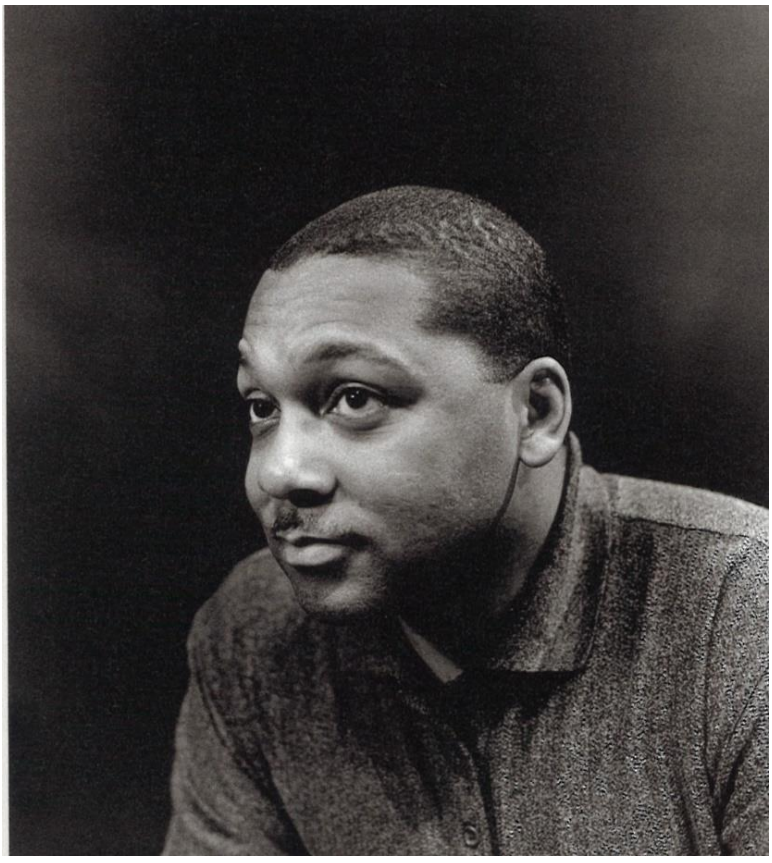
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION WITH A GROOVE

Ken Burns* interviews Wynton Marsalis

The following is an excerpt from the book "Jazz: A History of America's Music", by Geoffrey C Ward and Ken Burns, 2000.

Wynton Marsalis is the best-known jazz musician in America. Trumpet player, composer, educator, and creative director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, he was born October 18, 1961, in New Orleans. His father, Ellis, is a jazz pianist and teacher. His mother, Dolores Ferdinand Ellis, is a home economics major and the mother of six sons, four of whom are musicians. Marsalis acted as Senior Creative advisor for the Jazz film project, and Ken Burns spoke with him on camera several times over the course of the five years it took to complete it. The following interview was culled from those conversations.



Wynton Marsalis: the best-known jazz musician in America... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

** Ken Burns is an American filmmaker, known for his style of using archival footage and photographs in documentary films. He is best-known in the jazz community for his 10-part, 19-hour documentary film "Jazz".*

What is jazz?

Jazz music is freedom of expression with a groove. Jazz music is down-home and it's sophisticated. The feeling of jazz is like the feeling you get going into your favorite grandmother's house. You know there's all kind of things in there that you might not recognize, but it's accumulated wisdom. The whole feeling of the house is warm. And a familiar place. You've been there before, and then when you sit down to that table to eat—well, everything is laid out for you. Jazz objectifies America. It's an art form that can give us a painless way of understanding ourselves. That's really the best thing about art, really. You can learn about yourself and you can have a good time doing it. That's what jazz music does for you.

Ken Burns: known for his style of using archival footage and photographs in documentary films… PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

What is the special genius of jazz?

The real power and innovation of jazz is that a group of people can come together and create art—improvised art—and can negotiate their agendas with each other. And that negotiation is the art. Like, you'll hear all the time that Bach improvised, and he did improvise. But he wasn't going to go to the second viola and say, "Okay, let's play 'Ein' feste Burg.' " They were not going to do that. Whereas in jazz, I could go to Milwaukee tomorrow and walk into a bar at 2:30 in the morning. There'll be three musicians playing there and I'll say, "What you want to play man? Let's play some blues." Well, all four of us are going to start playing and everybody will just start comping and playing and listening. You never know what they're going to do. So, that's our art. The four of us can now have a dialogue. We can have a conversation. We can speak to each other in the language of music. And that is art. That is our art.

That spirit of improvisation seems utterly American as well.

The whole conception of improvisation is a part of all of American life. And if you were a slave, you had to learn how to improvise. You came on the land, you couldn't speak the language. You had all kind of foods you weren't used to eating. You had

another whole system to deal with. If you couldn't improvise, you were going to be in a world of trouble. You were not going to be able to survive.

You have said that jazz is the distillation of the American spirit, and the clearest way you know of discovering who we are. What do you mean?

In American life you have all these different agendas. You have conflict all the time and we're attempting to achieve harmony through conflict. It seems strange to say that, but it's like an argument that you have with the intent to work something out, not an argument that you have with the intent to argue. And that's what jazz music is. You have eight musicians and they're all standing on the bandstand and each one has his own personality and his own agenda. There's written music but then you leave that score and are left to make intelligent decisions. Decisions that have soul. Decisions that allow your personality to breathe and to speak, but decisions that allow for other people's personalities to breathe, too. Invariably they're going to play something that you would not play. So, you have to learn when to say a little something, when to get out of the way. But you're always negotiating: Who are you going to go with? You going to go with the piano? Do you know where the drums are? And so you have that question of the integrity, the intent, the will to play together. That's what jazz music is. So you have yourself, your individual expression—and then you have to figure out how to fit in with everybody else. And that's exactly like democracy. Jazz music explains to you what it means to be American. Which is that it's a process. And democracy is a process. It's not always going to go your way. Sometimes you have to play that riff and listen to what somebody else is playing. Jazz believes in freedom of expression. But it also believes in people communicating with each other. A lot of times things might not work out. But there's always another time: "So, okay, we messed that up. Let's play another tune." It's like Charlie Parker told a musician once, "Well, what do you want to play? 'Cause we can play a lot of tunes. No sense in playing something that's going to leave you out."

Charlie Parker (above, at the Royal Roost, 1949) told a musician once, "What do you want to play? … No sense in playing something that's going to leave you out"…
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Does it strike you as ironic that America's greatest music should have been created by America's most maligned minority?

Well, it's not ironic if you know mythology. God gives the message, not man. And the message comes from where you least expect it. That's how it always is in myth. The person who you keep out and you push down and you kick—Cinderella—that's the one with the moral authority, with the gift. That's as old as night and day, as old as dust. Jazz music was created by people who wanted to be American people. It comes from the consciousness of those who are outside of something but in the middle of it.

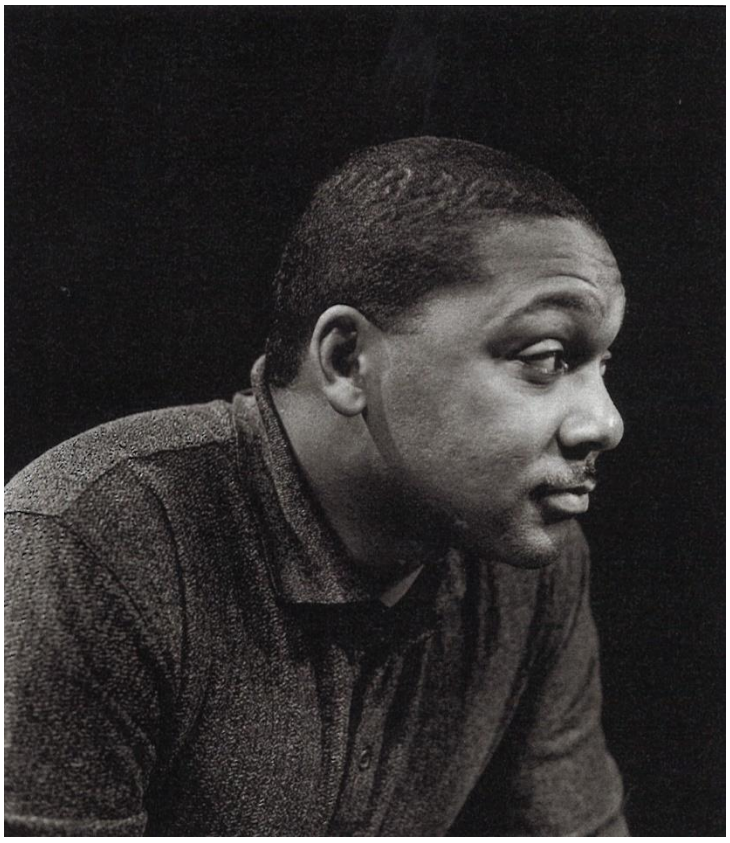
Jazz music was created by people who wanted to be American people... People like Buddy Bolden (above), and Louis Armstrong (below)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

People like Buddy Bolden, like Louis Armstrong, these are people who were American in the realest sense. They'd been denied access to a recognition as Americans but that doesn't alter the fact that they were American. They had access to all of the information that other Americans had access to. And they came together in New Orleans and synthesized many different ways of living and approaches to experience and that became jazz music. And they were forced to negotiate their

agendas. They didn't do it because they wanted to do it; they were forced to do it through segregation. First you have the Creoles, who are segregated from the darker-skinned Negroes, so they don't like each other at all. Then you have the white people. So you have that basic three-caste system, none of whom like the other one or trust the other one. But they all know each other because they see each other every day. They live around each other, they eat the same food, they speak essentially the same language. They listen to the same music. They have a common experience. Then, the Creole people are forced at a certain point to integrate with the dark-skinned people. Well, they didn't want to do that but they had to compete with them for jobs. Well, now you start to get jazz. Because then it's, "Okay, now how am I going to deal with what they're doing?"

What's the role of the blues in that potent mix?

The blues, they feel good. The blues is many things—a philosophy and a form, a musical form of bars and measures, a whole body of melodies and themes. It's a harmonic system. It's a system of call and response. It's a bunch of moans and groans and shouts and cries. Dissonance and consonance. Blues is many things. And it can interface with music all over the world. Blues is like the folk themes and little nuggets and kernels that are developed through the art of jazz into jazz music. You have to have that blues. Blues is like the roux in a gumbo. Now you might have a soup, and it might be killin', but if you don't have that roux, you cannot have no gumbo. People ask me if jazz always has the blues in it. I say, if it sounds good it does.



Wynton Marsalis: blues is many things, and it can interface with music all over the world... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The history of jazz is filled with extraordinary personalities, towering geniuses. What is it that puts Louis Armstrong in a category all his own?

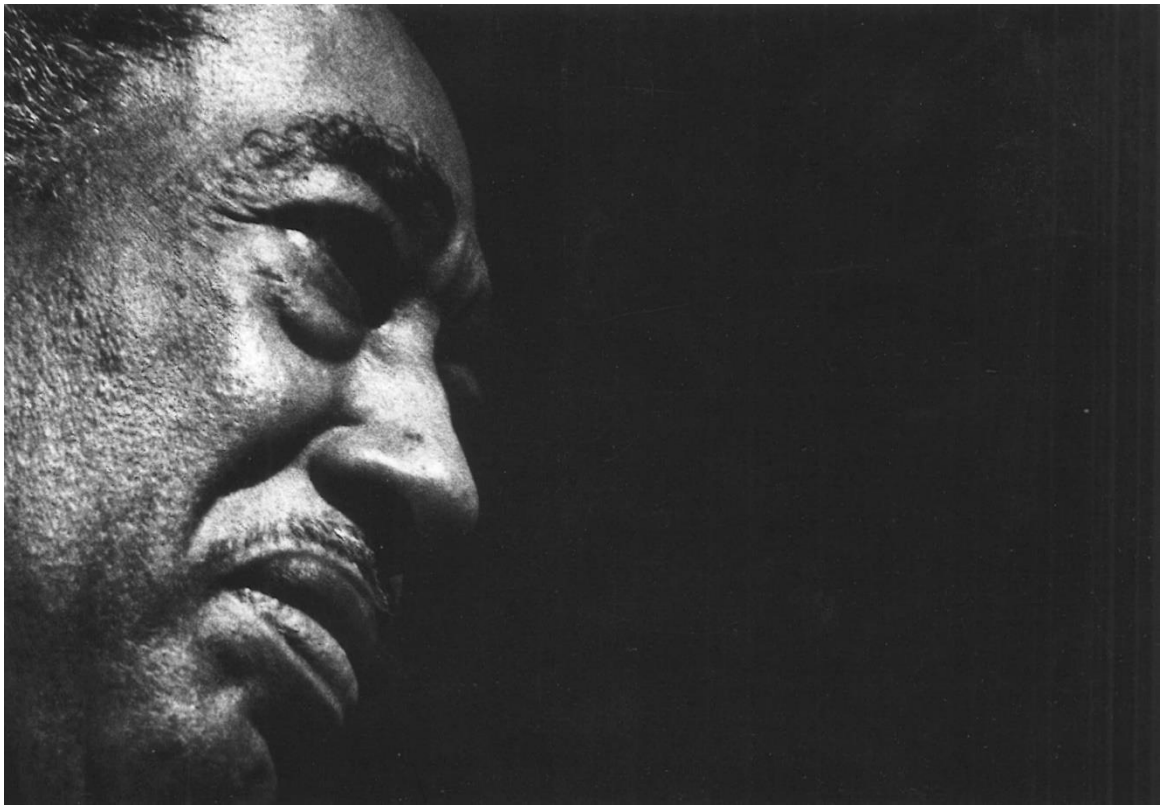
When you talk about Louis Armstrong, well, you're talking about the deepest human feeling, and the highest level of musical sophistication in the same man. That's a rare occurrence in the history of music. He was chosen to bring the feeling and the message and the identity of jazz to everybody. He brought it to all the musicians. He brought it all over the world. He's the embodiment of jazz music. He's deeply down-home and soulful with tremendous compassion, but he has plenty of fire and is built like a bull and would knock you out if he had to. And he knows about the low life. He knows about poverty. He knows about prostitution. He's also regal at the same time. He has a spiritual presence. He's always trying to make situations better. That's how his playing is. He could play the trumpet better than anybody. He could play higher with more dexterity than anyone else. And the thing that made him so great as a musician is that he heard what everybody was playing. And not only did he hear what they were playing, he heard what they were *trying* to play. And all of that he played.

Louis Armstrong (above) invented a new style of playing. He created the coherent solo, fused the sound of the blues with the American popular song, extended the range of the trumpet…PHOTO CREDIT DENIS LE NEUF

Louis Armstrong invented a new style of playing. He created the coherent solo, fused the sound of the blues with the American popular song, extended the range of the trumpet. Louis Armstrong created the melodic and rhythmic vocabulary that all the big bands wrote music out of. And all the musicians imitated him. It's hard for us really to think today of just how popular he was. Everybody on every instrument tried to play like him—clarinet, saxophone, bass, drums. Duke Ellington once said he wanted Louis Armstrong on every instrument.

Then, he was always himself. The first time he touched the trumpet he sounded great, I'm sure of that. The spirit was in him, and the understanding that comes from the Creator of humanity. His sound had a *light* in it. That's the only way I can describe it. You can't practice to get that. It's a spiritual presence, and when that light is in someone's sound—when you hear it, it draws, it attracts you.

The other person who seems to dominate the story of jazz, at least as we've told it, is Duke Ellington.



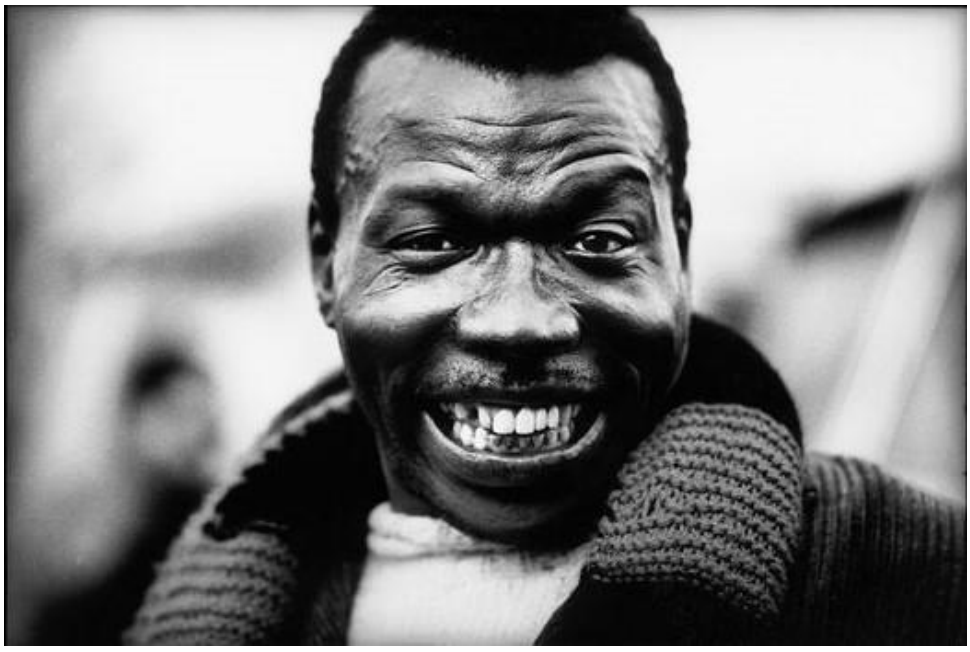
Duke Ellington: he's more of a late-night person. He's the person who understands the sensuous... PHOTO CREDIT LEE TANNER

The most important things to know about Duke Ellington are that he loved people, he loved life, and he loved music. He understood that anything is possible. He understood what it took to make something invisible visible, knew how to take what could be and make it what is. And he could do that in so many different ways. He showed the world how to orchestrate the sound of the blues for a large ensemble. The systems of harmonization and voicings that he alone invented only he knows. He could listen to a style and get to the very center of it, and take the meaning and the

juice out of that style and put it into his own. People say that he wrote for his musicians and that that was the secret to his success. But I don't think that. I think that was the secret to their success, that they had him to write for them. You don't get the same type of spiritual high-mindedness in his sound that you have in Louis Armstrong's. Duke Ellington, he's more of a late-night person. He's the person who understands the sensuous. That's in his music and it's in his sound. When he hits one or two notes on the piano, you know he's going to take you into a late-night room where something of interest is about to take place. He's like Bacchus or Dionysus. He loves things carnal. That's his domain. And he's there to let you know what you need to be doing and how you need to be doing it and what tempo you need to be doing it in. So he's indispensable.

The story of jazz and the story of race in America seem inextricably bound together.

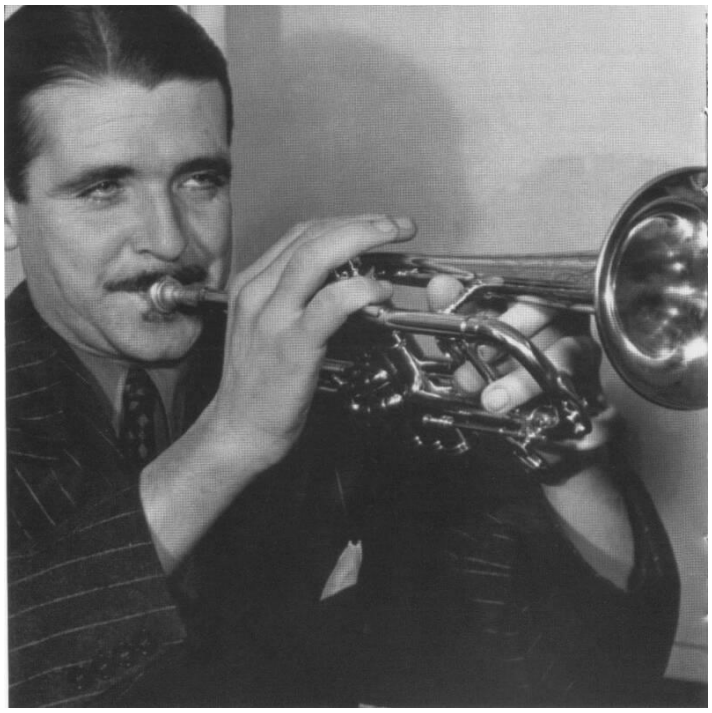
Well, race is a . . . For this country it's like the thing in mythology that you have to do for the kingdom to be well. And it's always something you don't want to do. And it's always about confronting yourself, always tailor-made for you to fail in dealing with it. And the question of your heroism and of your courage in dealing with this trial is the measure of your success. Can you confront it with honesty? And do you have the energy to sustain an attack on it? And since jazz music is at the center of the American mythology, it necessarily deals with race because race is our black eye, to make a little pun. It's something that the more we run from it, the more we run into it. And it's an age-old story, if it's not race, it's something else. But in this particular instance, in this nation, it is race. Now, jazz music is not race music. Everybody plays jazz music. Everybody has always played it. But when people teach the history of jazz, they always talk about white bands and black bands. Musicians don't learn that way. See, this is the big lie in the way that it's taught. Benny Goodman was going to learn the clarinet from whoever he could. Elvin Jones studied with a guy who played in the



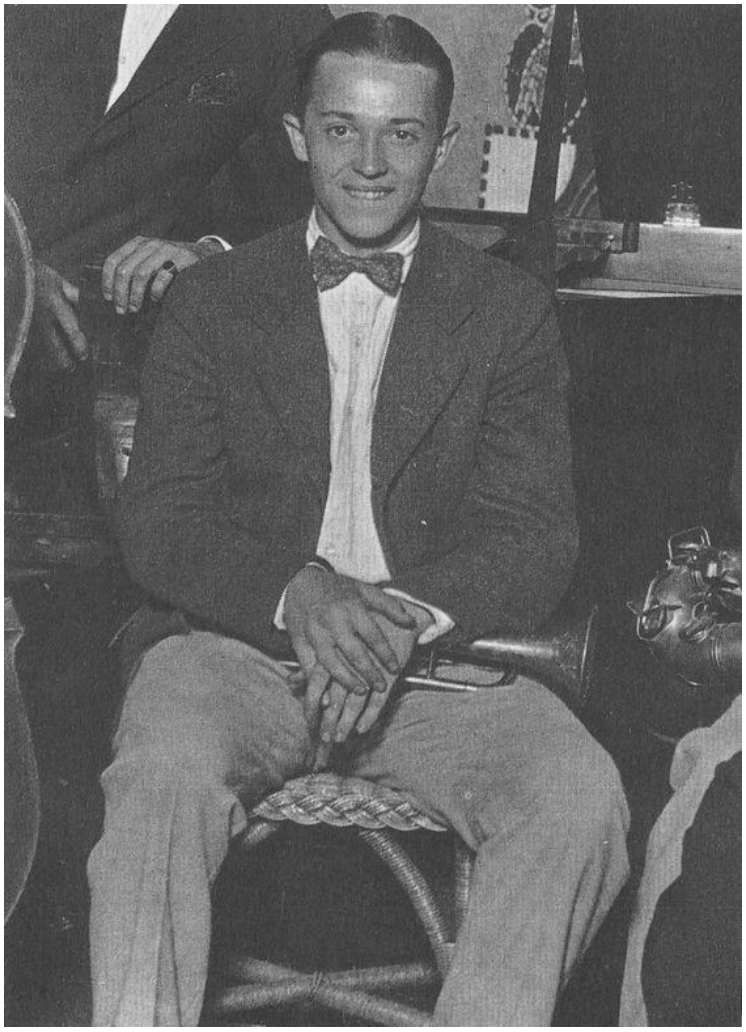
Drummer Elvin Jones studied with a guy who played in the Detroit Symphony...
PHOTO CREDIT ROBERTO POLILLO

Detroit Symphony. Miles Davis went to Juilliard and studied with William Vachiano. Now, he didn't learn to play jazz from William Vachiano, but he's a trumpet player, so he's going to learn from whoever is there. Louis Armstrong's style is influenced by the style of cornet virtuosos like Bohumir Kryl and Herbert L Clarke. Bunny Berigan is influenced by Louis Armstrong. Bix Beiderbecke is influenced by Louis Armstrong. Lester Young is influenced by Frankie Trumbauer. That's how music is. You hear something you like, and you want to play like that.

Miles Davis: he went to Juilliard and studied with William Vachiano... *PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*



Bunny Berigan (above) is influenced by Louis Armstrong... *PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*



Bix Beiderbecke in 1924: he is influenced by Louis Armstrong… PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Lester Young: he is influenced by Frankie Trumbauer… PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Frankie Trumbauer: he influenced Lester Young... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

What was going on in those early years in Chicago, when young white kids including Bix Beiderbecke began traveling to the South Side to get in on the amazing new music being played by Armstrong and King Oliver?

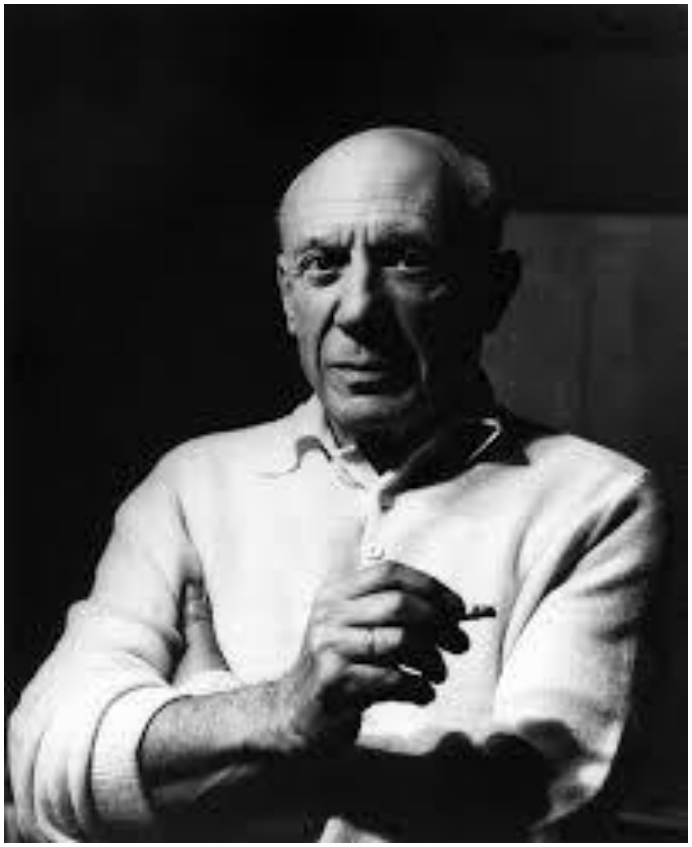
Well, I think that with Bix Beiderbecke you have a prime example of a musician who's caught in the crossroads between the racial question and the question of jazz. Because you know, whenever you hear the question of race in jazz, you always hear it from one perspective. You always hear the same story of the white musicians coming in, playing and getting more credit from the media than the black musicians. And in general that happened. There's no doubt about it. It happens all the time. But you never hear the story from the perspective of the white musician. When these white kids came down to hear King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, we have to realize that this is some of the most abstract and sophisticated music that anybody has ever heard, short of Bach. Now, a musician loves music and loves that instrument. And when he hears someone who's great on that instrument there's a mixture of great envy, respect, and love. You're going out every night, you're hearing the greatest musician in the world play—Louis Armstrong—and all you want to do is be able to play like him. But you've been told, "Don't listen to them. These are niggers and they ain't playing nothing, and this is some coon music and it's all a joke." But you realize it's the most serious thing you've ever encountered in your life. And when you realize that, you realize that you, too, are a part of it. And that's got to be exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Because to accept jazz music means that at a certain time you have to accept something about the humanity of the United States Negro.

This is something that goes back to Uncle Remus. But the difference is that old Uncle Remus was this helpless old "uncle" sitting down to tell the little white kids the ways of the world. Well, now this has been transformed because the men that these kids are looking at on the stage are well-dressed, sophisticated men, and Louis Armstrong is close to their age. There's the element of competition in there, as well as awe, as well as envy, as well as respect, as well as love, reverence, a lot of different feelings, all at once. Shame, too. Because these white kids have been taught these people are inferior their entire lives. Every magazine article, every newspaper story, the whole mythology of America is saying, "A nigger ain't shit." That's what you have been taught. Now, you're standing up and you're looking at these men playing and you're saying to yourself, "Boy, I sure wish I could play like these guys." How does that make you feel? And when they go out and start learning how to play the music, what is society's response to them? Either they can make it and be known as the white this or the white that—which is not the thing that made them want to play the music in the beginning. Or else, they can be scorned by their parents, as playing dirty black music that's going to just make you be a drunk and in the gutter and have all kinds of good sex that you ought not be having. Or, they're going to grapple with the art form and learn how to play it and become as good as they can, but even if they become as great as they can possibly be, as Bix Beiderbecke did, they're still going to fall far short of Louis Armstrong. So, how do they, then, as men with the natural competitive drive that a man has, plus being white and therefore having been taught that they should be number one, how are they going to come to grips with this as they grow into manhood? That was the great question that confronted them throughout their lives.

Uncle Remus (left), played by James Baskett: this helpless old "uncle" sitting down to tell the little white kids the ways of the world... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

You've argued that to play jazz you need to understand its history.

History is the playing field. That's true in all the arts. Shakespeare's dealing with themes that existed long before Shakespeare. Picasso used to say he could bring to life forms of art that had been dead for years—Sumerian art, Etruscan art. He could take these forms and bring them back to life and give them another flavor or feeling. That's the question of art; that's the fun of it. Do you want to play with the whole history of humanity? Or do you just want to play with the last ten years?



Picasso (above) used to say he could bring to life forms of art that had been dead for years... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Jazz was most popular during the 1930s and early '40s, when it was played for dancers.

Jazz is dance music. The closer you get to the body response, the more the music is going to swing and the better it's going to feel. The further you get away from the body response, the less good it feels. When Duke Ellington would play a dance and play one of his slow pieces he could see the romantic effect that his music had, and on the up-tempo songs, he could see a whole floor of people dancing and juking to his music. But if you're playing in a concert hall sometimes people seem to be afraid even to tap their feet or move their heads. You say to yourself, "What's happening?" You don't know if you're swinging or not.

But there's the argument that jazz only matured when, after the advent of bebop, it became a more "intellectual" art.

I don't think that it ever was a question of it becoming more intellectual, because the wisest jazz musician in terms of just musical intelligence was Duke Ellington, and he never was attracted to that sound. So I don't think it became a thing where some tremendous amount of intellect was put into it to create a style that nobody could understand. That's what European music suffered from. Some of that music went into a direction that may have been mathematically sound but the audience just said no. Basically, you know, music deals with a man and a woman and men and women and their relationship to God. Now once you get out of that ballpark, you might come up with something hip and interesting for a little while. You might. You can pick your horn up and just play what you want to play with a group of musicians and it can be creative. They can play what they want. You can take a little theme and just play for an hour on it and you can play as loud as you want, you can express as much anger as you want, as much joy. It can be expressive and meaningful and you can have a great time doing it. But I don't think too many people are going to want to hear that for too long. So, to me, that's the most elitist form of music. That's the ultimate elitist statement, which is, "This is what *I* want to do." And also you're not addressing form. It's like basketball, once the net is gone, once you don't have to stay in bounds, you're just out in the street dribbling. Which can be fun, but it ain't basketball.

Marsalis: It's like basketball, once the net is gone, once you don't have to stay in bounds, you're just out in the street dribbling. Which can be fun, but it ain't basketball... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

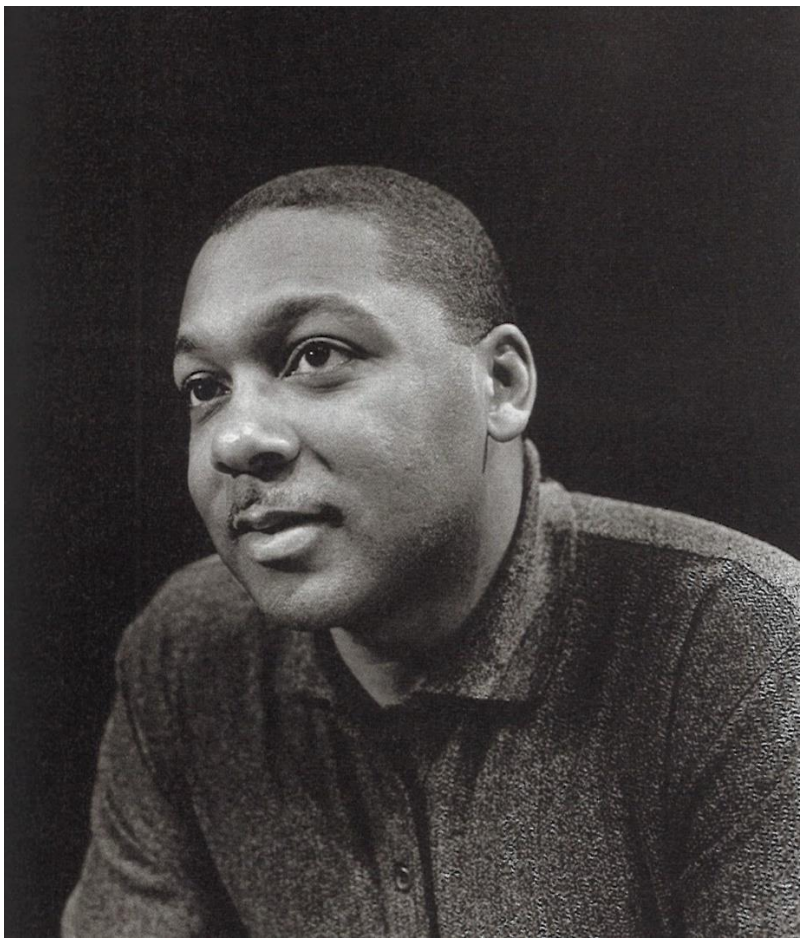
You've said that jazz is for grown-ups, that it grows out of an adult sensibility.

Well, you never see a prodigy like Mozart, eight or nine years old, who is great in jazz music. Not that there are lots of Mozarts in classical music, but you do have people who come up who are precocious and who are on a professional level at a young age. You don't really get that in jazz. Jazz music is about how much you know about the human condition. What do you understand about old Uncle Ned, this dad that left his family? Or what do you understand about what your mother has to deal with? Or what do you understand about what the woman that you met on the bus told you? That's what comes out of your horn. What comes out of your horn is what you understand about life, the texture of it, the absurdity of it, and the beauty of it. And children don't think about that. They're too self-absorbed. We live in an age where there's a tremendous investment in the generation gap. Our music doesn't have that. When you're young, you try and learn how to play like people who can play. Nobody 13 or 14 is getting around Clark Terry and all these great musicians and telling them what the deal is. Whereas, if you go out and you talk to high school students, they'll ask, "What about what the kids are thinking?" As if, as an adult, your job is to relate to them, to try and figure out what they're thinking about, as if that's going to take you to another level. When you talk about the message brought by great jazz musicians you definitely are talking about something that's spiritual. How many people did Louis Armstrong's music help to survive in the world? Jazz music is existence music. It doesn't take you out of the world. It puts you in the world and it says, "This is." It deals with the present and it says, "Yes, all of that is what happens." Somebody may be lying out drunk in the street. It might be the cat you've just heard playing. It might be Charlie Parker. But that fact doesn't alter the power of what he's saying, "Yes, I did that and I also do this." The whole range of humanity is in this music.

Nobody 13 or 14 is getting around Clark Terry (pictured above) and all these great musicians and telling them what the deal is...

What does jazz tell us about our country right now?

Right now it's telling us that we need to learn how to listen. We don't listen, you know. It's like when I hear these young musicians play, the thing they all have in common is they don't listen to each other. First, they play too loud. When you're playing that loud, you just can't play with anybody else. And then it's telling us we need to listen and make an honest attempt to understand what somebody else is playing. If you're playing the trumpet and you don't understand what the bass is playing, you might be lost. If you don't know the chords the piano is playing, it's very hard to play with the piano. So part of your responsibility is to learn. You have to go and get with the drummer and say, "What is this rhythm?" "It's a five rhythm." "Okay, can you show me how to play that? How should I react to that?" You can't say, "Well, I'm African-American and you're Asian-American and you're Caucasian and you're Irish-American and I want ten percent of this and you can have the other ninety percent," because the music doesn't work that way. Everybody has to make the music. I can't say, "Well, I'm a trumpet player, I don't really have to know what the piano is playing. All I want is my space to solo." "Oh, I'm the drummer so I play louder than all of you all so do the best you can." You can't say, "Well, I'm the composer and I know more than all of you about music so play my music the way I want you to play it." You can't have that relationship to play jazz music.



Marsalis: when I hear these young musicians play, the thing they all have in common is they don't listen to each other... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

If you compose music, you have to write music the musicians can play. Part of your success is to write something that they want to improvise on. If you are the trumpet player, you have to figure out how to play in balance with the saxophone. If you're the drummer, you have to figure out how to groove and swing and make everything feel right for everybody, how to push them along when they need help, how to back away when they don't need it, how to give 'em a little something. But you also have to listen to that bass and have the swing locked up. If you're the bass player, you've got to just do that workmanlike job and chip your two cents in whenever you can and come up with interesting ostinatos and grooves and take the music in different directions. So everybody has their little thing they have to do, but all the roles are interchangeable. It's a matter of the integrity and the intelligence of the group.

Marsalis (right) pictured with pianist John Lewis at Umbria Jazz, Perugia, Italy, 2001: jazz is just a little something to make you special and make you sweet…
PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE

What would life be like without jazz?

You definitely can live without jazz. The only thing you need to live is water and some food. Art in general is nonessential to living. But now, the style that you're gonna be living in? Well, I don't know about that. You don't need a bed to sleep. You don't have to cook food to eat it. You don't have to have clothes of a certain style. You don't have to speak a certain way. Most of the things you are surrounded by you don't need. But when you have those things around you, it makes you feel good about living in the world. And it gives you something to look forward to, and it also gives you a way to connect with everything that has happened on earth. It's like real poor people in the country, on a Sunday, would get dressed up and they wouldn't have any money but just that little hat with the flower on it. You know, just what that flower represents. A certain thing. Just a little something to make you special and make you sweet. That's jazz music. That's what the jazz musician wants to give to the people.