



## SOUTHERN BLUE SOUL BROTHER NUMBER ONE

*Just turned 30,  
**Wynton Marsalis**  
now assumes command,  
of Jazz trumpet  
and perhaps  
of Jazz itself.*

**Philip Watson** talks to him about principles, innovation, Armstrong, Miles, and what to wear on your birthday. **Justin Quick** provides visual aids.



THE MOST confident, assured and controversial man in modern jazz can't decide what to wear. Today is his 30th birthday and on the floor of his plush central London hotel suite two bulging suitcases spill over with designer clothes. Wynton Marsalis walks around them in a measured, unhurried way eyeing the contents. He already looks immaculate in pleated trousers and a crisp shirt – one he ironed carefully himself a few minutes earlier. He has great physical presence, and moves gracefully, with dignity, yet there's no hint of a strut or swagger, of his infamous arrogance. Suddenly he stops and turns towards me.

"What d'you think, man?" he asks. "Should I wear a tie on my birthday, or a sweater?"

I suggest the tie ("more of a sense of occasion"), and he slips on the jumper – a cleverly woven collage of shapes and colours.

"That's *it*, man, now it really feels like my birthday."

A FEW minutes later, down in the hotel lounge, over some late morning cups of birthday Earl Grey, I begin to suspect that the "tie or sweater" question was a set-up. It's not just that Marsalis has always tried to maintain a distance between himself and the opinions of critics; he tells me that he grew up in an environment in which "ribbing was a way of life" – an essential part of the New Orleans sense of humour.

Certainly Marsalis has always been his own man. Get him talking about the time when he musically came of age, the nature of jazz and its traditions, innovation, Miles Davis, or any of the other issues that he has pronounced on in the last ten years, and you're left with the strong impression of a one-man crusade. It's as if he has appointed himself sole guardian of the jazz flame, the keeper of the faith, the touchstone of all things musically pure.

It's a crusade backed up by a formidable intelligence. For while he is relaxed, polite and respectful in conversation, and laughs a lot, when you broach a subject he feels strongly about (and there are a great many), he has an unnerving habit of moving forward on his seat, looking you even more piercingly in the eye, and disarming you with his insight and lucidity. He is articulate and perceptive. He is knowledgeable and precise. And he has a lot to say. A simple, five-word question elicits a serpentine, 500-word answer.

Does he have any regrets?

"No, I don't regret anything I've done. I don't regret all the times I've been at jazz festivals and I've been the only one playing jazz. I don't regret that I've stood for this music through these ten years and represented Art Blakey and Betty Carter and all the musicians who were serious. I don't regret that I have stood up publicly, even though the critical community have written bad articles about me or tried to paint me as a messianic figure or all that bullshit.

"I don't regret any of that. I'd do it again. I will keep doing it and I'll even go into the physical arena with some motherfuckers over this music. I'm serious. If it's going to be light conversation, like playing around, then I like doing that.

I had fun dealing with Miles Davis and joking around. But if somebody says something bad about this music I would be ready to punch them upside their head, man. Because when I look at all the intellectual devastation and emotional impoverishment that has come about as a result, not just of Miles Davis, but the whole philosophy that the writers have perpetuated, then I have to say that I stand against them, and that.

"If that means they will say that my music is not shit for another 30 years, that's fine with me because musicians far greater than me have had the same fate. I'm not a politician – I'm just trying to represent people. People I grew up with, people I know, people I meet in the world. That's my position."

It reads like a manifesto, a roll call of guiding principles, but it's an illuminating monologue that touches upon many of the areas Marsalis is passionate about. His definition of jazz, for example, is embodied in one man: Duke Ellington ("he represents most comprehensively what the music is about; his is the greatest sustained development in jazz history"), yet he is more obtuse and dismissive on the more general subject of black music – a term he considers a misnomer.

"The notes on the page are black," he quips when I ask him what the words mean to him, "but I don't know what black music is. I don't know what white music is. Some have said that European music is white music. Well, I've played a lot of that and it doesn't sound wholly white to me. I don't know what something that's totally white would sound like. Bach's music? It didn't come from white people, it came from Bach. If Duke Ellington does a version of Tchaikovsky's music – like *The Nutcracker Suite* – is it then black music? Louis Armstrong? His music comes from God – it's a spiritual thing, music is a spiritual thing, man, and he can't be reduced to some race."

And he is equally disparaging about notions (and they're almost received wisdom by now) that his music is conservative, lacking in innovation, even that, as Lester Bowie once asserted, "it uses the concept of the tradition to destroy the tradition".

"The development of jazz music was not meant to be in the way European music developed. You can develop yourself out of an audience by over-refining one aspect of the music. Jazz music has many elements and aspects. Group interaction – what about *not* soloing all night? – that's a concept in jazz. What about the fact that jazz has a fundamental and functional African component which means the music has to reinforce fundamental mythological things about the people it comes out of? That means that you don't need to have a new movement every five years.

"All these conversations about innovation are just strange because all of jazz is always modern. The concept of jazz – a group of people playing together and working out a group resolution – is *still* modern. And right now, that's what I and my group, are trying to do."

It's an attitude echoed in his crusade against critics and their

## Wynton Marsalis

"[*Round Midnight*] tended to romanticise Black suffering. The French assume that Bud Powell and Lester Young, two great geniuses, were helpless. That's a contradiction. I worked with both of them; they were so profound. They didn't need anybody to help them cross the street. They may have been battered and beaten by the socio-political and economic systems. But they were never helpless – their music influenced the whole world."

MAX ROACH, *WIRE 29*

failure, in his eyes, to meet the challenge of his music. "The music that I play has not really been addressed for what it is on any level of analysis. The people address it for what it is, but the critical community don't really know what it is. Their assessment of what it is is incorrect. What you've got to realise is that I'm not looking to be endorsed by writers, I don't care what they think, because in our music they have a tradition of missing the boat. And they will always miss the boat because they lack humility, they only deal with appearances, and they don't understand what we're doing. They say what I'm doing is old, but it's all flipped around because what I'm doing is new."

Marsalis also feels strongly about having kept his jazz head together while all around him, he believes, were losing theirs. "In my era I've come up between two camps: the avant-garde camp and the rock camp, and I'm a jazz musician. So I don't fall into any political or social group that's liked, and that's one of the reasons I don't get assessed. All the same, the agenda that I've followed, and all the heat I've had to take, has at least resulted in musicians realising that they don't have to imitate *rock musicians*."

There is his crusade for respect and dignity for jazz, Afro-Americans and all other minorities: "My responsibility is to uphold the legacy of Art Blakey. That is to be on the bandstand presenting jazz music. To accept the responsibilities of manhood. To provide a situation for musicians to flourish in. And to represent the culture, the Afro-American culture on all levels. If that means having to argue with some people about rap music, rock, or something ignorant, then I'll do it."

Or his crusade for scholarships and seriousness: "I support learning how to play and being serious. I've spent hours practising this shit, and all I'm saying is knowledge is knowledge, and talk is talk."

MOST VOCIFEROUS of all, of course, are his occasionally very public tirades against the later music of Miles Davis, and to a lesser extent, his one-year-older brother Branford, who left Wynton's band to play with Sting. Both are disagreements, he claims, that have been grossly exaggerated.

"Branford and I are brothers, man – we fought like motherfuckers together; there's a lot of shit we've shared together – and in terms of music and the racial issue, we're in total agreement. Total agreement – I want to make that very clear."

Yet as much as this fraternal solidarity exists between them, and as swiftly as Wynton declares the Sting issue one of the past and a subject he is tired of discussing, when pressed, he

still apparently harbours enormous resentment at Branford's departure.

"Man, if you lost your whole band to go play rock music and you're out there saying jazz music is not rock and the guys in your band decide to co-sign some shit that is being called jazz, and it's the exact opposite of what you're preaching, would it be a problem with you? Yeah, it would. It wasn't a crime or nothing. I mean nobody got killed. It was just another stab at the culture, the Afro-American culture."

The same ambiguous brotherly frictions seem to apply to his relationship with Miles Davis. Because again, for all his criticisms of Miles, for all the reciprocated vitriol and counter-attacks in Miles's autobiography, and despite the famous incident in Vancouver in 1986 when Miles stopped his band when Wynton walked on stage to join them, Marsalis is adamant that their arguments were essentially good-natured.

"He loved all that shit. He enjoyed every minute of it. And I thoroughly enjoyed it too. It was a game to us. I mean we didn't take that stuff seriously, man."

All the same, while he seems cold and unmoved at first when I ask him about Miles's death, he soon warms to the subject and can't resist passing judgement, or voicing strong opinions about the man.

"I felt bad for him because he was in a lot of pain. To turn your back on greatness like that for 21 years, from 1970 to 1991, and who you are, must have hurt him a great deal.

"When he was serious about playing he was at the top of the game, one of the greatest musicians, but the stuff he did later was pop music. He knew it, I know it, and you know it too. It's like the story of the king without his clothes on: everybody looked and they knew what it was. He went from being a great jazz musician to being a mediocre rock musician and as a pop musician, well, you figure it out.

"As for the Vancouver incident, he lied in his book about that. There wasn't any 'they' pushing me to go up there. I went up there on my own to work some things out on the bandstand. But it was funny – he grew up in that arena. He told me himself how Fats Navarro used to stand him up and fire on him. He knew what it was all about.

"But, anyway, I said what I wanted to say when he was alive. Now he's dead. I hope he rests in peace."

THE ONLY problem with all this talk, with the acutely polemical line Marsalis takes on a vast range of topics, is that, as RD Cook noted in *Wire* 38, it can get in the way of the music. Marsalis bitterly and convincingly argues that his music is disrespected and misunderstood, yet he continues to surround it with a battery of armoury and attitude. He boxes

**"People used to snigger when Thelonious Monk got up and started moving, as they would when he used his elbows on the keyboard. I didn't find it funny, in fact I was rather mesmerised by the audacity of this man getting up in the middle of a composition and moving, and yet I was quite aware that the focus of his band was always centred, whether he was sitting at the piano or moving. The same applied to the Kabuki Theatre from Japan. All their musicians always danced, always sang. The only approximation we have to that certain rhythm and blues and rock people who sing and dance; the so-called – in quotes – serious fine artists just sit and look glum. There is not much happening with their bodies. But the body is an instrument."**

CECIL TAYLOR, *WIRE* 46/7

clever, but maybe he also boxes himself in. He fights a corner so small that he has little room to manoeuvre. He appears aloof; the lord of a manor so lofty and sacred that he's impenetrable and imperious. If you're not with him, you're against him, even if it does mean alienating potential audiences coming to (his definition of) jazz from other avenues. He is scornful of compromise.

Yet in many ways and instances, he speaks a lot of sense, and his comments about his music being new and always modern get to the heart of the Marsalis dilemma. Is his music old or new? Is it for or against the tradition? Is his music too scholarly to really engage the listener? And has he been badly served by the critical community?

Certainly few musicians in jazz have made such a comprehensive investigation of the music that has gone before them, especially in such a short period. In that Marsalis *is* new. Just consider the exemplary range of his output: from the chillingly precise modal and post-bop music of his early records to the blues-based compositions on *J Mood*, the New Orleans melodies on *The Majesty Of The Blues*, the *Standard Time* studies of standard compositions and popular songs, even to *Crescent City Christmas Card*, his arrangements of traditional and modern Yuletide tunes. Add Marsalis's classical recordings – often fresh and lively interpretations of the works of Haydn, Hummel, Mozart, and Baroque trumpet music – and it is a very significant body of work. It's almost as if, with the self-imposed exceptions of forms of jazz-fusion, and the avant-garde, Marsalis has made it his task to keep the *whole* of jazz alive. And because of this he may well be rejuvenating areas and traditions widely assumed to be lost.

The personality and expressiveness of his music present more difficult problems, and criticism in this area has often been harsh. Arid, cold, over-technical and under-emotional are common responses to the Marsalis tone, one considered reliant too much on academicism rather than gutbucket bravura.

And they are criticisms that up until his most recent output would have carried a considerable amount of weight. It's easier to respect Marsalis than enjoy him. But with *Tune In Tomorrow*, his soundtrack to the film *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, and more especially his three-volume blues cycle, *Soul Gestures In Southern Blue* (actually recorded back in 1987–88, but only now available here on import), Marsalis genuinely seems to have opened out, to finally be realising the fruits of all his study and learning, of his many-sided talent.

*Tune In Tomorrow* shows enormous maturity as a composer and demonstrates just how far Marsalis has absorbed the music of Ellington with all its attendant tonal and textural complex-

ities. Inspired by the master's *New Orleans Suite*, Marsalis reflects the New Orleans setting for the film in an entirely modern way, the orchestral fragments suited to both the film and his young ensemble. The feel may be entirely classical, but new are Marsalis's details, his rhythmic touches, his inflections of tone. It's a subtle, yet entirely successful balance between old and new, of respect for the Duke and development of some of his themes.

The *Soul Gestures* trilogy stretches this tension even more dramatically. Fully immersing itself in the full range of possibilities of the blues melodically, harmonically, rhythmically and as a vehicle for soloing, and featuring Joe Henderson and Elvin Jones on the first album, *Thick In The South*, it is three hours that highlight not just Marsalis's increasing mastery as a composer, arranger and interpreter, but most surprisingly as a soloist. His improvisations over the three records are full of unrestrained blowing, of a vivacious brassiness as yet unheard, his twists and slurs of meaning not just fitting the form, but full of invention and fire.

Add Marsalis's continuing sartorial and musical influence on a whole generation of players, both in the US and Britain, his extensive support of jazz education through bursaries and fund-raising concerts, and you also have a musician and a canon of significant importance and integrity. The man is also incredibly prolific: he has no fewer than eight albums in the can awaiting release (five live, three studio), and during this tour worked daily on music for a ballet being performed in New York in December. As Marsalis puts it: "I love music, man. And I just love to play."

AS OUR allotted time comes to an end, Marsalis's manager drops by to whisk him away to the photo shoot. Polite to the end, he apologises for not having more time, and when I get up to say goodbye, he surprises me by ignoring the formality of my approaching handshake and draws me to him in a shoulder to shoulder hug.

He saunters off, resuming his deliberate, controlled poise, his head cocked high and proud. It's an hour that leaves me with the impression of a serious and dedicated musician driven by scholarship, excellence and a desire to reach high standards in his art. Of a musician under-valued and too readily criticised. A musician very much in command of his music, his instrument, and himself. It's an hour, dare I say it, with one of jazz's greatest virtuosi and sharpest minds, with, as classical music's most pre-eminent trumpeter Maurice André described him, "potentially the greatest trumpeter of all time".

I still think he should have worn that tie though. ★