

BURNS' JAZZ DOESN'T SWING

by William Berlind*

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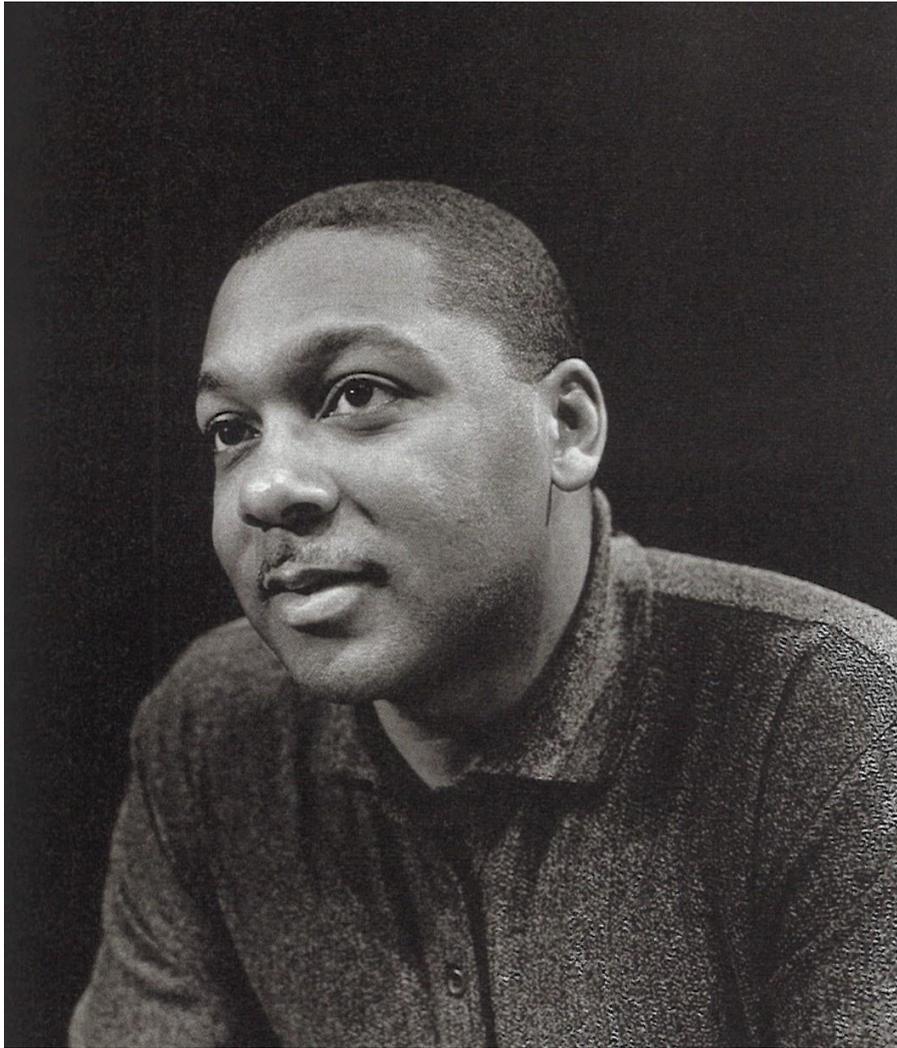
William Berlind (right) with his father, the wealthy theatre producer Roger Berlind... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

As almost everyone in New York knows by now, *Jazz*, a 10-part, 19-hour documentary that began airing on PBS station WNET-TV on Jan 8, is the latest opus by nonfiction filmmaker Ken Burns. As almost everyone here also knows, titles can be deceiving. And though Mr Burns may have been the man behind the camera of this ambitious yet ultimately frustrating series, it's clear from the tight-assed perspective of *Jazz* that trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the "senior creative consultant" on the project, is the real intellectual force behind the film. Mr Burns, to use the lingo, was just a sideman.

Mr Marsalis, who is also the creative director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, has long made it clear where his affections lie. It's "yes" to Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and "no" to post-60's jazz—the arranger Gil Evans, for instance, or anything electronic—and that is the narrow map that *Jazz* follows.

Mr Marsalis has his reasons for promoting such a world view. His traditional programs seek to establish a jazz canon, to make jazz a classical music. Not surprisingly, the trumpeter's approach has created static among musicians who see jazz as a living, jiving art form that was never meant to be codified into academic torpor—at least not yet.

*William Berlind writes on a variety of subjects for *The Observer*.



Wynton Marsalis: it's "yes" to Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and "no" to post-60's jazz... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MUSIC

Certainly Mr Marsalis has brought a lot of attention—and, one could argue, respect—to the art form. Even before the Lincoln Center gig, he was modern jazz's most recognizable figure, thanks, in no small part, to *The New York Times'* inexhaustible coverage of him. Come to think of it, Mr Burns is no piker in that department.

But at what expense? Jazz, throughout its history, has interacted with, responded to and challenged other music in the culture, something it is still doing today—as evidenced by its appropriation by rap artists.

Jazz lives, but you wouldn't know it from this film. The conservative ethos of Mr Marsalis and his crew infuses the entire project, which, as you might expect in this age of synergy, is not just a documentary film but a tie-in tour de force that includes a 5-CD boxed set of jazz's greatest hits, 22 individual compilation CD's from artists featured in the series (and some not), a promotional agreement with Starbucks (the Wynton Marsalis of coffee), a companion book put out by Knopf and an NBA halftime show.

But *Jazz*, the documentary, is just plain saturated with Mr Marsalis' perspective. Mr Burns uses interviews with musicians, critics, actors and writers, as well as photographs and live footage, to tell the story of jazz from the music's beginnings in turn-of-the-century New Orleans to the present day. The host of talking heads includes Mr Marsalis' adviser at Lincoln Center and his champion in the press, the two-fisted critic Stanley Crouch, as well as Mr Marsalis' brother Branford, a former late-night-TV-show bandleader. And, of course, there is much, much footage of Mr Marsalis acting as the armchair royalty, as Shelby Foote did for Mr Burns' *Civil War* and Bob Costas for *Baseball*.



The host of talking heads includes ... the two-fisted critic Stanley Crouch (above), as well as Mr Marsalis' brother Branford (below) a former late-night-TV-show bandleader... MARSALIS PHOTO COURTESY ABC JAZZ



In the very straight script by Geoffrey C Ward, Armstrong and Ellington emerge as the lead characters. Ellington is hailed as the greatest American composer ever, the man who made jazz into an art, who gave it its symphonic dimension. Armstrong is depicted as the great soloist, and a humanist who gave jazz its soul, instructing the rest of the jazz world how to improvise by abstracting the essential core of a song's melody.



Writer Geoffrey C Ward (left) pictured here with Ken Burns: a very straight script in which Louis Armstrong is depicted as the great soloist, and a humanist who gave jazz its soul... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

If you don't believe the narrator on these tent-pole points, the slew of pundits will remind you again and again over the whole 19 hours. Even as the film diverges to tell the story of swing music or of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and the development of bebop, it always tells those stories in opposition to the super-text of the Armstrong and Ellington narrative. In fact, Armstrong's and Ellington's are the only stories that span the length of the series. Even after Armstrong was out of his prime, *Jazz* still cuts back in Burns-time to update us on his health or to tell us about his new house in Queens—even as the rest of the jazz world is undergoing major upheaval.

Naturally, there are omissions in a project that attempts to mine a subject as large and unwieldy as jazz. But some of the omissions suggest a tunnel vision that violates the very principles of inclusiveness and democracy that Mr Marsalis claims to champion. Where's the pianist Bill Evans, whose daring and subtle approach to harmony influenced everyone who followed him? Where's Ella Fitzgerald? And where's a mention—one mention!—of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters whose tunes fueled jazz?



Where's the pianist Bill Evans (above), whose daring and subtle approach to harmony influenced everyone who followed him? Where's Ella Fitzgerald (below)?
PHOTOS COURTESY PINTEREST



The film does have its strong points. The portrait of Armstrong should spark a re-evaluation of his legacy, especially his later years when he was considered an Uncle Tom by young African-Americans. According to *Jazz*, Armstrong was alone among jazz musicians in publicly protesting racial savagery in the South.

There are some nice stories, too, about the other jazzers covered by Mr Burns' film; some sex, drugs and madcap boys-on-the-bus stories. Dancers Frankie Manning and Norma Miller vividly recall the early days of swing in their recollections of the Savoy Ballroom. The segments on Benny Goodman and Charlie Parker are particularly evocative, but somehow you get the impression that they should be even better. But Mr Burns does succeed at re-creating the excitement surrounding Duke Ellington's famous performance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival—the highlight of which was his marathon rendition of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*—simply by employing

some jazzy camera tricks and the still photographs that are the only known visual record of the event.



The segments on Benny Goodman (above) and Charlie Parker (below) are particularly evocative... PHOTOS COURTESY PINTEREST



Generally, though, there's much too much rhapsodizing in *Jazz*. Mr Marsalis and critic Gary Giddins talk as if the audience is in constant need of assurance that what they're watching is worth the effort. The words "feeling" and "soul" and "great" and "amazing" and the old saw about jazz resembling democracy are hauled out with such regularity that you might suspect you're watching a documentary film about baseball.

The best moments are when you hear from the musicians themselves—Artie Shaw, the brilliant and tortured clarinetist who left a soaring career because he couldn't handle success; Lester Bowie, the avant-garde trumpet player; and violinist Matt Glaser, even though he tries to compare jazz to quantum mechanics.



Artie Shaw (above) the brilliant and tortured clarinetist, who left a soaring career because he couldn't handle success... Lester Bowie (below) the avant-garde trumpet player... SHAW PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MUSIC; BOWIE PHOTO CREDIT PETER SMETANA



Until the final segments, *Jazz* maintains a flat, dull tone. But as the 1960's come around and the history of the music itself loses an obvious linear thread, the hand of Mr Marsalis becomes more evident. Regarding the avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor, the film gets downright nasty—and it is Mr Marsalis' brother, Branford, who gets to wield the axe. He calls Mr Taylor's music "self-indulgent bullshit." Then critic Gene Lees opines, "He has every right to make the music he wants, and I have every right to listen to something else."



Critic Gene Lees (above) on Cecil Taylor (below): he has every right to make the music he wants, and I have every right to listen to something else... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN



Actually, this is just the sort of candor that's missing from the film. *Jazz* is so concerned with making sure the audience knows that it's watching great art that this sort of pointed commentary is replaced by vacant cheerleading and vague and bad metaphors about jazz music. In the final episode, the writer Gerald Early accuses the later Miles Davis, who switched from acoustic jazz to electronic funk music in the early 1970's, of having "too much going on, too many people not listening to each other." Mr Early then concludes that Davis' electronic experiments were "like playing tennis without a net." And if there's any doubt where *Jazz*'s editorial bent lies, "Tennis without a Net" is the title of the segment.



Gerald Early: Miles Davis' electronic experiments were "like playing tennis without a net"...

There are, of course, plenty of people who would disagree with Mr Early's point.

Miles Davis' music became less formalized, chaotic even, but it possesses many moments of ecstasy—there are electronic musicians who find his later work a source of inspiration. But this film has no intention of opening up such a debate. Rather, it wants to establish a hierarchy of jazz as Mr Marsalis and his cronies see it. Indeed, although Mr Burns probably did not have this in mind when he embarked upon this project, *Jazz* ends up being a good primer for the kind of music that Mr Marsalis will no doubt be giving us at Lincoln Center over the next few years.

Mr Marsalis has said that Mr Burns acted with complete independence in the creation of *Jazz*, but I don't buy it. Mr Marsalis' influence on this documentary is so evident that I suspect Mr Burns may have gotten lost in his subject. In allowing Mr Marsalis to guide him, Mr Burns has ultimately done us a disservice. He has managed to make a vital, evolving music seem dead and static. *Jazz* doesn't swing.