know of and it is the highest rendition of individual emotion in the history of Western music.

What Louis Armstrong brought to the world when he started giving notice through his horn in the 1920s had never existed before. This man stood up there and *improvised* music that made perfect sense, that expressed intellect and emotion in *action*. He brought new angles of melody and rhythm into the world. Louis Armstrong was a great artist, one of the greatest of all time, and, as Albert Murray points out in his classic, *Stomping the Blues*, Louis Armstrong's work made him a hero. Murray also points out that what jazz musicians did with the popular tunes of Gershwin and all those people was to show that the distance between them and those songs writers was the huge gap between high art and folk art. Those show tunes, as Max Roach says, were lightweight and would have been



Three giants of jazz, Louis Armstrong (left, top), Duke Ellington (left, center), and Charlie Parker are praised by Wynton Marsalis, who has been highly acclaimed for his performances of classical jazz and European classical music.

Why We Must Preserve Our JAZZ HERITAGE

By Wynton Marsalis*

Trumpet virtuoso says rich musical legacy is crucial to Black identity

forgotten if jazz musicians hadn't played them and improved them through the Negro methodology of swing. In some liner notes to a Billie Holiday record, Stanley Crouch expands on that by saying that jazz is about improving things and that to jazz something up really doesn't mean to mess it up; it means to make it better. That's what jazz musicians did: they

took some low-grade Puccini imitations and made them into *American* songs. One of the reasons is that most of the best writers of popular songs in the '20s, the '30s, and the '40s were immigrants. They were new Americans. Negroes had been here for 300 years and they put the weight of centuries into what they did. Nobody is more American than a Black person and



Count Basie and Billie Holiday enriched the American musical idiom, Marsalis says. He deplores the lack of seriousness of New Wave musicians and calls for national effort to preserve the jazz heritage.

OUR JAZZ HERITAGE *Continued*

that's why you see so many people all over the world influenced by the way Negroes put things into style. When people talk about the international influence of America, they're talking about us as much as anybody, but too often we accept the idea that when you put the word *Black* in front of something, it ceases being connected to anything, except itself. When the Wright brothers invented the airplane or Edison invented the electric light, those became *American* inventions.

Things we do are often rejected or pushed into a corner or devalued because we did them, and when we *accept* the idea that we aren't part of the modern age or part of America—a central part of America—we assist those who work to keep us in a position where we can be taken advantage of, sometimes gratefully.

Jazz is opposed to all of that. Jazz is about not being satisfied with mediocrity. Jazz is about being yourself and working your hardest to live up to the

responsibility of developing your gift. Jazz is serious business and it is also the noble joy that Louis Armstrong embodied and projected with his horn. He raised the level of individual confidence. The same recognition of deep human values that you hear in Beethoven, you hear in Louis Armstrong. As one Black poet said to a friend of mine recently, "We, since the Revolutionary War and the Constitutional Congress, have been the arbiters of the *honor* of the Constitution." You hear that honor upheld in the work of Louis Armstrong. He realized every democratic ideal in the quality of his music. From those ideals turned into sound and from our experience in this country with limitations wrongly imposed, Negroes have been more concerned with freedom and the quality it can

"You have a war going on out here where your ammunition is your imagination and your technique."

provide than any other group in this country, perhaps more than any other group in the Western World. What is so remarkable, however, is that Negroes invented a form *based* on freedom, a great art form. Suffering has

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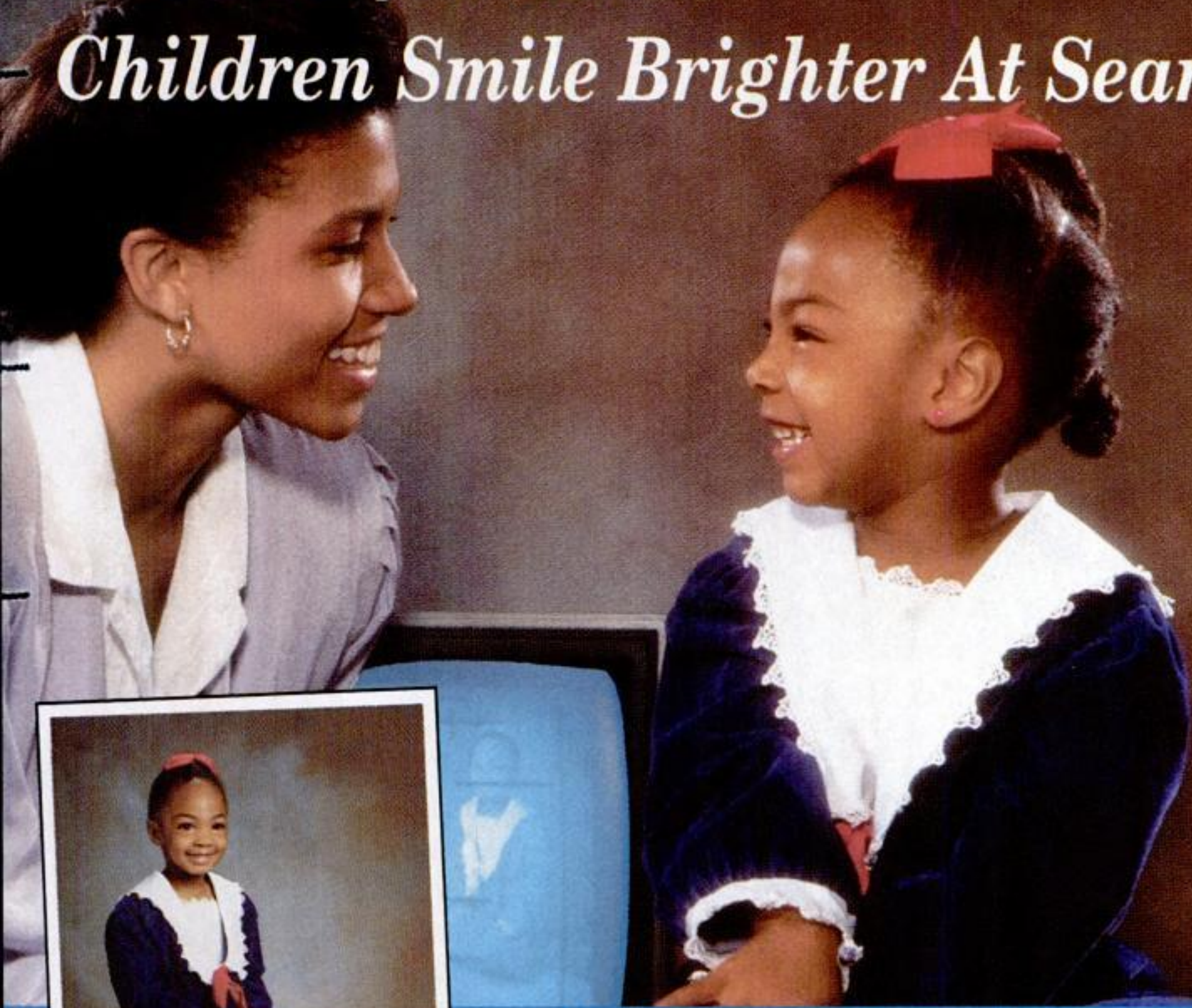
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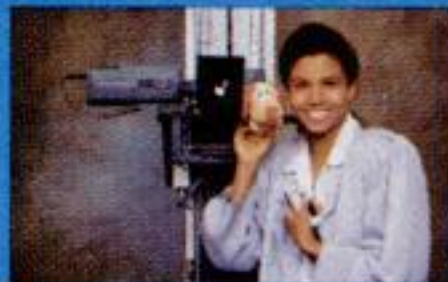
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OUR JAZZ HERITAGE *Continued*

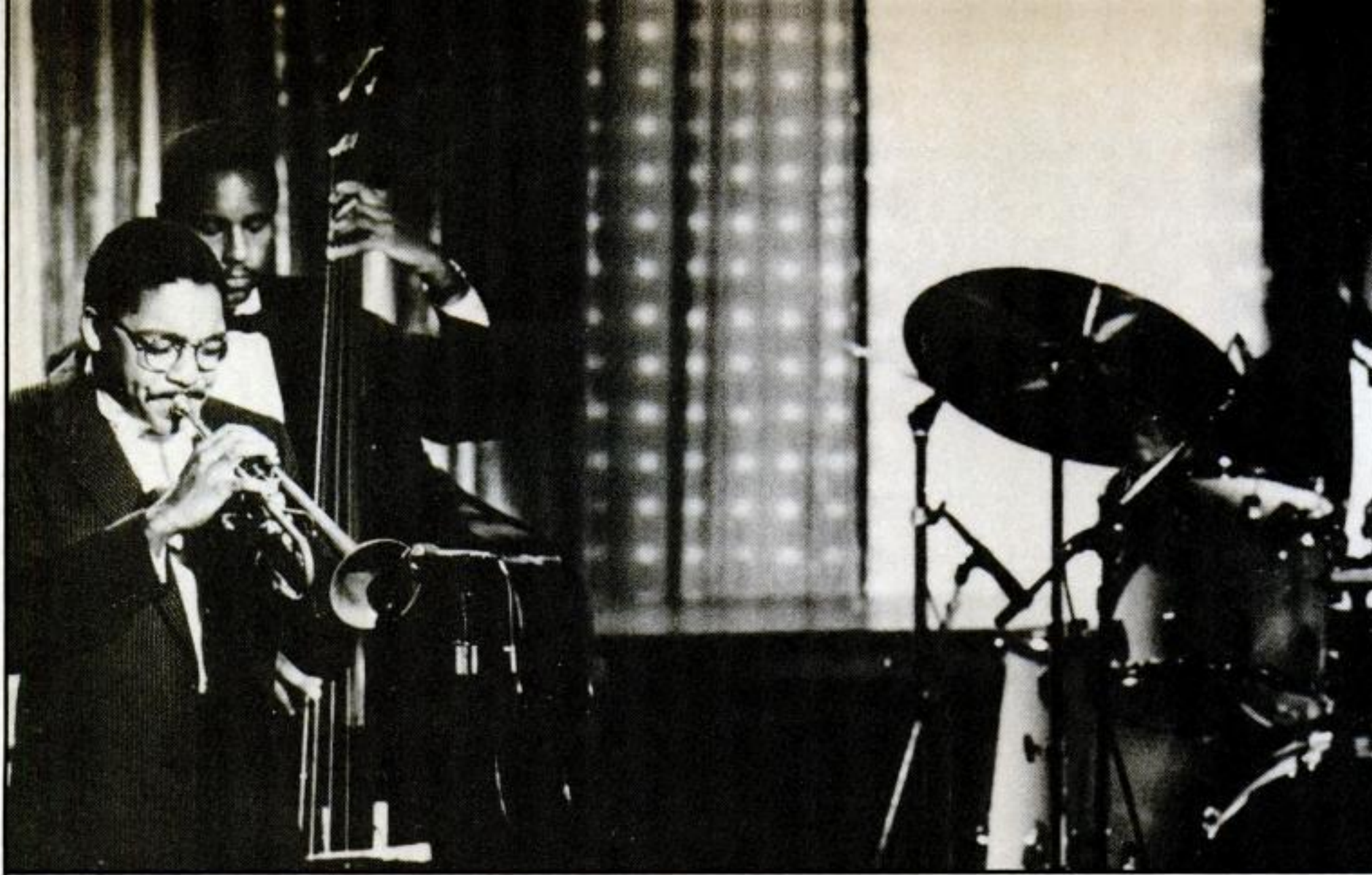
always existed in the world and people have always been taken advantage of; but the creation of the art form that is jazz is so remarkable that it can't be accounted for through sociological clichés, which Albert Murray nails down over and over in his *The Omni-Americans*, a book every person interested in the realities of American culture should read. What Murray makes clear is that there was a body of ideas about human life that Black Americans brought into functional human expression with such vitality that *their* version changed the society and the image of the society in the rest of the world. That's the center of the issue: Negroes didn't accept what was handed down to them, they put those things together in the symbolic form of art and proved that you can use those same principles of respect for the individual and collective expression in artistic *performance*. That was a major event in the history of the world and in the history of art.

But you have to have serious people to make serious art, and there were no more serious artists than those who made jazz so great. Louis Armstrong played things that were functional and

became timeless at the same moment. We know that because of recordings. Duke Ellington, learning from Armstrong and from Fletcher Henderson and anybody else who had something to say, went about the business of laying out a legacy. He was determined to show how many different ways humanity could be expressed in a Negroid fashion. Ellington created the largest body of work of any jazz musician in this century and probably the largest of any composer of this century. In his art you hear everything, from the most subtle expression of dreamy sensuousness to roaring, hollering excitement. Every time he put in a new color or worked out a unique approach to the combination of melody, harmony and rhythm, he was showing how rich and broad Negroid art could be. By the end of his life, he had taken the music to the highest levels, performing for everything from dancers to kings and queens, accepting medals from distinguished appreciators of art the world over. He was dead serious and he was also humorous and he was also romantic and he also knew you have a war going on out here where your ammunition is your imagination and your technique. When you bring

off a good piece of work, you have taken a victorious position in the struggle with falsehoods, regardless of where those falsehoods come from, White people *or* Black people. Ellington wasn't intimidated by any ideas about Negroes that were based in limitations. He never accepted the idea that complexity was foreign to the Black American culture or mentality. What Ellington saw was this panorama of life he wanted to capture in his music. Check out the fact that one of his pieces was entitled *Sepia Panorama*. Ellington made demands of himself first, then of his musicians, then of his listeners. That is why he was great—he was neither afraid to think nor act upon his thoughts.

Charlie Parker took Negroid improvisation to the highest level it has achieved. No one before or after played as well as he did. His conception was perfect, his execution was perfect, and he had deep soul and a wide emotional range. It is obvious in the way he played the saxophone that he was a very attentive person and that he thought long and deep about things, never just accepting surfaces. He also was a lot like Beethoven because he galvanized the music and took it into



The Wynton Marsalis Quintet blends traditional jazz and modern jazz. The product of a musical family, he studied at Juilliard and became the first American artist to have simultaneous jazz and classical albums released in the same week.

OUR JAZZ HERITAGE *Continued*

another dimension that hadn't been reached by anybody else. It wasn't better in the sense of a horse race; it was an addition to the aesthetic. Parker played melody, harmony and rhythm in a new way, and he never sacrificed swinging for what he achieved. His work was pure and totally informed by Negroid standards of expression. There is nothing European—or even African—in Charlie Parker's music in the sense that it can be reduced by comparison to an external source. I say that because the term Black American means a synthesis and a fresh expression of all elements anyway.

Those are only three musicians, but there are many more I could name:

“There was a body of ideas about human life that Black Americans brought into . . . human expression with such vitality that their version changed the society and the image of that society in the rest of the world.”

Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Fletcher Henderson, Lester Young, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman. They all had one thing in common: a commitment to the highest form of Negroid expression in the style that they felt suited them. But the world they came from is almost gone now and many of the people who should be passing on the information have gone over to the other side, spreading falsehoods. We now live in an age of aesthetic skullduggery—inside jobs, lying, back-stabbing, theft, larceny. We are now told that plastic

spoons are silver and we're supposed

“The same recognition of deep human values that you hear in Beethoven, you hear in Louis Armstrong.”

to believe it. Much of this results from greed and misconceptions. In the past, jazz was one of the few forms in mass media that gave a realistic image of the panorama of Negro life. Somebody might go to a movie and see a bunch of skinning and grinning and tomming on the screen, a bunch of insulting stereotypical images, then see Duke Ellington's band or Billy Eckstine's band come out and turn the whole deal around by providing you with the true substance of the soul of the Negro. Or they could go home and put on a Charlie Parker record, or whomever. The point is that Negro expression in mass media used to be an antidote to the stereotypical muddy water you were asked to drink and the hollow logs you were told to live in. Now, however, with few exceptions like Bill Cosby, Black people have been pushed all the way back into minstrelsy.

I think that things got this way because people stopped believing that there were any real values to be upheld that were Negroid. When you hear Louis Armstrong play the trumpet, you hear Negroid values upheld and expressed with so much soulfulness you want to go over there where he is and get some of that. The same with Ellington, with Charlie Parker, Monk—any musician who could say things that important with so much beauty. They wanted to show you that strength, knowledge, integrity and a

sense of history made it possible for you to say beautiful things, for you to *be* beautiful, and for your beauty to be respected internationally. But before they found out what could happen outside of America, they were defining the greatness available in human terms in this society, regardless of obstacles.

We now find ourselves in a situation where everything has been confused and the true significance of Negroid expression has been cast by the wayside in favor of clown costumes, of co-signing garbage, of kissing the hind quarters of those in power in order to get grossly overpaid for grossly insignificant work. For instance, you have Black people who seem as though they believe the Norman Lear version of Negroes is more valid than Duke Ellington's version. Then you have all of these musicians who have become so cynical that they not only continue to sell out but try to pretend that they are advancing the music because the junk they're playing now is done at a later date than their best work.

We must realize the importance of this. Art does not continue by itself. People make it happen or people allow it to decay or allow it to die. In the past, when it was impossible to sell out and become millionaires doing it, Black musicians stuck to their craft and took pride in the fact that they were bringing fresh beauty into the world and that they were living up to the standards set by their predecessors. Now . . . if you take the position that you have integrity, your position is dismissed by the term “purist.” That is an interesting change. Before, if you were a purist, that meant that you didn't believe that something should be diluted, thinned out by compromise and greed. Now that is supposed to mean somebody who is out of step with what the real deal is. If you talk about having craft, you will be accused of being academic or of being somebody who's trying to be White. Or, worst of all, the idea of having high standards is looked upon with contempt and dismissed as old-fashioned. But, as Albert Murray points out in *The Hero and the Blues*, artists know that you keep up to date by dealing with the concept of timelessness, which comes from *quality*. Falsehoods may be in vogue but all they will mean in the future are further examples of how lies were articulated in a particular time.

If we had a better sense of art and a stronger sense of history, we wouldn't have to accept the idea that entertainers are artists. I have nothing against

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Honored on American Black Achievement Awards TV program, Marsalis thanks EBONY and deplores commercialization of American music.

OUR JAZZ HERITAGE *Continued*

pop music, but I do resent the pretension attached to the entertainment of today. If you sell millions of records you might be making an economic breakthrough, but an economic breakthrough isn't the same as an artistic achievement. Today there are so many musicians who try to get you to believe that they are the same thing that it is sickening.

I don't begrudge anyone his or her success, but I am shocked by how many Black people at the top of their professions are so gullible and worried about being accused of not identifying with the man in the street that they refuse to discern the interest in quality that makes for a true elite. I go into the homes of brilliant Black professional people and they have no sense of what is superb in Negroid terms. They just go along with the trends that are handed to them through the media. Their record collections don't have any Armstrong, Ellington, Parker, Monk, Coltrane, Coleman, etc. What they usually like is what's selling, and they often evaluate its significance in monetary terms. In fact, what I find to be the general feeling among Negroes across the country is that monetary success is substance. That is very dangerous because it lowers the consciousness of people and it makes their aspirations solely economic.

A lot of our problems come from the fact that far too few of the Negroes I encounter, regardless of class and income, have any intellectual aspirations strong enough to keep them reading material that will put the world—and their place in it—in perspective. Most of them haven't read Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, two of the most serious Negroes out there. But what makes them important to this essay is the fact

that they put a lot of thought into what the meaning of Negroid is and how that distinctive element has been stylized. They know that everything important comes from thought, even if it began accidentally. When you read something like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, you encounter a work that has the same intention as Duke Ellington had: sepia panorama. When you read Albert Murray's books, you come in contact with a man who didn't accept the Norman Lear version of Negroes—the more simple-minded they are, the more real they are. Or if you pick up Stephen Oates's biography of Martin Luther King, you discover how great a man King was, how many levels he was thinking, how much stuff he had to deal with to bring his accomplishments off. But in that book King is described as a man of great concern for Negro culture and a man who could see that integration would pose one danger that had to be battled: that Black people might lose sight of what made Negroid style important and reject it as a hold-over from an oppressed past.

Perhaps that has happened already. You have young musicians who don't know how to play the blues, who don't care about being in tune, who can't get through any of the music Monk wrote but try to pretend that they're what's going on because they're playing right now. It's like a Watusi having a dwarf baby and the baby saying he's taller than his father because he's younger. But I think we can get through all of this if we learn how to appreciate our highest achievements and exhibit the will to perpetuate them. For instance, Jews would never let you confuse Barry Manilow and Itzhak Perlman, nor would they allow somebody to say Manilow is more important to our time because he's sold far more records than Perlman. One is a pop star, the other a great concert violinist. That is what the Black middle and upper class must do: Take the time to learn what makes great art and move to support it. Much has already been lost and many of the masters from earlier eras are dying every year, but that might not make a difference if we choose to aspire to higher standards, if we become as serious about our culture as Negroes were when they went about indelibly changing Western music by adding a new ingredient: Negroid expression coming from a form based in freedom and a democratic sense of the collective. We did it before, we can do it again. It would be cowardly to think otherwise.