

The Man Comes Around

Wynton Marsalis Quartet

Morrell Gymnasium, Bowdoin College, April 29, 2004

When someone says “Wynton Marsalis” I think of Chico Freeman’s 1981 album, *Destiny’s Dance*. Mr. Marsalis, then barely 20, is found stretching in the company of veterans of the exploratory 1970s Modern Jazz scene and playing in a fashion which would make Woody Shaw proud (literally and figuratively). His soon-to-be-legendary technique was already well on the way to fruition; his historically-informed box of tricks and colors was fully stocked. The record is a glimpse into an alternate reality, a taste of what might have happened if Mr. Marsalis had fallen under the wing of, say, Wayne Shorter instead of Stanley Crouch.

The tangle of jazz rhetoric and musical fact weighed heavily on my mind as I approached the scene of Mr. Marsalis’ most recent visit to Maine. “The word,” well-paid-for in the jazz press, was that jazz’ most recognizable living spokesman was back to basics, fronting a new quartet, touring an album of new compositions, and ready to play.

The concert began with our host celebrating the date as Duke Ellington’s 105th birthday and wryly remarking that the Duke was no stranger to gymnasium concerts. He then announced that the first set would feature Ellington compositions exclusively, with the second set devoted to songs from the new album, *“The Magic Hour.”* Any thought of repertorial exploration promptly went out the door as the band turned toward home plate with “C-Jam Blues.” Mr. Marsalis’ celebrated breadth of palette was on display immediately as he moved from open horn to plunger and back again. Following the boss’ turn, pianist Eric Reed displayed what was to become a hallmark of the evening, a relentless, “breathless” solo style, going bar after bar without any substantial gap. Mr. Reed’s vocabulary reflected some influence of Wynton Kelly, although missing the rhythmic variety which brought so much momentum to Mr. Kelly’s work.

The second selection, “Caravan,” was a telling choice. The song is the most modal of Duke Ellington’s familiar works, and as such it has attracted jazz modernists for over half a century. Mr. Marsalis’ current version moves at a moderate tempo but featured a relentlessly-grooving second-line drum beat. Eric Reed’s solo again reflected a strikingly anxious, relentless quality, at one point going two full choruses without pausing for more than a handful of eight-notes. In contrast, Ali Jackson, Jr.’s drum solo displayed a masterful use of space, often displacing his crashes to keep the listener provocatively off-balance.

The next two pieces also brought some modern aspects to otherwise highly-familiar material. Mr. Marsalis’ performance of “In a Sentimental Mood” was down-the-pike, but Mr. Reed’s harmonic language was thoroughly contemporary. The rhythm-changes tune which followed featured a particularly exciting series of exchanges between trumpet and drums – not fours, but free-flowing exchanges of phrases of whatever length came to mind. Here, at last, Mr. Marsalis broke new musical ground, and the moment was truly dynamic.

After the break, the band returned to focus on the new *Magic Hour* material. The pieces succeeded as showcases for their composer’s strengths, but their juxtaposition next to an hour of

Ellington made it is clear that Mr. Marsalis has not yet composed The Next Book of Standards. That said, he deserves modest kudos for taking pen in hand when it would be so easy to release yet another exploration of Broadway tunes.

“Free to Be” showed a McCoy Tyner influence, and Ali Jackson took the chance to vividly and successfully invoke Elvin Jones. Unfortunately, the tune highlighted as a weakness what had so far been a strength. The band played the concert at acoustic volume levels – there were no monitors on stage and very modest reinforcement for the house. While this approach worked well for the Ellingtonia, during the new material Carlos Henriquez’ double-bass, strung with old-fashioned gut and floor-miked, simply got lost.

The last piece of the second set was the “Magic Hour” suite and it began with a display of trumpet virtuosity that probably cannot be matched by anyone on the scene today. Portraying the scamper of mischievous kids at bedtime, Mr. Marsalis adopted his pianist’s relentless style. For chorus after chorus the notes flowed out of his horn as fast as the ear could catch them, each note a barely-perceptible pearl. The result was like a jazz fountain, and of course, there was nary a miss.

And there lies the central issue. For the handful who, like Mr. Marsalis, reach the exalted plane of complete mastery of the instrument – those who never miss – technical risk is no longer a factor. But even for those players – the Hubbards, the Breckers, the Hancocks – there still remain the challenges of bringing spontaneity to the moment, of musical risk and of depicting an individual voice. It was in the latter two aspects that the performance in Brunswick, fine as it was, fell short of the very highest mark. Mr. Marsalis’ development of unique talent as a trumpeter may have outpaced the growth of his voice as a musician, but his apparent re-orientation toward the present is a turn of events with dramatic potential both for himself and the music as a whole.