

Wynton Marsalis - Biography

Wynton Marsalis has been described as the most outstanding jazz musician and trumpeter of his generation, as one of the world's top classical trumpeters, as a big band leader in the tradition of Duke Ellington, a brilliant composer, a devoted advocate for the Arts and a tireless and inspiring educator. He carries these distinctions well. His life is a portrait of discipline, dedication, sacrifice, and creative accomplishment.

The sound of Wynton Marsalis' band is inspired by the basic principals of democracy. According to Marsalis, what you hear in a great jazz band is the sound of democracy. "The jazz band works best when participation is shaped by intelligent communication." This intelligent, hard swinging interplay has made Marsalis' bands the favorite among jazz musicians and audiences worldwide. In the smallest of towns Wynton is received warmly and enthusiastically. The connection is the music, which mimics our valued way of life. Through jazz music Wynton Marsalis represents America all over the world. In such disparate locations from Prague to Warsaw, Seoul to Wellington, Paris to Istanbul, Santiago to Mexico City, Toronto to Calgary, Amarillo to Portland - you will find Wynton Marsalis sharing his vision of the union of jazz and democracy.

Wynton was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on October 18, 1961 to Ellis and Dolores Marsalis. He was the second of six sons, one of whom is autistic. At an early age Wynton exhibited seriousness about study, an aptitude for music and a desire to contribute to American culture. At age 8 he performed traditional New Orleans music in the Fairview Baptist Church band led by legendary banjoist, Danny Barker. At 14 he was invited to perform with the New Orleans Philharmonic. During high school Wynton was a member of the New Orleans Symphony Brass Quintet, New Orleans Community Concert Band, New Orleans Youth Orchestra, New Orleans Symphony and on weekends he performed in a jazz band as well as in the popular local funk band, the Creators. At age 17 Wynton became the youngest musician ever to be admitted to Tanglewood's Berkshire Music Center. Despite his youth, he was awarded the school's prestigious Harvey Shapiro Award for outstanding brass student. When Wynton moved to New York City to attend Juilliard in 1978 and began to pick up gigs around town, the grapevine began to buzz. Two years later (in 1980) he was rewarded with the opportunity to join the Jazz Messengers to study under master drummer and bandleader, Art Blakey. It was in Art Blakey's band that Wynton learned the relationship between jazz and democracy. Art Blakey would always say, "No America, no jazz!" It was from Blakey that Wynton acquired his concept for bandleading and for bringing intensity to each and every performance. In the years to follow Wynton was invited to perform with Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, Sweets Edison, Clark Terry, Sonny Rollins, and countless other jazz legends.

With this foundation Wynton assembled his own band and hit the road, performing over 120 concerts every year for ten consecutive years. His objective was to learn how to play and to comprehend how best to give to his audience. During these years Wynton's strong belief in jazz and his vision for the music revitalized the art form. Through an exhaustive series of performances, lectures and music workshops Marsalis rekindled widespread interest in an art form that had been largely abandoned and redefined out of its artistic substance. Marsalis invested his creative energy in the art of jazz and would not be compromised by financial opportunity or critical pressure. Additionally, he garnered recognition for the older generation of jazz musicians and prompted the re-issuance of jazz catalog by record companies worldwide. A quick glance at the better known jazz musicians today reveals

many students of Marsalis' workshops: James Carter, Christian McBride, Roy Hargrove, Harry Connick Jr., Nicholas Payton, Eric Reed and Eric Lewis to name a few.

Not content to focus solely on his musicianship, Wynton devoted equal time to developing his compositional skills. The dance community quickly embraced his penmanship and he received commissions to create major compositions for Garth Fagan Dance, Peter Martins at the New York City Ballet, Twyla Tharp for the American Ballet Theatre, and for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. Marsalis collaborated with the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society in 1995 to compose the string quartet, AT THE OCTOROON BALLS, and again in 1998 to create a response to Stravinsky's A Soldier's Tale with his composition, A FIDDLER'S TALE.

At the dawn of the new millennium Wynton presented his most ambitious work to date, ALL RISE, an epic composition for big band, gospel choir, and symphony orchestra which was performed by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Kurt Masur along with the Morgan State University Choir and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (December 1999). The work was recorded in September 2001 with conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and more than 100 voices from the Morgan State University Choir, Northridge Singers of California State University at Northridge and the Paul Smith Singers. "ALL RISE will make your spirits soar," stated Steve Jones of USA Today; while Los Angeles Times writer Don Heckman asserts that ALL RISE simmers and surges with propulsive jazz rhythms, free soaring improvised solos and jazz tinged harmonies..."

Wynton's love of the music of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and others drove him to pursue a career in classical music as well. He recorded the Haydn, Hummel and Leopold Mozart trumpet concertos at the age of twenty. His debut recording received glorious reviews and won the Grammy Award for "Best Classical Soloist with an Orchestra." Marsalis went on to record ten additional classical records, all to critical acclaim. Wynton performed with leading orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Boston Pops, Cleveland Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, English Chamber Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra and London's Royal Philharmonic, working with an eminent group of conductors including: Leppard, Dutoit, Maazel, Slatkin, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Tilson-Thomas. Through his recordings, workshops and performances Wynton inspired many youngsters to pursue classical music as well. Famed classical trumpeter Maurice Andre' praised Wynton as "potentially the greatest trumpeter of all time."

In 1987 Wynton Marsalis co-founded a jazz program at Lincoln Center. The first season consisted of three concerts. Under Wynton's leadership the program has developed an international agenda with up to 400 events annually in 15 countries. The programming is rich and diverse and includes performances, debates, film forums, dances, television and radio broadcasts, and educational activities. Educational activities include an annual High School Jazz Band Competition and Festival that reaches over 2000 bands in 50 states and Canada, a Band Director's Academy, and a hugely popular concert series for kids called "Jazz For Young People." In December of 1995 the Lincoln Center Board awarded the Jazz Department's significant success by voting it a full constituent, equal in stature with the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, and the New York City Ballet - a historic moment for Jazz as an art form and for Lincoln Center as a cultural institution. In February 1998 New York City Mayor Rudolph Guiliani announced that Jazz at Lincoln Center was selected to be part of the redevelopment of the New York Coliseum site at Columbus Circle. Frederick P. Rose Hall, the new 100,000 square foot complex (opened in October 2004), has become Jazz at Lincoln Center's new home and contains state-of-the-art performance, recording, broadcast, rehearsal and educational facilities as well as the world's first large

venue built specifically for jazz.

In the fall of 1995 Wynton launched two major broadcast events. In October PBS premiered MARSALIS ON MUSIC, a series of educational television shows on jazz and classical music. The series was written and hosted by Marsalis and was enjoyed by millions of parents and children. Writers distinguished Marsalis' television series by comparing his work to that of the late Leonard Bernstein in his celebrated Young People's Concerts of the 50s and 60s. That same month National Public Radio began broadcasting the first of Marsalis' 26-week series entitled Making the Music. These entertaining and insightful radio shows were the first full exposition of jazz music in American broadcast history. Wynton's radio and television series were awarded the most prestigious distinction in broadcast journalism, the George Foster Peabody Award. While this body of work is enough to fill two lifetimes, Wynton Marsalis continues to work as hard as ever to earn the privilege to contribute even more to our world's cultural landscape.

Wynton Marsalis has won nine of the coveted Grammy Awards, earned the distinction of being the only artist ever to win Grammy Awards for both jazz and classical records (an accomplishment he astonishingly repeated in consecutive years), and he is the only artist ever to have won Grammy Awards in five consecutive years. Wynton was awarded the Grand Prix Du Disque of France, the Louis Armstrong Memorial Medal, the Netherlands' Edison Award and the Algur H. Meadows Award for Excellence in the Arts. He received countless plaques and was given the Key to over 50 cities. He was inducted into the American Academy of Achievement and was dubbed an Honorary Dreamer by the "I Have a Dream Foundation." Wynton received a citation from the United States House of Representatives for his outstanding contributions to the Arts. Time magazine selected Wynton as one of America's most promising leaders under age 40 in 1995, and in 1996 Time celebrated Marsalis as one of America's 25 Most Influential People. In the spring of 2001 United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan proclaimed Wynton Marsalis an international ambassador of goodwill by appointing him a U N Messenger of Peace. If you speak with Wynton, however, he will tell you that his greatest reward is the love and support that he receives from people all over the world from his twenty plus years of uninterrupted touring.

Honorary degrees have been conferred upon Wynton by twenty-nine of our nation's leading academic institutions including Columbia, Brown, Princeton and Yale University. Elsewhere, the New York Urban League awarded Wynton with the Frederick Douglass Medallion for distinguished leadership, the American Arts Council presented him with the Arts Education Award and Britain's senior conservatoire, the Royal Academy of Music, granted Mr. Marsalis Honorary Membership, the Academy's highest decoration for a non-British citizen. In France the Ministry of Culture appointed Wynton the most prestigious decoration awarded by the French Republic - the rank of Knight in the Order of Arts and Literature. And in 1997 Wynton Marsalis became the first jazz musician ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his epic oratorio BLOOD ON THE FIELDS. In the five decades prior, the Pulitzer Prize jury refused to recognize jazz musicians and their improvisational music, reserving this distinction for classical composers. In a personal note to Wynton, Zarin Mehta wrote, "I was not surprised at your winning the Pulitzer Prize for BLOOD ON THE FIELDS. It is a broad beautifully painted canvas that impresses and inspires. It speaks to us all ... I'm sure that somewhere in the firmament Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong and legions of others are smiling down on you."

The most extraordinary dimension of Wynton Marsalis, however, is not his accomplishments but his character. It is the lesser-known but much appreciated part of this

man who finds endless ways to give of himself. It is the person who waited in a dark and empty parking lot for one full hour after a concert in Baltimore, waiting for a single student to return from home with his horn for a trumpet lesson; it is the citizen who personally funds scholarships for students attending the Tanglewood Music Center and the Eastern Music Festival. Wynton Marsalis has selflessly donated his time and talent to non-profit organizations throughout the country to help raise money to meet the many needs within our society. From My Sister's Place (a shelter for battered women) to Graham Windham (a shelter for homeless children), the Children's Defense Fund, Amnesty International, the Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute, Food For All Seasons (a food bank for the elderly and disadvantaged), Very Special Arts (an organization that provides experiences in dance, drama, literature, and music for individuals with physical and mental disabilities) to the Newark Boys Chorus School (a full-time academic music school for disadvantaged youths) and many, many more -- Wynton responded enthusiastically to the call for service. It is Wynton's commitment to the improvement of life for all people as well as his outstanding contributions to the Arts that portray the best of his character and humanity.

Wynton Marsalis has been appropriately described as a level raiser whose breadth of talent is equated with genius. It has been said that he is an American musician for whom greatness is not merely possible but inevitable. To date Wynton has produced 33 jazz and 11 classical records and has sold over 7 million records worldwide including 3 Gold Records. With his collection of standards he reinvigorated the jazz musician's relationship to the American popular song. With THE MAJESTY OF THE BLUES, Wynton re-introduced the concept of "one jazz" featuring serious performance in the earliest form of jazz as well as a contemporary vamped based conception. In LEVEE LOW MOAN, THICK IN THE SOUTH and other blues recordings, Wynton extended the jazz musician's interplay with the blues by writing a series of modern blues' with various melodies, unusual time signatures and chord progressions. His compositions for ballet: 'Six Syncopated Movements' and 'Them Two's' for the New York City Ballet, 'Sweet Release' and 'Here...Now' for Alvin Ailey, 'Jump Start' for Twyla Tharp and 'Ghost Story' for the Zhong Mei Dance Company represents an unprecedented body of ballets by a jazzman and reflect a depth and breadth of musical techniques. With CITI MOVEMENT and IN THIS HOUSE ON THIS MORNING he invented a fresh conception for extended form compositions. His inventive interplay with melody, harmony, and rhythm - his lyrical voicing and tonal coloring assert new possibilities for the jazz ensemble and extend the vocabulary of jazz. In his epic oratorio BLOOD ON THE FIELDS, Wynton draws upon the blues, work songs, chants, call and response, spirituals, New Orleans jazz, Ellingtonesque orchestral arrangements, Afro-Caribbean rhythms and he created Greek chorus-style recitations to move the work along. The New York Times Magazine said the work "marked the symbolic moment when the full heritage of the line, Ellington through Mingus, was extended into the present." The San Francisco Examiner stated "Marsalis' orchestral arrangements are magnificent. Duke Ellington's shadings and themes come and go but Marsalis' free use of dissonance, counter rhythms and polyphonics is way ahead of Ellington's mid-century era."

Wynton Marsalis is taking new steps and in doing so achieves a sometimes-mystical radiance in his writing and performance. From his skilled and adventurous composition to his swinging virtuosity, music will forever be changed, and our cultural landscape fundamentally enriched.