

# JAZZ

## MESSENGER

On the record, Wynton Marsalis blows up a storm over American and black culture. He has his standards.

By Dan DeLuca

INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

In 1985, when Wynton Marsalis was 23, the jazz trumpeter released an LP called *Black Codes (From the Underground)*. This high point of Marsalis' Miles Davis period also marked his debut as a social critic.

The title referred to laws that severely restricted blacks' rights in the post-Civil War South, but also, as Marsalis explained to critic Stanley Crouch, to everything from "people who equate ignorance with soulfulness" to "the way they depict women in rock videos."

In 1997, Marsalis won the Pulitzer Prize for *Blood on the Fields*, an ambitious three-CD set that explored contemporary racism through the tale of an African man and woman brought to the United States as slaves.

Another 10 years on, the jazzman is once again on his soapbox. On *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*, which comes out Tuesday, he speaks out — with lyrics sung by Jennifer Sanon

See **MARSALIS** on H12

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JOANNE SAVIO

Wynton Marsalis' latest recording finds him coming out in full swing for a musical take on the twin scourges of drugs and materialism, the evils of gangsta rap, and the crisis of education in America. "From the Plantation to the Penitentiary" will be released Tuesday.

# Marsalis straight, no chaser

**MARSALIS** from H1

and, on one song, rapped over a second-line swing rhythm by Marsalis himself — about the twin scourges of drugs and materialism, the evils of gangsta rap and the crisis of education in America, and the standing of the United States in the world as a result of the war in Iraq.

In the quarter-century since the son of jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis arrived in New York, Marsalis (who played the *Haydn Trumpet Concerto* with the New Orleans Philharmonic when he was 14) has become jazz's central polarizing figure.

As creative director of Jazz at Lincoln Center and unquestionably the most identifiable jazz celebrity of his time, Marsalis — who will appear on *This Week With George Stephanopoulos* today and on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart Wednesday — is either cheered for treating jazz with the dignity it deserves or jeered as a rigid conservative.

Jazz writers trash him even when they're not reviewing him. In a recent *Jazz Times* magazine, Marsalis' brother Delfeayo was slammed thusly: "In the spirit made (in)famous by his brother Wynton, Marsalis sounds most determined to rectify erstwhile radical innovations ... and transform them into paradigms of propriety."

Marsalis, whom Nat Hentoff once called "the Pope of Jazz," has heard the criticisms many times over, and rejects being labeled a conservative. "That's just people trying to discredit an opinion they don't agree with," he says.

Speaking from his office at Lincoln Center, the 45-year-old trumpeter spoke about the state of the nation and the culture, lamented that middle-age injuries keep him from using the basketball court he had built at Lincoln Center, and shared how he feels about hip-hop.

**Question:** The title song on *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* paints a grim picture. "From the yassuh boss to the ghetto minstrelsy ... from the stock in slaves to the booming prison trade." Do you think that American culture — and black culture — is at a crisis point?

**Answer:** Yes. But if you asked me that in 1985, when we recorded *Black Codes (From the Under-*



JoANNE SAVIO

"If you asked anybody who was black in the 1970s that was listening to Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, if there was going to be ... music coming along that calls people niggers — we would never have believed it. No way. After the civil rights movement?"

*ground*), I would have said yeah then, too.

I can remember being on the bandstand with my brother [Branford] when I was 15 and he was 16, playing some song like "Shake Your Booty," or "Play That Funky Music." And I said to him, "This is the dumbest [stuff] ever. I don't think it can get any stupider than this!"

He looked at me, and deadpanned: "It can, and it will." He was like: "This [stuff] is nothing. You only think this is dumb. Just wait." I'll never forget how he told me that. Ha!

If you asked anybody who was black in the 1970s that was listening to Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, if there was going

to be a type of music coming along that calls people niggers — we would never have believed it. No way. After the civil rights movement? C'mon! So what he said was truly prophetic. We saw it happen.

**Q:** Why do you think it happened?

**A:** I think there are a myriad of reasons. First, there's a belief in the generation gap. Second is the exploitation of kids. When you're exploiting people, and exploiting their sexuality, you have to find new ways to continue to do that. ...

The third thing is the traditional American relationship with the minstrel show. Black

people acting the fool. Always, there's some money to be made off of that. It's comfortable to the national psyche. And also black people's enjoyment of that — for taking what is serious and reducing it to entertainment, which is the same thing that happened with religious music. And it starts with the whole belief in youth music, and the separation of the 14-year-old from their parents.

**Q:** Do you have any use for hip-hop?

**A:** No.

**Q:** Do you believe there's good stuff but you're just not interested in it?

**A:** I believe there are always good things in everything. All prisons are not bad. All drugs are not bad. I'm also not knowledgeable enough about it to make an accurate assessment of the quality of it. I look at it in relation to all of the American music that's available to me, and in terms of the level of musicianship and improvisation ... and I don't have that much respect for it. And I feel that from a musical standpoint, it would be very difficult for me to be proven incorrect about that.

**Q:** And yet, there's a song on *From the Plantation* called "Where Y'All At?" on which you rap, or at least chant: "You got to speak the language the people are speakin' / Especially when you see the havoc it's wreakin'."

**A:** Well, you know, in New Orleans, we was making up rhymes to beef long before there was something called rap. And we used to do all our rhyming to "I-ko, I-ko, un-day, jock-ammo fee-no ai-na-né."

So I didn't have to practice that, if you know what I'm saying. I didn't have to think about having to talk on top of this beat. It's natural. ... That's fun, but that's very different from being a musician. Being a producer and taking samples and beats and putting them together with rhymes to make a song, there's an art to that. But don't confuse that with being a musician. It does result in an artifact

that is music. But that's a totally different skill. There's no way you could program the drums to play the way Ali [Jackson Jr.] is playing on "Where Y'all At?"

**Q:** What were you feeling when Katrina hit?

**A:** Man, I can't describe it. [Long pause.] It was a painful thing. Like somebody violated your mama. Very painful. Very painful.

**Q:** It's been a year and a half. What's your hope for New Orleans?

**A:** Better leadership.

**Q:** Locally and nationally?

**A:** Everywhere. Big problem like that requires leadership. People of the country have shown their willingness to support us. But the leadership is not, has not. ... It's very disappointing. And there's a painful lack of concern for the people.

**Q:** What do you think of the state of jazz, compared to when you came to New York in the late '70s?

**A:** There's a lot more musicians playing now, I think. We've lost a lot of people: Art Blakey, Betty Carter, Gerry Mulligan, Sarah Vaughan. But there are a lot more musicians trying to play.

**Q:** So if you arrived in New York today, would there be more opportunity to play?

**A:** Probably, yeah. There's a little more philosophical clarity than there was then. ...

In my time, the challenge was trying to get musicians to play jazz. Finding a bass player, finding a drummer. But any kind of artist, coming to New York, you're going to struggle. Playwright, photographer, dancer: You've got to find your place, your integrity, your voice, your sense of what it is you're doing. You have to be uncompromising in your belief in your direction. And that's a hard thing to put on a younger person.

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