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Wynton Marsalis: Jazz Phenomenon to Trumpet About



*In this article Kevin Jones explains why Wynton Marsalis (pictured above), who will tour here soon, is the pre-eminent jazz musician of his generation. It was published in *The Australian* on February 5, 1994, when the arts editor was Rosemary Neill.*

KEVIN JONES

He's been lionised and vilified, praised and condemned but, at 32, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis is the most important figure in jazz today. A jazz messiah who has saved the music's soul or a neo-conservative who has kept the music frozen in time? It's a debate which has raged for a decade and will probably continue into the next century. And while it is hard to pinpoint one musician responsible for the healthy state of jazz after the parlous years of the late 1960s and 70s, there is no doubt Marsalis has been the catalyst for its renewed popularity, especially among a new generation of young musicians and listeners.

The man is a phenomenon. A virtuoso, he was the trumpeter of the 80s and his dominance on the instrument shows no sign of weakening. There is so much to admire about his playing — the crystal clear tone, flowing lyricism, wonderful technique, impeccable taste, and love and respect for the jazz tradition. And it's this exploration of the music's traditional values that has brought about a change in his playing.

Gone are the post-bop trends of the 80s when he built his own language for trumpet from the roots of the great Clifford Brown after graduating with honours from one of the finest finishing schools in jazz — the late 70s to early 80s version of drummer Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Today his playing draws more on traditional styles. His tone can be reflective or coated with muddied growls and smears as he explores his compositions based on the blues, gospel or the idioms of New Orleans, the city of his birth.



Wynton Marsalis (in white suit), performing with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers...

He ended his set at last year's Brecon Jazz Festival in Wales by dueting with pianist Eric Reed on *Dear Old Southland*, a jazz classic from Louis Armstrong's magnificently fertile 1930 period. It was a far cry from his early years as a leader when, because his group was based on the great Miles Davis quintet of the mid-60s, comparisons by critics were often unfavourable. These days, as he shows he can write compositions of substance and originality, some critics are even comparing him to

Duke Ellington. High praise indeed! But it's important to remember that with Blakey not only did Marsalis learn to perform solo with fire and drive, he also learned about his Afro-American heritage. Which is why when discussing music he talks about the "main ones" — Armstrong, Ellington, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk.

His position as artistic director of Jazz at the Lincoln Centre in New York adds strength to his crusade to reassert the music's traditional values. The 1993-94 season includes theme series on classical jazz — such as the music of Monk, Miles, John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley — and New Orleans legacies (pianist-composer Jelly Roll Morton and clarinetist Johnny Dodds). The current 18-piece Lincoln Centre Jazz Orchestra, on its 30-city tour of the United States, is playing the music of Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Monk and numbers from the early Count Basie book of 1937-38. It's a program that echoes the sentiments of reed player Bob Wilber: "I feel that the best thing we can do now to help jazz survive is to celebrate the best things of the past."

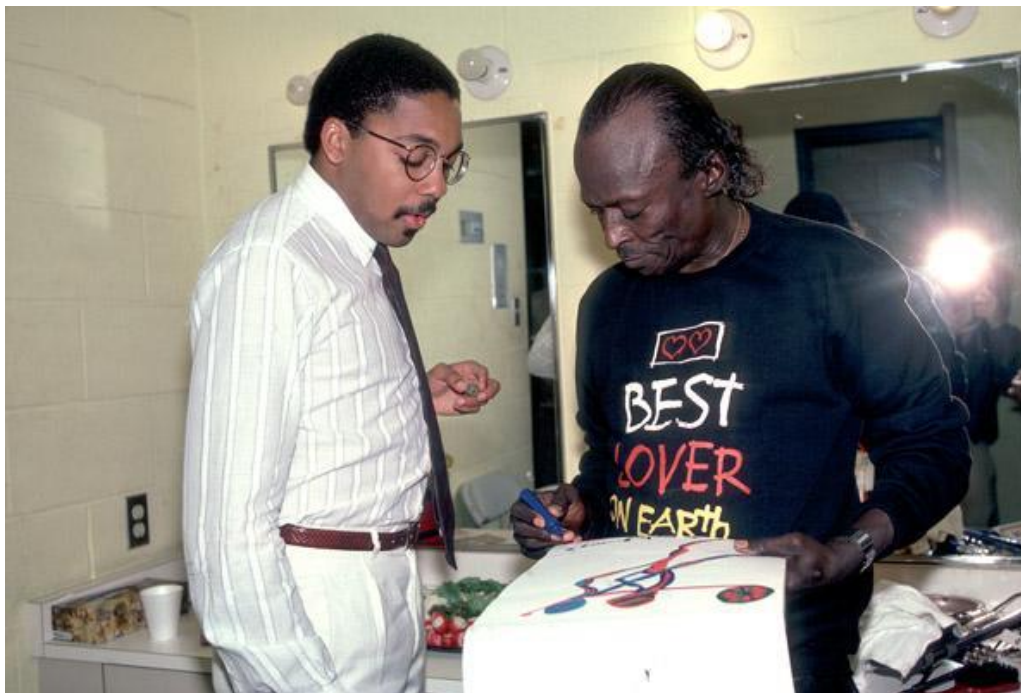


Bob Wilber (on the left) is pictured here with Benny Carter (centre) and Joe Newman (on the right): "I feel that the best thing we can do now to help jazz survive is to celebrate the best things of the past," says Wilber... PHOTO COURTESY JAMES COLEMAN

The music's health may be in good hands now but during the 70s many considered it terminally ill as age cut through the ranks of its greatest players, many of them sadly

neglected as major record labels reaped the financial rewards of pop music and its culture. Jazz's young listening base had been eroded by the manic popularity of rock 'n' roll in the late 50s. The emergence of The Beatles in 1963 and alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman riding the angry beast of free jazz a few years later split the music asunder. For all the hysterical praise of Coleman — much of it by critics who had missed out on Parker — his early music sounds quite palatable today compared to the excesses and zeal of the revolutionaries who followed.

Who could forget the rampaging sounds of the search-and-destroy saxophonists, Albert Ayler, Pharaoh Saunders and Archie Shepp? The '70s scene was dominated by pop and its bastard offspring, fusion — jazz with a rock beat and simple improvisations. It didn't swing and it was neither one thing nor the other. This didn't stop Miles Davis, after claiming jazz was dead, casting aside one of the music's most poignant and beautiful tones to join the electric scene. That all changed in 1982. It became known as the "year of Wynton Marsalis" after readers of the US music magazine *Down Beat* in their annual poll made him jazz trumpeter of the year, jazz musician of the year and his debut LP jazz album of the year. He defeated Miles Davis in all three categories — and he was only 21.



Wynton Marsalis (left) pictured with Miles Davis. In 1982 readers of the US music magazine Down Beat in their annual poll made him jazz trumpeter of the year, jazz musician of the year and his debut LP jazz album of the year... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

There were precious few young musicians playing jazz in the 80s until Marsalis picked up the music's banner. It was a statement that there were young musicians who not only wanted to play jazz but were dedicated to extending its tradition, And the most important part of this tradition is swing. Ellington put it simply back in the

1930s when he wrote *It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*. Marsalis didn't pull any punches when he told one critic: "If it don't swing, I don't want to hear it. There are different feelings of swing, but if it's swinging you know it. If you



ain't swinging, you ain't doing nothing. The whole band must swing. You can't have weak links."

Marsalis: If it don't swing, I don't want to hear it...

There are no weak links in the Marsalis family either, one of the most talented and musical of all American families. Marsalis's younger brother, reed player Branford, as musical director of the Tonight Show Band on NBC television, is the most visible jazz musician in the US; trombonist and record producer Delfeayo appears certain to become a major soloist; and the patriarch, dad Ellis, is an exceptionally gifted jazz pianist and educator.

And then there is Wynton: a classical music prodigy who became the first musician to win Grammys in both the jazz and classical categories (he did it twice, in 1983 and 84); whose recording of Haydn's *Trumpet Concerto* with the great English conductor Raymond Leppard and the National Symphony Orchestra is one of the most impressive ever recorded; who was headed for a double career as surely as any musician since Benny Goodman until he opted for jazz in 1984 because he couldn't find time to keep up his classical technique.

Jazz was definitely the winner.

Wynton Marsalis ... authoritative trumpet player and articulate leader of the new breed of sophisticated jazz stars. The music could wish for no finer ambassador as it moves towards the 21st century.

Itinerary for trumpeter Wynton Marsalis's septet (Wycliffe Gordon trombone, Victor Goines tenor, Wes Anderson alto, Eric Reed piano, Benjamin Wolfe bass and Herlin Riley drums): Perth Festival, Concert Hall February 27; Brisbane Concert Hall, March 1; Sydney Opera House, March 3; Melbourne Concert Hall, March 6.

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Kevin Jones, "All What Jazz?", *The Australian*, October 6, 1995, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-86>

Bruce Johnson, "All What Jazz: Self-fulfilling Prophecy?", *JazzChord*, Oct/Nov, 1995, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-86>

-Also, Johnson's piece is followed immediately by Kieran Stafford's piece "Think Positive Kevin", an edited version of a letter from Stafford which was published in The Australian on October 10, 1995.
