

**Written Testimony in Support of FY 08 Appropriations for the  
National Endowment for the Arts**

Submitted by Wynton Marsalis

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House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies

**“Role of the Arts in Creativity and Innovation”**

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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to be here. My name is Wynton Marsalis, and I am the Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. It is a pleasure to come to our capital city for Arts Advocacy Day, which is coordinated by Americans for the Arts each year. I am here to testify in favor of a Fiscal Year 2008 appropriation of \$176 million for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

In my experience with years of teaching kids of all ages – I have seen a strange phenomenon: We understand the value of the arts for kids up until the third grade.

We understand the importance of teaching through song and storytelling, we encourage the development of creativity-through drawing, and teaching writing through literature, and the significance of expression through dance. This is cultivated at home and in a larger group. Yet, we question the belief that artistic endeavor after the third grade is not just ancillary, but wholly unimportant.

The state of our culture today is the most powerful testimony in favor of arts education.

We create the impression that culture is like a trend – a matter of taste, like hairstyles and clothing. And our pre-pubescent teenagers are the most exploited in the country. They are given the illusion that there is such a thing as teenage music – semi-pornographic music and videos. They are fed a steady diet of this at a very delicate time in the development of their sexuality.

Art forms are created out of a people’s need to express their attitude about existence. These art forms speak to the level of civilization of a people. They are tools of survival, like the Negro spiritual, ways of reenacting great moments in a people’s history – they can codify tools of language, for example, Chaucer & Canterbury Tales, and Shakespeare.

They speak to rituals of courtship – like tango in Argentina. They speak to religious traditions – like medieval art. They indicate that a people have intricate interpersonal relationships of such significance that peoples of other eras can be entertained and informed by them – Italian opera, Greek tragedy.

In most instances, great arts forms come out of a people’s experience with their own environment, each other, their way of life. At some point, this tool of the populace is considered to be so important and significant – it becomes an indispensable part of people’s lives. In some

instances, art is so significant, education is required to maintain the public's relationship with it – Russians and Pushkin; the Samba Schools in Brazil.

Our country has slaved for many years under the impression that the best American art comes from Europe – but Europeans have long recognized that the best American art is indigenous.

It is time we investigate the nature of our national arts-take it more seriously. These have more significance than laws.

National dance should be something that the oldest and youngest do together – and no one feels violated. This intergenerational spirit is the essence of tango, Afro-Cuban music, and Danzon. Can you imagine old Grandma backing her ass up in the typical high school dance that goes on in this country? And why is this language appropriate for our teenagers, and radio stations, and not here? The international diplomacy of Duke Ellington is what we should be teaching our kids. Then our test scores will not fall behind those of kids who come from countries with national cultures.

Then we will find our younger children and older people together, and we will remember what it feels like to be a part the national experience of participation that is the hallmark of democracy. We will understand the value of the arts. When we replace the 80 pound model videos as consumption – we will see less anorexia and cutting; less of our children on Ritalin and Zoloft.

Why is America, the invention of swing, lacking in national dance? In our rush to define what is culturally current, we confuse commercial success with artistic success.

This is the time for us to step back and find those things in American culture that define our spirit. The resilience of the blues, the optimism of the Sousa march, the conversation and sophistication of the swing dance. The all holds barred creativity of Jackson Pollock, the down home sophistication of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Romare Bearden.