

# JAZZ MESSENGER

## JACK HEALEY talks with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis about the good works of good jazz, America's classical music.



**W**YNTON MARSALIS IS A PHENOMENON. A great jazz musician steeped in classical training, a young man with not just a horn but a clear and articulated view of the world. Last year he played as part of Amnesty International's concert in the National Stadium in Santiago, Chile. He played in the same place where thousands of Chileans were detained, tortured, or killed in the brutal aftermath of the military coup in 1973.

And there, in a new Chile with a democratically elected government, Amnesty International held a concert—a musical celebration of a freedom that had not been experienced for 17 years. And there Wynton Marsalis blew his horn, and blew away the thousands gathered.

We stayed in a nearby hotel, and each of the three nights we were there Wynton stayed up into the wee hours jamming with his fine jazz band that had come down to Chile with him. One night I joined them—at three in the morning—and found him, his band, and a wonderful group of Chilean musicians playing a cool, moody jazz that seemed to hang in the atmosphere. There he was, this great American musician, playing with unknown local musicians and together speaking a language that has no words—communicating deeply and movingly. I'll never forget that scene.

Nearly a year later I found Wynton—still playing his horn—at a New York recording studio, and asked him a few questions.

**Jack Healey:** What were you thinking when you came down to play for Amnesty, in Chile, in the stadium?

**Wynton Marsalis:** At first I thought, "You have to go to a show where people will come and hear rock music, and they're not going to want to hear what we're playing because it won't be that loud. It won't be the beat they are familiar with." But that was a very moving thing for me—how people identified that blues and started singing a song that they were singing at soccer games in 1963. Just the fact that they could identify the form of the blues, the sound of it, and everybody could sing that song against the sound of the blues. It was a very moving thing.

**Healey:** It not only was moving—it rocked the place.

**Marsalis:** To think that here was the blues we were playing. That was an amazing thing. It was one of the most unique experiences in all my years of playing music. I'll never forget that.

**Healey:** How about in general? How do you feel as someone walking down the street and looking at things?

**Marsalis:** I feel that we have a very naive political philosophy, in terms of human rights. . . . In order for a democracy to work, those who have the most sometimes have to give up more. It's like playing in a jazz band. You can't stand up and solo all night yourself, even if you're the best soloist. You have to play the background sometimes, and let someone else develop and play. That's what I learned play-

ing with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers.

**Healey:** How about this music? You have to be really clever to keep your integrity in this thing. I mean even as an outsider—as I am, just doing concerts for human rights—it seems you've got to try to protect your integrity.

**Marsalis:** Yeah, it's hard to stay out there and act with integrity, because you don't get accolades for keeping your integrity. You get insulted and cut down. The recording industry itself is not based on integrity or musicianship or any of that. They're trying to make some money basically exploiting the sexual naïveté of teenagers. And they'll do that however they can.

**Healey:** So you fight . . .

**Marsalis:** To maintain your integrity. You can't want to have control over other people. Once you start wanting other things—publicity, popularity, money—that's the beginning of the end. And boy, those things are tempting. Sometimes you feel jealousy for other people who have these things. You might know more about music than they know, but you have to realize that the music industry is not about music. It's not about the level of musicianship. You just have to accept that you're just a small part of what goes on in the world. So you develop your musicianship, and you develop your skills in terms of dealing with people.

**Healey:** And who do you think is really playing a good note?

**Marsalis:** People like the Modern Jazz Quartet; all the great orchestras—the London Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra. There are a lot of great musicians who are out there right now playing. I don't even like to name some, because there's so many.

**Healey:** Once I was lucky enough to spend some time with Charles Mingus at Dick Gregory's house, and I asked him how did he listen to the music. And he said that he could just hear orchestras. Why didn't I hear an orchestra? Do you hear that early on? Where does that jazz thing come from? It's so complicated.

**Marsalis:** It's not really complicated, because there's the blues and the beat in the blues and the soul of it. But the thing that makes it so powerful is the combination of the inner link and the soul. And this is something that has been separated in a lot of music so that the teenagers can be exploited into believing the inner link is not a part of life, that it fights with emotion. But it doesn't fight with emotion. That's what separates man from a dog or a cat or an elephant. We have minds, and we have parts and feelings. And they're both important, and they both should be cultivated. I was introduced to John Coltrane's music when I was twelve and thirteen. I used to go to jazz concerts with my dad then, but I didn't like that music. It was too crazy, people playing everything. I didn't know what they were playing. But then I put this Coltrane record on, and it was—just the sound, the dignity of the music and the intellect of it. And the soul of it. It was sexy, it was spiritual, it was intellectual. It was aristocratic, it was down to earth. It seemed like it had everything in it. And I could hear so much in it. It made me feel a certain way.

Photographs by Jesse Frohman



Riding on a blue  
note: Wynton  
Marsalis  
articulating his  
world vision.

**Healey:** Peter Gabriel told me about a song he did that was sung in China, Senegal, and—I think—Wales. There were no translators, but they still communicated, composed together. Do you have some sense that world music is being grasped as a wider reflection of music now?

**Marsalis:** To me, when you put a backbeat on something it becomes African-American music. I don't care what you put on top of it. It could be a pentatonic scale, it could be some chants from some region of the world, it could be some Chinese music. I listen to the folk music of many different peoples' traditions. And each tradition has a series of grooves and beats that go with its music.

So to really deal with all music is a very serious proposition. Musicians traditionally incorporate aspects of another style of music into their style. Bach did that. Even though he was German, he would write music to sound like the French music of the time, and there were some concertos he wrote that people thought Vivaldi, an Italian, wrote. That was the world as he knew it. Now the world that we know is much greater than the world of that time because we have the airplane and telecommunications, but unfortunately we're not producing musicians like Bach.

Now, I'm in favor of anything that brings people together. And if people come together under this sound, that's fine. But I feel that most of the music that I've heard that comes under the heading of world music is not sophisticated enough to be actual world music. It's just a backbeat with the sound of some other people's music on top of it. And to me, that makes it African-American music. Because the African-American culture is a world culture. There are some Chinese Negroes who are called black. Some Cubans, Brazilians, combined with French and English and German and Japanese, it's a hybrid mulatto race of people. And I can't question what goes on in the world, because I'm trying to figure out about jazz music.

I feel the blues has something to do with music, folk music, that I've heard all over the world. It can be *gagaku* music from Japan—sounds like the blues. It can be the somber music of Brazil. All the different styles, I can hear blues in all that. There's this Chinese flute music I heard dealing with the minor third and the blues proposition. The organization of the improvisation was like the traditional African drum ensemble.

So to me world music is like what Duke Ellington was doing at the end of his life, like the *Fauré suite* and the African-Eurasian eclipse, and "Midnight in Paris"—the music of all French tunes done in the jazz style. The *Nutcracker Suite* in Tchaikovsky's music, this is world music. Not to disrespect this other music.

**Healey:** Sure, I understand.

**Marsalis:** I'm just trying to clarify what I already feel about. Which is not that it's a bad thing to have happen. I think it's good if you can get people of different cultures together. But in terms of an enduring aesthetic statement—well, that's a different proposition.

**Healey:** When you talk about a real aesthetic contribution, do you feel that jazz as you hear it in the United States now is moving in a good direction? Are there modern-day Duke Ellingtons?

**Marsalis:** Well you don't produce people like Duke Ellington just by talking about it. I know there's nobody like him out there now. But we have to get more serious about music and human feeling in music. You can't produce people like Duke Ellington on top of one beat. It takes a willfulness to be sophisticated and to address the actual feeling of living in the world, complexity of being alive.

And the simplicity of it. You have to have an assembled romantic conception and a sexual conception, sensual conception. It has to be adult music. The world deals with adult sensibilities. Children have a certain innocence and beauty, but the greatest achievements are adult achievements. The adult spectrum of the world is broader. In terms of producing Duke Ellington in the jazz scene, I feel that we're doing better than we were ten or fifteen years ago. But we still have a lot

of jazz music to address that has not been addressed over the last twenty or thirty years. . . . To really have an impact, you have to be well versed in your craft, and there has to be a belief in that craft, and a belief in that art. There can't be always a desire to sell the art out just to make some money. But I think that Duke Ellington has laid out a marvelous foundation, much like the foundation that Bach laid out for European music.

**Healey:** What do you practice? How do you say to yourself, Wynton's got to improve in that area?

**Marsalis:** There are different things to improve and there are musical things—hearing, more precisely. Having quicker reflexes so whatever you hear you can just play automatically on your own. Playing with a more beautiful tone, bigger sound, swinging harder, playing with rhythms, with a more groove-oriented rhythm. Better communication with the other musicians that you play with so that you can really get a group dialogue going. And then there are the things—the human things—that are not music, but come through the music. Like developing greater humility. Developing greater understanding.

**Healey:** So there's a whole hell of a lot going on in that, in your jazz path, and it's swinging and moving. It's a democracy.

**Marsalis:** Because everyone is playing, and you're trying to make them sound good, and they're trying to make you sound good, and you're inventing what you're playing at the moment that you're playing it. So there's a lot going on. It's an actual representation of what goes on. It's a musical representation of what goes on in a working democracy. You have to want to play with other people to play jazz music. You can't just play your part.

'Cause your part is their part.  
**Healey:** A lot of times governments won't let in messages of freedom and decency and spirituality. Do you get a sense there's some imperative a musician has, or do you just feel that they do their music?

**Marsalis:** Well, what I'm going to say is unpopular. I think a lot of what goes on today in terms of music is just based on getting on TV and making some money. They'll say they're for human rights and all that, but if you were concerned for human rights, the first things you would address are human rights in your own country. The striving for dignity and freedom lies within the hearts of all people, no government can take that from people. The United States government couldn't take it from the United States Negro. They couldn't take it from the slaves that came over here. And the people produced this in themselves. The Creator has produced this in people. It's something that exists in the human spirit. There are many who have the will.

So we can sing. It can be a bunch of rock songs about "let the people go free" and all of that, but the governments don't take that seriously.

They'll take it seriously through Amnesty International. You can man a thousand people in a stadium, because that's a political activity. That's a political action. But to really force change, you have to inspire a mass of the populace. And those who are in charge never want to see things changed, because their money is being messed with. And a lot of these things are spiritual understandings. A belief in the oneness of man. A spiritual thing. Spirituality's always been given black eyes at different times. But the entire history of humanity is one assembled motion. There may be people who believe, "Oh, there never was any good old days. Thirty years ago I'd have to sit on the back of the bus behind some signs and be subject to all kinds of whatever." I caught the tail end of it. So, we lose the glorious past? But the things that were glorious could be the future. And it would be glorious. It's just a matter of when. ♪

**"In order for a  
democracy to work, those  
who have the most  
sometimes have to give  
up more."**

