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Funding for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program NEA Jazz Master interview was provided by the National *Endowment for the Arts*.

JANSON MARSALIS
NEA Jazz Master (2011)

Interviewee: Jason Marsalis (March 4, 1977 -)
Interviewer: Anthony Brown with recording engineer Ken Kimery
Date: November 7, 2010
Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Description: Transcript, 47 pp.

Brown: Today is November 7th, 2010, and we are at 1304 St. Claude in New Orleans, Louisiana. We are conducting the Smithsonian NEA Jazz Oral History Interview with Jason Marsalis. Good afternoon, Jason. How you feeling?

Marsalis: I'm feeling very good. How about you?

Brown: I see you're dressed for a gig. So you got to run to a gig right after we're done here, I see.

Marsalis: I'll have some time. But I thought that I would get ready right now and be presentable. I'll be performing a little later on this evening.

Brown: At Preservation Hall?

Marsalis: That is correct.

Brown: With whom?

Marsalis: I think it's a pianist. No, it's a clarinetist named Tommy Sancton. I think it's going to be his show.

Brown: Let's start from the beginning. If you could state your full name and your date of birth and place of birth.

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Marsalis: My full name is Jason Ignatius Marsalis. Date of birth is March 4th, 1977. I think at 5:30 pm Central Standard Time from what I understand. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Brown: Where?

Marsalis: Ochsner Hospital.

Brown: What was the address that your family was living at, at the time of your birth?

Marsalis: It was 8318 Hickory Street, where – they're still there to this day.

Brown: Were all your brothers born there as well? I mean, living there as well?

Marsalis: Yes, but they moved out not long after.

Brown: But I'm saying, were your parents living there, say, when Branford was born?

Marsalis: No. They had moved into that house in 1976, I believe. '75 or – I think it was '76.

Brown: But you lived there for your entire upbringing.

Marsalis: Oh yes. That's where I grew up.

Brown: What part of town is that?

Marsalis: That the uptown area, around Carrollton, the uptown Carrollton Avenue area, that particular area. That's where it is.

Brown: What was the neighborhood like when you were growing up in the late '70s?

Marsalis: I'd have to say that I grew up in the early to mid-'80s. Late '70s I don't quite remember. I was just a little toddler. But I do remember memories of that neighborhood in the early to mid-'80s. It's interesting. In some ways it's still the way it was even then, where you'd have a nicer part of the block and then you'd have a rougher part of the block. But as a kid, I played from – I used to play with some kids in that neighborhood. Some came from the rougher part, but they were nice kids. It was nice people in that area. Sometimes we played ball here and there. It was a mixed bag, if you will. Overall, though, it was definitely a nice neighborhood overall.

Brown: Was it predominantly African-American?

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Marsalis: Not really. It was a mix. Past my mother's house, that's more African-American than before it. It's mixed. That's where you had more white – Caucasian-Americans in the area. That's how a lot of New Orleans is. It's a lot of places that are divided up, like you'll have rough areas and then nice areas, and then areas where there's black people, areas where there's white people, and areas where there's – it's really divided up. It isn't like a lot of towns where you have one whole block or one whole – blocks of one kind of neighborhood. In New Orleans it isn't like that. You have a few blocks of this, a few blocks of that, a few blocks of this on the same street.

Brown: We're going to talk about post Katrina and what that tragedy impacted on those kind of neighborhoods. But I want to stick with the chronology. Your middle name is Ignatius. Your first name is Jason. We know where Wynton – we know your father named Wynton after Wynton Kelly. Of course Delfeayo's real first name is Ferdinand. So presumably that was for Jelly Roll Morton. Could you tell us about your name, Jason and Ignatius.

Marsalis: As far as Delf, I would – you'd have to double check some things, because Delfeayo – see, there was an uncle Delfeayo and a cousin Delfeayo. So my father would know more about that. It's possible his name came from those people, and they were Ferdinands. So I think that it's a thing where they were Ferdinands, and that's where they got the name to name him.

Brown: So it's Ferdinand being their last name?

Marsalis: Yes.

Brown: Got it. And that's from your mother's side or your father's side?

Marsalis: That's from my mother's side. That's my mother's side. Anyway, as far as my own name, I'm trying to remember the story as to how I got named. They've told me the story. I don't know if it's something that they saw in the newspaper about Jason Robards or something – something to that [?]. Something like that. They saw it and said, "Okay, we'll use that." I'm not sure how they arrived at the Ignatius, but I do know that my mother read somewhere that if you picked initials that – she read somewhere that if you picked the initials that spelled out a word or name, that your son would become a celebrity. That's something that she told me. I don't know if that's really true, but that's what she read. So I think that they wanted to have syllables that would spell out a name. My initials spelled the name Jim.

Brown: Your first memories – any recollections about schooling: when you first started going to school? Which school did you go to?

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Marsalis: Funny thing is, I do have vague memories of a lot of those schools, like the Gladstein Nursery.

Brown: You remember nursery schools.

Marsalis: Yeah. I don't know why, but I do have vague memories of Gladstein Nursery. After that, there was Newcomb Nursery, which is – that's pre-kindergarten. I do vaguely remember going there. I have just spotty memories of that. Newcomb Nursery – it's still there, too. It's on Tulane's campus. It was interesting, because I – it's funny, because I have two daughters. One of my daughters went to Newcomb. It's funny, because that classroom looks so small. I remember thinking, this looked so much bigger when I was five or whatever it was.

The following year I attended Howard Montessori School in kindergarten, which the following year changed to Audubon Montessori. The Howard Montessori School building was – where is that? It's near Magazine Street. I want to say on Camp. But it's around – it's a little closer to Garden District. It's not in Garden District, but it's a little closer. That's where the Howard Montessori School building was. That building is still there. Audubon Montessori is on Broadway. It's on Broadway. It's near the levee uptown. So it's not too far from where my parents are. It's not too far. Broadway Avenue – if you go – it's in between St. Charles and in between Magazine, before it turns into River Road. In between that little area. That school is still there. That's where I went to elementary school. I did that about three years, first, second, and third grade.

'86 was where a lot of things changed, because we moved to Richmond, Virginia. I attended John B. Cary Elementary School fourth and fifth grade, and Albert H. Hill Middle School in sixth grade. In the summer of '89 we moved back to New Orleans. I attended McMinn Magnet High School. Or what was it? The McMinn Magnet Secondary High School I think was the full name. What's interesting, that high school was not too far from where I live now. I attended there from seventh through twelfth grade. I graduated from high school there and also attended the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts for my ninth – through ninth and twelfth grade years. I did go to college at Loyola University. So it's a lot of schools that aren't too far from where I grew up at. I learned various things from various people here and there.

After my third year at Loyola, I left to pursue my career as a musician, because my schedule was becoming really tough. I'd be in and out of classes and going to gigs and in and out of doing this. There was a lot going on. I just said, I've got to pursue this full time. I'm just starting to get real busy. So that was the history as far as my schooling was concerned.

Brown: What was your major at Loyola?

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Marsalis: It was music performance. But I was studying classical music. I was in – I had performed with the school’s orchestra and the school’s concert band. I took some of the classes: orchestration, music theory, music history, music literature, and so forth. It was good to do that, to refine some of the knowledge that I had about classical music. I did have some, but it was good to refine and get some more information.

Brown: Since you brought up your musical education, let’s go all the way back to the beginning, because when we read your biographies, we understand that you were first interested in the violin, or you were playing the violin. So maybe we can talk about how you got interested or how did it come about that you played violin first?

Marsalis: The first story that I was told, as far as music was concerned, had to do when I was three. The story involved this little toy drum set. There’s a picture of that too. There’s a picture of me behind this toy drum set. The story was that they would play a game and introduce me playing these drums. I’d bash incoherent nonsense. After a while, I got into this game. “Come on. Introduce me. Introduce me.” That’s the story that I was told.

A short time after that I did have some piano lessons. Not a lot, but I did have a few. From what my mother told me, she said that I was into music just as a little kid. I was always – I either bobbing around or – they could see that I had an interest in music

Brown: Let’s go back to your bashing on the drum set. Who were you imitating? Do you remember any . . . ?

Marsalis: No. There was no imitation. No.

Brown: Nobody in the house played drums?

Marsalis: No, no. It was just a toy drum set. It’s what kids do: see a drum set, and they just start banging on it. That’s all. It wasn’t that deep.

Brown: Who gave you piano lessons?

Marsalis: I don’t remember the piano teacher’s name, but I did have some very basic piano training from back then. I don’t remember the teacher’s name. I should – a lot of these things my parents will definitely know.

The violin was something that came from a deal my father had at the Audubon Montessori School that I was attending, because they had a violin program. But also, there was a few string programs. Strings on a Saturday Morning, which was at the Lafayette School. I was probably five years old at the time. I can’t remember the details of the deal, but it was something having to do with if your son or daughter attended this For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

school, you'd get some kind of a discount on the violins. Something. So that's how I got the violin and started practicing on it.

The drums, that's a little more unusual. I'm not sure how that one got started. I know that I had a love for drums. It was something that I liked. But how I got it started, I'm not sure. This is one of the more unusual mysteries about it, was I do remember a performance when I was in kindergarten. It was at the Howard Montessori School. I was six years old. My father was playing this show, and somehow I ended up behind the drum set for this one song. I think it was *Sesame Street*. I don't know how that happened, because I wasn't really – I didn't have a drum set, and I wasn't really playing it, but I ended up playing. I understood things about ride cymbal and snare and so forth. So we played this one song. I said, aw, man, that was kind of fun. What's even more unusual is, I think a woman went up to my mother and said, "Wow, I didn't know your son played the drums," and she said, "He plays the drums?" I don't know how that got started. I don't know how I got up there. I don't know if I asked. I really couldn't tell you. Those are one of the more – I remember playing. I remember the show. But shortly after that, I did get a real drum set and started to get drum lessons and started to get fundamentals of playing drums shortly after that.

Brown: We're going to come back to your development as a drummer. But let's go back to your brief experiences with the piano and the violin. Do you remember ever feeling any joy or deriving any joy from playing music on either of those instruments early on?

Marsalis: Probably, in a way, yes, in terms of – I think on the surface level, is the best way to put it, meaning it was something that I could do. I wouldn't say that I had a strong belief in violin, but it was something to do and it was something that was fun at the time. It was something that was enjoyable. It wasn't that I just hated and said, "I don't want to do this," and I was made to do it. It's just something I did. It was something that was good to pass the time by. It was nice.

Brown: It sounds like your parents or your family, regardless of whatever instrument you were doing, they were going to encourage you to find whatever it was you were doing or were a lot more interested in?

Marsalis: Absolutely. They were supportive. There's no question about that.

Brown: So when you switched from piano to violin, it was with their blessing, if not their encouragement?

Marsalis: Oh yes. It was definitely by their encouragement. No question.

Brown: Let's go to the drums. You start getting interested. You get a drum set. Who are your first teachers, and what are they teaching you?

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Marsalis: My first teacher was a drummer by the name of James Black who I later found out was my father's partner in crime as far as music goes. At that time, what I learned from James was fundamentals, such as the book, which I later discovered was the bible of drum books, or the J. S. Bach drum books, if you will, a book called *Stick Control*. It was written by George Lawrence Stone, I think is the name. It's one of those very fundamental books that always – it always helps, because if you want to get grounded, you just put that. All it is, is one line, just two measures, just right/left hands, and that's it.

Brown: All sticking.

Marsalis: Yes, it's all sticking. They tell you to play this 20 times without stopping. You can do this slow or fast or – all it is, is just dat-dat-dat-dat-dat-dat-dat, repeat 2; next line, left-right-left, repeat; next line, right-left-right-left, repeat; right-left-right-left-left-right. That's it. The question I have about that book is, has any drummer gotten past page five? I don't know. I'm serious. I don't know if any drummer's gotten past that, because it's such a fundamental thing that could be done every day, and it's always beneficial. There's other breakings that they go down to. One day – I've said this, and I'm glad this is on film, so I can watch this and make myself do it – one day I'm going to go through that entire book, even if it's doing everything once, even if it's just, "All right, let me do that once. What's the next one?" Even if it's once, just going through the whole book.

Brown: So it sounds like James Black focused directly on technique and not on any conceptual approaches to the kit.

Marsalis: No. I would have been too young for that. How would I have understood?

Brown: How old were you again?

Marsalis: Six, seven. I'm going to say seven. I would have been too young to understand a lot of that at that time. But it was a lot of fundamentals. A lot of those lessons I don't remember as well, but it was at that time – but I do remember a lot of the fundamentals. There's other things that I don't remember as well, but the fundamentals I do remember.

A few years later, I was privileged – and this all goes – and this is all thanks to Delfeayo – I was privileged to get drum lessons from the great teacher Alan Dawson. The reason why I say that this was – owes to Delfeayo, is because my playing was improving quite a bit. It was developing pretty fast. I had started at six. Next thing, at seven, I'm making these appearances on my father's shows, sitting in, maybe play three tunes, then sit down. So then, at the age of eight – what was it? February of '86. I was about to turn nine in about a month. Delfeayo asked me to play on his recital. He's attending Berklee School of Music. I said, okay, yeah, that would be great. Anything with my brothers, yeah, sure, I'll do it. Next thing I know, Delfeayo wants me to write these songs. It's like – I vaguely
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– I have a vague recollection of this, but he just went to the piano and played this little vamp, and he said, “Sing something, man. Sing something.” I said, all right. So I start singing this blues. [Marsalis scat sings the first ten beats of a blues.] So he says, all right. Then he’d write it down. That was it. Then, the next thing I know, it’s this tune I wrote, and I was like, what? I wrote that? Okay. So then, next thing, I think I ended up singing on *Rhythm* changes, and he’d write that down. Next thing I know, it’s arranged for big band up in Berklee, for this recital.

While I was up there – I remember just having a blast – to me it was – I approached the trip like a kid, because even though there’s all these college kids – I mean, not kids. College students, because I’m eight. They’re not kids. They’re adults. But even though there’s all these adults, I love playing jazz and I love playing drums. So to me it was like a mini vacation in a way. I’d go and do the rehearsal or go and sit in at this club called Wally’s, which was not really legal, but I did it anyway. He managed to get me in somehow. And staying up until three in the morning, which I don’t recommend, but hey, that was what I did. Woke up one in the afternoon the next day. “What is going on?”

Brown: This was at eight and nine years old?

Marsalis: Yeah. I was eight years old doing this nonsense.

Brown: You were living the jazz life as a kid.

Marsalis: Oh yeah. I was all about it. That’s the frightening thing. I was all about playing and staying up. I didn’t care.

But, during this same trip, all of a sudden Delfeayo tells me, “Yeah, man, you’re going to have some drum lessons with Alan Dawson.” “Okay. Who’s that? All right.” “Yeah, yeah. He taught Tony Williams a long time ago.” “Oh really?” Now that caught my attention, because I knew who Tony Williams was.

Brown: How did you come about knowing about Tony Williams or any other drummers? Who were the other drummers you knew about at this time?

Marsalis: At that time – I will say that I was always privileged to have a lot of information and a lot of access to jazz records. It could have been cassette tapes that Delfeayo was making for me to listen to, or vinyl recordings that my father had, or records that maybe Delfeayo would be listening to with Dad, and I’d go in and listen also. So there was a lot of records that I had heard, like, for example, Delfeayo made me a tape of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, and *Moanin’* was on it. So I’d heard that. One time I remember Delfeayo was listening to one of the classic records, Clifford Brown and Max Roach, with *Delilah*, *Blues Walk*, *Daahoud*, and *Joy Spring*. I was listening to this record like, wow, this is great. Man, I love this. This – man, it’s fun. So I had heard about
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Tony Williams from not only V.S.O.P. with Wynton and Herbie Hancock, but also the Miles Davis Quintet. I had heard a lot of those records as a kid. I heard not only – for Miles, not only had I heard *Kind of Blue* and *Some Day My Prince Will Come*, but I heard *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, *Nefertiti*, *Miles Smiles*, and *Miles in the Sky*. I had heard a lot of these records, and I enjoyed it. I didn't fully understand it yet, but I enjoyed that music. So that's how I was aware of Tony Williams and aware of Philly Joe Jones, from the Miles Davis recordings. Also, too, sometimes Delfeayo would quiz me. Sometimes call me, "Yeah man, who is this playing?" It would be Sonny Rollins's record, *Newk's Time*. I'd listen and say, "Sounds like Philly Joe Jones. Sounds like Philly." Then Philly would play this one phrase. "Oh yeah, that's Philly. That's him." So I really did enjoy jazz as a kid, but I did have access to a lot of recordings. So that's how I was aware of a lot of those drummers, was from some of those records.

Brown: You're going to take your lesson with Alan Dawson. Your brother was telling you, Tony Williams, Tony Williams. Take it from there. What happened?

Marsalis: Yeah. When he said that, I said, oh, okay. I said, all right. This is okay, somebody to respect. The first lesson, the one thing that I remembered from that lesson – we had discussed some things here and there, but the one thing I remembered was, is that – was that the great Alan Dawson said, "Yes, son. I have some exercises from this book. Are you familiar with *Stick Control*?" "Yeah!" I got excited, like, yeah, I know that book. I have that. I just felt excited, like, wow, okay. At that moment I knew, this is an important book. If James Black in New Orleans said it, and Alan Dawson in Boston said that this is the book to practice, this is an important book, and I'm going to have this forever. And I've had it forever, and it's come up with various lessons with various teachers and various students. That was the one thing that I remembered. It was the same thing for him. He had a lot of exercises in terms of what to play on the drums, how to develop techniques in terms of coordination.

Brown: You said, "what to play on the drums." So when you were studying with James Black, it seems like he was focusing mostly on the stick control technique. So you're saying that Alan Dawson started to have you work on the drum set, as opposed to just . . . ?

Marsalis: Yes, but mind you though, my playing was a lot more advanced. I'm not saying it was advanced in terms of . . .

Brown: You're nine years old.

Marsalis: I'm saying at nine – there's a huge difference between when I was six and when I was nine – big difference. It was not – I'm not saying that I was a great drummer. It was great for someone who was eight years old. I had – my coordination was a little better. At the time, with James Black, I was just getting started. So I needed that stick. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



control. Now, Alan Dawson was talking about how to use *Stick Control* and put it to the drums, which was – that was an important thing. That’s something that he always taught. I was lucky to have two more lessons with him, through the years, years later. That was something that he, even then, discussed.

Brown: So you had one lesson with him at this time.

Marsalis: At that time it was just one.

Brown: Do you remember how long? Did he go through a variety of things? Can you recall?

Marsalis: I have a vague recollection of it, but I do remember the *Stick Control*. I believe there’s a recording of that lesson that I need to try to find. I need to try to find that. I don’t know if I have it. Delfeayo might have it. I need to try to find that tape and go through that to see what he was talking about, because my memory of it is vague. But in terms of teachers, that was one lesson that I had.

Now, fast forward to Richmond, Virginia. There was a drummer by the name of Isaac Edgerton. He was really important, because this is the first time that I started reading drum music. Before this time, I was reading violin music, and I was playing violin. I did have lessons on violin. I had studied in the Suzuki method. There was a teacher by the name of Janet Newman. She lived not too far from my parents’ house. We’d just walk to her house, have a violin lesson, go home. So I was studying there. But in ’86 – I think it was somewhere between the fall of ’86 – no. You know what? I think it was early ’87, when my father gave me – I started having lessons with Isaac Edgerton. He was one of the drummers – he was a student at VCU, and my father was teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. When – he exposed me to drum music. The very first drum book that I saw was the *William F. Ludwig Collection of Drum Solos*. I looked at this book and seeing these figures that I’d never seen, like five stroke rolls, seven stroke rolls, flams, ruffs. It was an interesting thing for me, because I could already read violin music. I could read, and I think that was something that was important in terms of reading in treble clef and key signatures and time signatures, but now I’m seeing drum music, but it’s rhythm, but there’s all these other embellishments to the rhythm that I had never seen. I said, oh, this is interesting, and I really took a liking to this. I’d like to do this. So I started reading out of the book, practicing the solos they had, and so forth, and getting into what more of the rudiments were, because at this time I hadn’t really got into more of the rudiments, like in terms of this is what a ruff is and this is what a flam is. Not at that time. At that time – before then, it was more basic left-right combinations. This is the ride pattern. This is how you lock it up to the bass drum. It was more that, but now it’s getting into, this is a ruff, this is a ratamacue, this is a double ratamacue, this is a double paradiddle. That was another level. I thought, oh, this is okay. So I started to do that, and I started to get into more drum books.

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At this point I was playing drums and violin off and on, but it wasn't as consistent, because in Richmond there weren't as many chances to play as there were in New Orleans. In New Orleans, my father was working every week at Snug Harbor, which he still does. We're still there, after all these years. In fact, I'll tell a brief story about Snug Harbor. The first time that I remember sitting in with my father was at Snug Harbor. That club was initially called Faubourg's. I think it opened in '82 or '83. At some point it changed the name to Snug Harbor. I don't know when they did the change. It may have been '84. Maybe late '83, but it was Snug Harbor. The first time that I sat in with my father was there. It was in '84. Or was it? – '84 or '85, one of the two years. There's a recording. I'll have to look at the date on the recording. Delfeayo made the recording, of course. That was the first time that I performed. I did maybe three or four tunes. I was seven at the time, or eight. No, you know what? I think I was seven years old. So I'm going to say '84. That was the first time that I played with him. I would sit in with him maybe for a song or maybe for a few songs. I'd do this not every week, but maybe once a week – once a month.

In Richmond, there wasn't as much of that. There weren't as many shows or many opportunities to play, just to sit in. Not that I was thinking about that, but there just wasn't that. So at the time I played drums and violin off and on.

The turning point was the fall of '88, my sixth grade year. I was in the junior youth orchestra. Before that, I was in – I was in the Richmond Sinfonietta, which would meet on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University. So sometimes I'd go there and practice. Sometimes I'd sit in on some of my father's classes. But I would go there, to VCU. Now this year, in sixth grade, there's a Junior Youth Orchestra. The reason why this was very important is because the Sinfonietta was a string orchestra. Junior Youth was a full orchestra. That means I get there, go to sit down with my violin, and I look in the back, and I see a percussion section. I looked at that and said, you mean to tell me that they got – they have drums in classical music? Why didn't anybody tell me that? Why didn't anybody tell me that there was going to be a timpani. There's a snare drum. There's a bass drum. There's a crash cymbal. Why didn't anybody say anything? I really – at that point, the violin's days were numbered. The clock was ticking, because I'm thinking to myself, man, I'd rather be in the back of the orchestra, not the front. I don't belong here. I belong back there. What's that about? I wanted to know what that was about, because classical music, I didn't really have a deep love for it. I was just reading music. But I wanted to know what this was.

So the following year, when we moved back to New Orleans – in '89 we moved back. For me, the turning – this is when I knew that things had changed for good. We get to New Orleans. I remember looking forward to being in New Orleans. I can't – because we lived in Richmond for three years. I was looking forward to get back to New Orleans. I can't wait. I can't wait to get back. We get back home, and I swear to you, either that
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night or the next night, Dad gets this phone call. Then he tells me, “Say, man, you’re going to go to New York with your brother Delfeayo.” “What!” We’re just getting to New Orleans. I’m like, “What to you mean, we’re going? What are you talking about? We just got here.” I’m like, “I’m going to New York? Why? We just moved.” I wanted to be in New Orleans and just – mind you, we would come back to the city, like if there was a Christmas holiday or if there was a – for the summer we’d come to New Orleans, or – we did that for three years. But finally it’s like, we’re back in the city. Oh, man, this is great. And now I’m hearing, I’m going to New York? What am I doing there?

Then I get to New York, and it turns out Delfeayo and I are involved in a photo shoot for *Essence* magazine. That’s when I say, okay, yeah, all right. I guess things are different now. We’re involved with this photo shoot. I say, all right, that’s fine. We did the photo shoot for *Essence*. We do that. All of a sudden, being the youngest, you have no control over anything. You have older family that’s controlling things for you. Next thing I know, I’m on this kids’ concert with Wynton, some kids’ concert Wynton’s put together that has to do with Charlie Brown and the Peanuts gang and the music. I’m on this concert. There’s this other kid there. In fact it was a young alto saxophone player by the name of Amani Murray, who, ironically enough, I saw him on *It’s Showtime at the Apollo* a year earlier. That was the irony of that. But I’m on this kids’ concert. I’m like, okay, this is fine. This is nice. I’m staying at Wynton’s place and so forth. We do the concert. Then, the next thing I know, I’m on the road with Wynton’s band. Okay, all right, this is great. This is great, because at the time, Wynton’s music had changed. So I got a chance to check that out up close. Finally I just said, “Man, look, I got to go home. I just can’t stay out here. I got to get back to New Orleans.” So we did. I got back to New Orleans.

Brown: How long was this period?

Marsalis: I want to say it was a week, maybe a week and a half. No, I think it was a week, because I seem to remember it was a weekend where I went to do the shoot and did the concert, and then it was like Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. I think it was Friday I said, “Look. I got to get back home, man, because I’m just wandering out here,” or at least it felt like it. I was being supervised.

I got back to New Orleans. That’s where – I think it was during that summer, we went to the – my old violin teacher’s house, and I told her that I’m giving up this instrument. I’m not doing this anymore. I had some tears in my eyes, but I was like, I want to move on. I want to find out about percussion. I don’t want to do this anymore.

Subsequently, that’s what I ended up doing. Shortly after playing – after I gave that up, I did start to study with classical teachers. When it came to snare drum, I had a teacher named David DeGroot, which – we only studied a short time, because I think he ended up leaving town. Then my next teacher was a gentleman named Jim Atwood, who plays with
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the Louisiana Philharmonic. I had studied with him off and on through the years. In fact, he taught at Loyola University while I went to college.

Brown: How did you – who hooked these . . . ?

Marsalis: My father did. My father always made sure to find teachers. There was also another teacher, Leland Beach, who I studied with a little bit also, but Jim Atwood ended up being the guy that I studied with most. Atwood's lessons, for me, I remember most, because that was the first time that I had studied timpani. That was intriguing, because timpani was playing notes and reading music. I thought, oh, okay, let's see what this is. I remember the first lesson, reading the music, and I said, that's a bass clef. Agh great. Now I got to learn how to read bass clef. Agh. In music terms, the treble clef, the notes, the middle C is the third space on the line. Bass clef – well, no, actually, not even middle C is above the staff. It's a C which is lower than that, an octave lower – that's the second space. I'm like, oh man. The second space from the bottom. Oh man. I was like, oh great, okay, which I did. After a while, it wasn't a big deal. I learned it and got over it. But I remembered that being the first thing. But it was still something that I enjoy doing, to get into reading notes and music for percussion and drums. I was studying with him off and on.

Now we're entering seventh and eighth grade. I'm still playing – now at this point I'm starting to play a lot more jazz music. As a kid I'm starting to play a lot more – really just sitting in, mostly sitting in, but starting to play. It was, I want to say, eighth grade, about 13, 14, that I started to do full shows with my father. Before then I had just made guest appearances, maybe play one or two numbers with him. Now I'm starting to – now I'm thinking, okay, we're dealing with the big boys now, doing full shows. Got to really step it up now. I started doing full shows.

Brown: Before we continue with your jazz trajectory, let's step back and fill in a couple – when you were touring with – when you were working with your brother on this Charlie Brown project, what were you playing? What were you doing?

Marsalis: Just drums. I think that that concert was the beginnings of – it was the beginnings of what Wynton was working on the Charlie Brown music, because there was the Charlie Brown mini-series that CBS aired called *This is America, Charlie Brown*, and he wrote the music for that. In fact, yes, that already had aired. That's right, because we were in Richmond when that aired. So that had already aired, and I'm thinking this was the continuation of that. I guess he played – I don't remember the full program. I remember there was some Vince Guaraldi music and I'm assuming some of Wynton's music that he did for that special. But that's what it was. It was things in relation to the Charlie Brown show.

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For me it was great, because I had grown up watching Charlie Brown specials. I remembered seeing the Charlie Brown Christmas special, *Charlie Brown Christmas*, and *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, the Charlie Brown Thanksgiving. I watched that as a kid, 6, 7 years old, and I remembered that music. I enjoyed that music. So that was – to me it was almost surreal. Wynton's writing Charlie Brown? What? Wow, that's great. It was a kids' show.

Brown: Okay. Let's go back to – your teacher in Richmond was Isaac Edgerton? Do you remember the spelling? Can you spell that?

Marsalis: Yes. E-d-g-e-r-t-o-n.

Brown: During your studies, did anybody graduate you from *Stick Control* to *Accents and Rebounds*?

Marsalis: No. It's funny. I have that book. I have *Accents and Rebounds*. It just didn't happen. When I studied, it was different books that we had, like *Haskell Harr Drum Method*. That was one. There was, I think, some of the Goldenberg method books. There was . . .

Brown: Wilcoxon?

Marsalis: Yes, the Charlie Wilcoxon. Yes, you are correct. You know some drum books. The Wilcoxon book I got – oh, when was that? I want to say – man, who got me that book? – I want to say seventh grade. I think it was when I got back to New Orleans was when I first got the Charlie Wilcoxon book, which I still have. I want to say – I can't remember which teacher. I don't know if it was David DeGroot. I don't know if it was Beach? I can't remember if it was Atwood. But the Wilcoxon book, yes. So it was just different books that would come up.

Brown: When you started studying classical percussion, did you go through Saul Goodman's timpani books, since you were so enamored with timpani?

Marsalis: You know what? To be honest, I saw that book. I don't think I worked a lot out of it.

Brown: Or Vic Firth's book?

Marsalis: I'm trying to remember what – see, here's what was interesting about my studies with timpani, because really, I'm trying to remember. There was a method book, and I'm trying to remember which one it was, because I didn't work a lot out of it. I think a lot of it was that I had started playing repertoire from the gate, because I started playing with orchestras in which I was playing timpani. So there was a lot of fundamentals that
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my teacher would work on. We – I just started. We would discuss excerpts and different fundamental aspects of timpani in terms of using the pedal, muting, and this and that. But in terms of timpani books – some of that was – I don't think I had a lot of timpani books, because I didn't have a set of timpani at the house. So I didn't practice them a lot. I would practice them when I got the chance, but I think that's why. So I didn't really work out of a method book. I was aware of those books, and I had seen those books. I saw the Goodman book and the Vic Firth book, but I didn't work a lot out of those, since I didn't own a set. So I didn't – so a lot of times it would be, if there was an excerpt I was playing, we would discuss the excerpt.

Brown: And at this point – you hadn't developed an interest in mallets at this point?

Marsalis: No. That's coming. That's very – that's a year later.

Brown: So let's go back to where we just digressed, back to your interest going into more jazz modes. We're talking about now you're sitting – now you're playing with your father rather than just sitting in.

Marsalis: Oh yes. I'm playing with him. It's so funny, when I look back at the time. One of the drummers that was in town – that moved in town – because I look back at that time with a little different perspective, especially with what's going on with jazz music now, is that, when I came back to New Orleans – this is something that I did know, but I – this is something I did figure out, but now I see that it was definitely how it happened.

Let me go back a bit, back to that trip. There's some things about that trip that I forgot to mention, when I went to New York, that as I'm on the road with Wynton – I think Wynton did a show in Boston, I believe. Next thing I know, I'm hanging out with Delfeayo, because that happened sometimes. If I would go on these trips with my brothers, I'd swap some. I did the photo shoot with Delf, did this concert with Wynton. Then I'm on the road. I think he had a show in Boston. I think it might have even been at Berklee College of Music. So Delf's there. Then I'm hanging out with Delfeayo. He's hanging out. He's with these friends. He's with his friends. Delf's like, "Yeah man. Got this tape of a gig that Branford did with his new band with Kenny Kirkland and Jeff Watts and Bob Hurst." I was like, okay. This was when the band was starting to tour and so forth. I remember thinking – I think it was either in that moment or sometime – it might have been at that moment I thought, this is interesting. Here we are at the end of the decade. Wynton's got this new music with his band with Herlin Riley and Reginald Veal and etc. Branford's got his band with Tain. Father – we're back in New Orleans. I think Delfeayo's going to move back to New Orleans. This is going to be interesting. I remember thinking, man, this is going to be something to watch. I didn't use those words, but I remember thinking, this is exciting, because it felt like there was going to be some new things that was going to go down with the music.

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Sure enough, I was right, because my father – in '89 my father started a program at the University of New Orleans, and a whole flux of students came to New Orleans to study with him. There's piano players, like Glen Patscha and David Morgan. There's a wonderful trumpet player named Jeremy Davenport who came in. There's a bassist named Chris Thomas who came in. There's a drummer, Geoff Clapp. He came in. There was all these students that came into town. Brice Winston, the tenor saxophonist who now plays with Terence Blanchard. He came to town.

It was a short time after that where there was a drummer who was currently going to Loyola at the time, but eventually he went to UNO. It was a drummer who I was really jealous of at the time. Not in a hateful way, because me and him was real tight. We were real cool. But I was real jealous of him at the time. The drummer was now a gentleman who is a hero to a lot of young drummers. His name is Brian Blade. Brian Blade was somebody that came in. Folks – and I was jealous of Brian, because folks – everybody loved Brian's playing. Everybody used him. I remember – in fact, I remember even when I was at NOCCA [New Orleans Center for Creative Arts], the teacher at the time, Clark [?Herr], Jr., had a gig, and Brian Blade was on it. I said, man, everybody's calling Brian Blade. Everybody's hiring this dude. This ain't fair. Even though I couldn't really play that great. He was a much better drummer than I was. But I didn't care. Man! But it wasn't a hateful thing, because when I saw him, me and him were just cool, totally. Me and him were totally cool. But it was just kind of a funny, like Jesus, everybody's hiring this guy. I knew why.

There was a lot of things that was starting to happen. My father started to work Snug Harbor every week again, and now you have younger guys that are starting to play. There's one tragedy that did happen, and I must refer back to one of my older teachers, James Black. I'm going to rewind, and I'm going to go back to Richmond, Virginia. This is in early 1987. I was going through my father's records, because he had – this is LP. This is vinyl. As far as the debate about the CDs. "That's not a record. It's a CD." "No, it's a record. A record is a recording." So, it's a record. If anybody tells you it's not, they're wrong. You know, like the Olympics records. It's a record. Anyway, I just wanted to make that clear. He had vinyl. It was vinyl. It was a record, but it was vinyl. I was going through, and I saw this boxed set of these AFO recordings from New Orleans, which I hadn't heard, because my father's not one to brag about what he's done or say, "Here. Listen to this. We did this here . . ." No. He just doesn't do that. I found this boxed set that Harold Battiste had put together. There was all these different vinyls. Anything that was of my family's music, I would listen to, whatever it was. So, I opened it up, and the very first thing I see is "Ellis Marsalis Quartet." I said, okay, this is interesting. Oh, James Black is on this. Oh, it's early '60s. Let's check this out. Man, when I put that record on, I'm here to tell you that it was a very important moment, because all of a sudden a lot of things became very clear. One was that I put it on and I'm listening to James Black's drumming, and it was just incredible. But it wasn't a side that I had heard from him. I'm like, man, this clarity is ridiculous. As the record continues to play – of
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course, what this record originally was, was entitled *Monkey Puzzle*. I didn't know that yet, but that's what it was originally called. So, as this record is playing, the next tune was *Whistle Stop*. At this point, I'm starting to get a little bit of a better understanding about form and structure, and I'm hearing these odd phrases. *Whistle Stop* is this tune that has a 3/4 bar in the middle, which, at the time in the '60s, was unheard of. You either played in 4/4 or you played in 3/4 or you played in 5/4. At that time, there was no such thing as you're playing in 4/4, you're going to have one bar of 3 and then go in 4. I said, man, you did this in the '60s! Man, this is 20 years before *Delfeayo's Dilemma*, which is one of Wynton's songs on *Black Codes (from the Underground)*. I didn't know the changes, but I knew that – because I could hear rhythm, I knew that there was a 3/4 bar, and that was something that was different. I was thinking, man, this music is unbelievable. I don't believe this. I heard this record. This tune's in 5/4. Guys are walking through it, which also at the time was unheard of. It wasn't very common. I just said – I had a newfound respect for James Black. I said, oh, okay, I see what's happening. This dude, he's a full musician. He's not just a drummer that understands fundamentals. He's a full musician. Okay. I see what's up with this.

The tragedy was that James Black died a year after that, in 1988. We were in Richmond at the time. I remember – I think I woke up one morning. I think I heard it – either overheard that he had passed or my mother said something. I remember being on – I think I was on the phone briefly with Charlie [Marion? Berian?], who was a New Orleans promoter. He also passed, but he passed many years later. He said, “You heard the news about James?” I said yeah.

Brown: So you never got a chance to talk to him or tell him

Marsalis: Not about that music. No. That's what I mean by tragedy. I never got a chance to, because I wasn't thinking to call him and say, “Say, man.” I was 10. I wasn't thinking about that.

But the bigger tragedy, even bigger than that, is the fact that in New Orleans, that music got released, because, as I mentioned, we come back to New Orleans, my father's starting on the faculty at UNO, and Harold Battiste comes back. He's on the faculty at UNO. So then, it's gets released. It's a CD. Notw you have all these people hearing it for the first time. Now you have – or people who hadn't heard it the first time, or maybe those who did, who are hearing it again. And these young guys that are coming to town are starting to play that music. To me, the biggest tragedy was that James Black didn't get a chance to see that. That to me was the biggest tragedy of the whole thing. Not that – it was a tragedy that I didn't get to call and tell him I was listening to that. That was – but to me, the bigger tragedy was that he didn't get to see the fact that you had drummers like Geoff Clapp and Brian Blade and Mark Butler, guys who were in New Orleans at the time, who were learning about that music and playing it. He didn't get to see that. He didn't get to see that there were younger guys trying to play jazz and swing out.

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In fact, I'm reminded of another teacher that I studied with off and on, named Stanley Stevens, who was a wonderful New Orleans drummer who died very early, very unexpectedly. I think he had a hole in his throat. It was really tragic. Stanley Stevens was one of my father's students at NOCCA. He was somebody that ended up really big in the traditional circuit and could play jazz, a lot of traditional jazz, but could play a lot of different styles. To me, he died, in my view, at the wrong time, like '89, '90, because he also didn't see the scene that was about to happen. To me, that was really tragic that that didn't happen.

As far as New Orleans, also I did study with David Lee, who was a fabulous drummer. He was somebody that I got a lot of information out of in terms of different exercises, what to play on drums and how to approach solos and form. This is at a point where I'm aware of a lot of things about music. I've very aware about form and what's happening. Now, chord changes, that's a little later, in terms of the details of chord changes. I understand some things. I understood notes and what key something is in. But chord changes, that's a year away. But I did study with David Lee. I think Brian Blade also did some studying with David Lee, because I remember one time Brian Blade telling me, he say, "Man, I got this video of David Lee in the '70s playing with Sonny Rollins. It's killin'." So David Lee was able to see that scene. But to me it was a tragedy that drummers like Stanley Stevens and James Black even, which to me was even a bigger tragedy, didn't get to see the scene.

Now we're talking '89, '90. Now I'm starting to play more gigs. At this point I start to play with – not only was I playing with my father, I was also playing with my brother Delfeayo at the time. At this time, Delfeayo is almost in some ways reminiscent of the days at Berklee. In another way, he's starting to put music together with his album, which was slowly happening. I didn't know that at the time, but he was putting together tunes. I remember we did this demo for this session where he said, "Yeah. I got this idea for this tune, and I got this vamp. We're going to play this vamp that's in 11." I say, all right. We're driving to the studio in the car, and he's explaining this. Then he tells me, "Hey, man, could you play a Blakey kind of rhythm?" Okay. So he's playing. So I start playing these triplets. "Okay. That's Blakey-ish. All right. I guess that'll work." So we go in the studio and record this thing, record this tune. It was all right. Record this session that we did. Of course, the funny thing is, that session ended up being the title track to his album called *Pontius Pilate's Decision* that he released on RCA Novus in '92.

I've fast-forwarded through a lot of things, but at that time I started to play with him at a place called the Crescent City Brewhouse. We started – we were working there a lot, every week when I could make it. I was there a lot of the time. That's when he was getting his music together for the *Pontius Pilate's Decision* album. He was starting to get it together even a little bit before then, but he was starting to play it, and that album was starting to take shape.

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That album – so now, I’m starting to record. It’s funny, because at the time of the demo, I did some tunes with my father for an album called *Heart of Gold*. We recorded two songs, one of which got released. I think it was *This Can’t Be Love*. It was just a standard that I played with him. I think it was just something my father wanted me on one song since we had been playing. So we did that.

Now, when Delfeayo did the *Pontius Pilate* record, I will say that there was some issue to whether or not I should have been on the recording. I’m not going to name parties, but there were those who were saying, “I don’t know if Jason should be on this.” It was fair, because I was just 14. So it was totally understandable. But – and I wasn’t on the whole thing, which was good. I didn’t want to be on the whole thing – but at the same time, I felt that I should have been on that record, because we had been playing this music. So I said, man, let me – you know what. I’m – to be honest, my practicing was not consistent. I’ll be honest about that. It wasn’t as consistent as it should have been. So, I remember a few months before the session, I said, I’m going to practice every day. I’m going to see to that. I’m going to practice every day and make sure that I’m in top form when it’s time to make this session, because for him it was a very big deal. For me it was, but for me it was more appearing on the record, more so than the session itself. But I think for him it was all of those things, because it was in New York at RCA studios, which was one of the last great studios of the past that were left. He had members of Wynton’s band – Wynton’s band, Branford’s band in there. He was mixing a lot of different people. So I knew I am going to be on the same record with – Jeff “Tain” Watts and Herlin Riley were professionals. So I got to really step up the game here. It turned out fine.

But that’s what was going on in New Orleans. I’m playing, but you have all these other guys that are playing as well, a lot of young – it turns out, it was a heck of a scene during that time in New Orleans. So the feeling that I had in ’89 turned out to be true.

Brown: I think I saw you in ’90, if not ’91, playing at the Heritage Festival with your father in one of the tents.

Marsalis: Yeah, that would be correct.

Brown: I remember them introducing you. “This is the youngest Marsalis son. He’s 14, and he’s up here playing.” You held your own. That’s for sure.

Marsalis: Yeah, that would be correct, Jazz Fest. I definitely was working Jazz Fest quite a bit at that time.

Brown: So, you’re at 14. When do you start forming your own group? Because obviously you’re starting to conceptualize music in a personalized way.

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Marsalis: Yeah. It was after – when was that? I’m going to – I’m drawing a blank, because I remember it. You know what? It was later that year.

I’ll tell a little bit of a story about the *Pontius Pilate’s Decision* session, because it was January of ’92. It’s a good story in terms of just the week of that session and all the players involved. Once again, swapping brothers again, because Branford – the first session, he’s there, and Wynton was there for some of the sessions as well. I think, if I’m not mistaken, it was the first day. I remember this well, because the first day – the second day – it might have been the first – we played, and at the end of the session, I ended up with Branford. So I’m with him. We’re just hanging out. Then Branford, I remember he played this little session for this back[-up] – for a vocalist. I guess it was a pop song. I remember it was like, “Be nice.” I’m like, “Okay. I don’t know what you mean.” It was at a point where, if I would have been real mean and hostile at age 8 – I’m 14 now, and I’m not thinking about that any more. I’m just along for the ride. But I remember him saying, “Be nice.” I’m like, okay. That’s fine. I’m just here for the ride. So he does the session.

Afterwards, I went to his place. I remember – there’s two things I remember. He turns on this stereo, and there’s this music playing. He turns it off, and he says, “That’s Wagner.” It’s like, “Who?” “Richard Wagner, some *Ring* cycle.” “What is that?” “It’s this opera.” “Okay.”

Also what I remember is, Branford had this cassette. He was singing to himself this idea for a song. He played the cassette. The cassette – it was him singing [Marsalis sings a fast bebop-like line]. That was all there was.

I spent the night at his place. I wake up, and he’s got his soprano saxophone. All of a sudden, he starts playing this tune [Marsalis sings the same melody at a medium tempo in a fuller version]. I was like, “Branford, that’s trad. That’s like a trad jazz” “Yeah, man. It’s a tune I’m going to record.” Okay.

Another small thing that I remembered was, when we were in the car on the way to the studio, the jazz radio was on, and they’re playing Ornette Coleman. They’re playing *Ramblin’*. I don’t know this, but I just remember them saying, “Oh yeah, *Ramblin’*.” [Marsalis sings a phrase.] He’s singing along. I’m like, “Damn, *Ramblin’*. I’ll remember that.” That’s all I said. “I’ll remember that.” I’ll get that, one day, and I did.

During that week it was interesting because he was also – not only was Delfeayo recording for *Pontius Pilate’s Decision*, Branford was recording for *I Heard You Twice the First Time*, which was his blues record at the time. So this is what I mean by, there’s a lot that was going on. So I had a chance to check that out. Now, Delfeayo’s in front of the glass and he’s behind the glass, engineering and producing – not engineering, but producing that session. So there was a lot happening. That was just a great week for me, because there was a lot that was going on in terms of the music that was being created, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

and it was an inspiring week. I remember shortly after that week, after we finished recording, I just say yeah, I'm definitely going to be a musician. If I had any doubts, I'm definitely going to be a professional musician for sure.

After that time is when – yeah, I think it was shortly after that time that I start writing music. I start to write. Yeah, I think – yeah, it was shortly after that or maybe around that time I start writing music and I start writing my own compositions. It was the fall of '92 when I start – yes, it was the fall of '92 that I started doing my own shows. No, spring of – I take that back – spring of '92 that I did my first show as a bandleader at Snug Harbor. That was the first show. It was a very interesting show, because there was a lot of guys who were NOCCA students. Jason Stuart was the bassist on that show. He had graduated NOCCA, but he was NOCCA alumni. He was on that gig. Adonis Rose, who is a drummer, was playing piano, because Adonis has piano skills. He's playing piano. And I think there was an alto player named Charles Taylor who sadly is no longer with us. He was playing saxophone. Kenyatta Beasley was playing trumpet. That was the first show that I did as a leader, that I actually had put together.

Around this time – we didn't do any original music on this show. But I'm starting to write, starting to put ideas together. The first show where I did debut original music was in the spring of '93. Is that right? The spring of – it was either the spring of – you know what? I think it was the spring of '93. I'm just trying – it was the spring or fall.

Brown: We won't go beyond that in the chronology. I'm just going to go back. Could you just tell us, what was the repertoire for that first gig if you weren't doing originals?

Marsalis: Okay. Sure.

Brown: Was it standards? Or were you playing fusion?

Marsalis: The repertoire for the first gig that I ever did as a leader was – it was standards and covers. We would cover things like – just the usual standards. I can't remember all of them, but it would be – like for example, we did *Two Bass Hit*, for instance. We might do a blues or something like *Au Privave*. Also I remember covering some newer songs, things like *Country By Choice* by Marcus Roberts, or, what else? There were some other tunes. I'm forgetting what they were, too.

Brown: We're going to take a break. Maybe they'll come to you. We got to take a short break just to change the tape. We'll take

Marsalis: Okay. Sure.

Brown: Let's just pick it up where you left off, Jason, talking about your first group and your first group under your name and then starting to write your own music.

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Marsalis: The first gig that I ever did – I can't remember all of the tunes, but it was a mixture of standards and also what I dubbed current music, like I may do a composition of Marcus Roberts. I may do – like *Country by Choice*, which was a little easier to play. I may play something that's by Terence Blanchard. I can't remember what, but tunes that weren't – they weren't too hard. I can't remember what it was. I think I did something from Donald Harrison as well. I just can't remember. But I remember wanting to do current tunes. Rather than doing the standards, do some newer tunes that I felt was worth playing as well. So that was what the first show was.

I did some shows. I started doing some more shows. The band that I had wasn't a working group, but it was peers that went to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. We would play in class. We'd have maybe some shows we'd do here and there, but it wasn't a working group. That was the first show that I did. That was the spring of '92.

Brown: It was a quintet.

Marsalis: It was a quintet, yes: trumpet, saxophone, and rhythm section.

Brown: Then you were mentioning that later on you started bringing in your own tunes.

Marsalis: I did. That – what I then started to do – this was – this is where I'm trying to get the years right. This was in '93. Yeah, this first show was '91, '92. Around '93 is when I start doing some writing. I start – starting to play original music. I believe it was October of '93 that I did a show in which it was the first time that I had played a show of all original compositions.

Around this time I'm starting to – I apologize for stalling again. I'm just trying to think through this. I was using students from NOCCA, but then I also started using students who went to UNO. I started calling those guys to play. The NOCCA students, I think, was '92. Yeah, that's what it was. The NOCCA students was '92 – early '92 – and then '92, '93 was when I started using UNO students. I still used NOCCA students sometime, but I started using the guys who went to college. That was a pianist named Glen Patscha, a trumpeter named Antoine Drye, a saxophonist named Brice Winston, a bassist named Neal Caine. I started using them.

October of '93 – I think it was October 10th – was a very important show, because I opened up for the great Elvin Jones. I tell you, it was definitely an honor, because I had never heard Elvin live. I was really looking forward to hearing Elvin live and meeting Elvin Jones for the first time. I remember that night I got to set up the drums. I met Elvin's wife Keiko. I met her. It's like, "Oh man. It's great to meet you. I'm really looking forward to meeting your husband Elvin." She asked me, "Have you ever heard

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him play live?” “No.” “Oh, you got to hear him play live.” “I know. You’re right. I know. This is why I’m looking forward to this day.”

I eventually did meet him. I was very honored. I wouldn’t say scared, but I was just really honored, really happy, like, “I’m so glad to finally meet you after all these years of hearing recordings. I can’t wait to hear you tonight.”

My band did play. We did play. It was all my original music at the time. In fact, in relation to more recent things, one of the tunes that we played is this blues that recently was recorded on *Music Redeems: At the House, in Da Pocket*. That was the first time I had played that, was that particular night. That was a tune that I wrote in high school.

So that night was important, one, because it was the first night that I played all original music, and I got to hear Elvin Jones. It was amazing. It was better than the records that I was hearing. It was just an important night as a drummer. It was definitely.

I had a similar experience a year later at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, where I had my set. We played – a quintet. We played original music. And who closes out the day, but Max Roach, playing solo drums. I’m in the front, checking him out. I don’t know if I was supposed to be there, but I didn’t care. They had people telling me, “Would you move out of the way?” I’m like, I’m watching Max. I probably should get out of the way, but I don’t care. I’m watching Max, hearing him play his solos and so forth. It was a similar thing. I was honored to meet him. If I heard this right – afterwards, I went up to him and said, “It was such an honor to hear you play.” He turns to me and he says, “Your set was kickin’ ass, man.” “It was? You liked that? Oh, thank you.”

It was an honor just to hear them, these two masters that I had grown up hearing on various records. It was great moments for me, to hear them play. Hearing Max, it started to shape my drum solo concepts.

But not to get too further. That was when I started to lead my own groups then, writing my own music.

Brown: Let’s talk about writing your own music. What are some of your inspirations and influences as far as composition, looking at role models, existing masters? Were your brothers encouraging and/or offering any kind of constructive criticism? Or your father? Let’s talk about your development as a composer.

Marsalis: Wow. The reason why I have to say wow is because really the influences was anything that sounded good to me. I did have jazz influences, but it was also influences from classical music, like, for example – and I want to go back to classical music just for a little bit, because it was around this time, in ’92, where I start to really listen to and enjoy classical music. I heard it before, but I didn’t really have a belief in it. It was just
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something that was on, but now – my first brush of really wanting to get into classical music was, I remember hearing this piece on television. This is a very unusual story. So bear with me, because it has to do with what the mind remembers and why the mind remembers something. I don't know why, but I remember hearing this music that was on television. It was this classical music. It was really driving. Something in my mind said, You know what? I think that's – this memory. I'm having these memories of things. I said, I think that's this Gustav Holst piece called *The Planets*. I think that's what that is, because I remembered as a little kid in elementary school, there was a documentary on space and planets and that piece came up. I'm thinking, I think that's what that was. I wasn't sure if it was. I thought that's what it was.

Another part to this story is I'm going through these old reel-to-reels, because my brothers and father, they would record on this old reel-to-reel machine, which – I have the reels. The machine doesn't work any more, but I have the reels. I found this reel of *The Planets*. I'm like, let me put this on. I put it on, and sure enough, that's what it was, and I liked it. It's like, yeah. I remember thinking, I want to get into this music. I think I told my father that. So he bought on CD a recording of George Solte conducting Gustav Holst's *The Planets*. I remember I would listen to just the first movement for like a week. Then I would listen to movements one and two for like a few weeks. Then I'd listen to movement – I kept doing this until I finally got to the whole thing. I remember, after that, saying yeah, I want to get into classical music, because I believe in it.

One of the first people that I started to listen to was Igor Stravinsky, only because I remember being in the car, riding with Delfaeyo, and some classical music on, and he'd say, "Sounds like Stravinsky. I think this is *Petrushka*." "Huh? Okay. Don't know." There was some recordings of Stravinsky in the house. I put them on. Put on *Firebird Suite* and loved it a lot. I thought, this is nice. Put that on. I heard *Petrushka* too, which I didn't like. I didn't hate it, but I didn't – wasn't in love with it at first, but after a few listens, I was like, man, this is great. Okay. And I'll never forget when I first heard *Le Sacre du Printemps*, also known as *The Rite of Spring*. That thing floored me. It blew my mind. I remember all of the textures, the different rhythms, the different time changes, different sounds, the different – all the power. I remember thinking – I just loved it. That was when I said, yeah, I'm in love with this music. I remember listening to it. This is November, a week before Thanksgiving, in '92. I remember every day – I listened to it every day for a week. It became an obsession. I'd wake up and put it on. Later in the evening, put it on again. I just loved this piece. For a whole week, that's all I did. There was so much that appealed to me. It just amazed me.

Brown: Did you go consulting the scores? Or are you just taking in everything aurally?

Marsalis: No. I didn't have any scores. I just put – I took the jazz musician [?] – I just put it on and would listen. I just listened to what instrument is doing what. What is going on? There was a lot of details that I found later, looking into the scores that I didn't know. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



at the time, that amazed me even more. But I didn't have – I didn't use that. It's great to do that, but at the time, I just didn't do that. I just put it on and listened. Man, what is going on? It just amazed me.

So that's when I started to get into – at the time, I'm also attending the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. There was a teacher, Dr. Steven Danker, who taught music theory and taught classical music in the repertoire. I was starting to get into that while listening to this. So I'm getting reinforced from education on a whole bunch of angles.

While this is going on – and I just want to make this a real quick side note, because I thinking about it – at some point my father has this conversation with me. He says, “I see that you're into percussion. I think it would be a good idea if you explored mallets.” I said, “Yeah, I think you might be right.” So he was able to get me a set of vibes. I started practicing on it, but at the time, my practicing was very inconsistent. It was, I practiced a little bit, then not as much, a little bit, not as much.

Brown: When you say practice, what are you practicing?

Marsalis: Practicing scales. I'm just trying to get scales. But it was practice a little bit, then not as much, a little bit, then not as much. It was very inconsistent. It should have been a lot more consistent than it was, but I hate to say that it wasn't, because I was still occupied with drums.

But I'm definitely interested in classical music. Another thing that my father told me was, “You should attend the Eastern Music Festival. I think that's a program that will be very important.” I said okay. I auditioned. I did attend it for the summers of '93, '94. He was very right, because I was able to get more into more repertoire, and I also got into the full range of percussion, to be in the back of an orchestra and say, okay, this is what it takes to play the triangle. Okay, you're going to have to play *Scheherazade*. I found out how hard triangle was. This is what it takes to play crash cymbals and bass drum and all of this. I got the finer aspects of what percussion was really about, attending the Eastern Music Festival.

I know that I did go on a bit of a tangent, but, to answer your first question about what influenced my composing, it was all of those things. I may get an idea from classical music. I may get an idea from jazz. The music itself was based out of, I would have to say, a lot of – mostly elements of some of Wynton's '80s music, but there was also influences from stuff Branford was doing in the '90s and stuff Wynton was doing in the '90s at that time. I would have to say that those were the main influences.

There was other stuff. I was also influenced by a lot of the history of the music. Really, my music would be influenced by anything that would trigger an idea. It could be

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something in classical music. It could be something I heard on the radio. Anything that triggered an idea, I would do that. That's what inspired my music. So I started writing.

What's interesting was, when I look back, at first the piano player had to help out with a lot of the parts, because sometimes I wouldn't even have piano music. Not really. I may have some changes or I may have a melody and then the piano player, Glen Patscha, would help out and hook it up, which he did. But I may have real basic changes. At the time, I was starting to study changes, how chords work, and how the extensions work. I was studying that while this is going on. So that starts to come a little later. I start to incorporate that a little later in my own music. As composing, that's what my influences were. My influences have always grown, and they'll continue to grow.

Brown: Looking at your career, you're becoming more and more involved with composition, but you make this drastic shift. Let's talk about some of the other groups that you're working with, some of your other collaborators, and then that leadup to your collaboration with Marcus Roberts.

Marsalis: Also in the summer of '93, there was a very important shift in terms of how I was thinking about music. It was while I was attending EMF. I walked into this CD store. It was BB's Compact Discs. It was across the street from the campus. I got in there. I'm just browsing, looking through records, seeing what they have, and this record catches my eye. I'm looking at it. It has Columbia Contemporary Masters. To explain the CD reissuing market, I would also see the Columbia Jazz Masters. It would be a '50s Miles [Davis] record, or a Benny Goodman record, or a Louis Armstrong record. But this says Contemporary Masters. I look at it. Return to Forever, *Romantic Warrior*. What is it? I'd never heard of it, didn't know what it was. I just said, I have to go to the listening station. I have never heard of this. I went to the listening station. I said, "I got to hear this." I'm opening up the booklet. Oh, Chick Corea. I know who. Lenny White, I've heard. Al Di Meola, I don't know. Stanley Clarke. Oh, I've heard of these guys. That music started, and I sat there, confused. It was like, what the hell is going on? This is weird. What are they doing? Wait, there's a section change. What are they doing? Wow, Lennie White is killing. What's going on? I didn't understand what was going on. I'm like, what are they doing? That bothered me for quite some time. I did not understand what I was hearing. It was to the point where I called Branford. "Have you ever checked out Return to Forever?" "Yeah, man." "What is going on? I don't know what they're doing." "You'll check it out." Thanks. Some help you are.

I just didn't know what they were playing. It was puzzling. But your ego can work in two ways. One, you can say, that's beneath me. But it worked the other way, like, I got to find out, because I can't sit here and not know what's going on. I got to know, and I'm going to find out. I'm going to know what they were doing.

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It was a shift, because what it also taught me was that the jazz fusion movement in the 1970s was not what I thought it was. Because I had heard – what I thought jazz fusion was, honestly, was the music of Kenny G. I thought that – that’s what I thought it was. I thought it was a lot of – like some of the more ’80s, more watered down, more mainstream music. That’s what I thought it was. In fact, I remember my father made a statement to me. He said, “Tain gets a lot of his ideas from fusion.” I just said, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I didn’t say that, but I just wrote it off, like that doesn’t make any sense. But when I heard that, I said, oh, wait, maybe there’s something to that. I remember saying, I’m going to go to the ’70s and find out what happened. I started to do that.

At the same time, I started broadening my horizons, because I started to – I started realizing – I realized this earlier, actually. Earlier meaning that in ’89 I did this gig in New Orleans with Kirk Joseph, a great sousaphone player in New Orleans who played with the Dirty Dozen Brass Band. I was playing this funk tune on the gig, and my father looks at me and says, “You’re not playing the snare drum right.” “Excuse me?” “No. You’re not playing it right. See, you’re lifting the stick off the drum. You have to lay the stick into the drum.” “Oh.” So I was, okay. I didn’t have any concept of how to play funk or any of that. So, after hearing these records, I thought, I’m going to really make an effort to practice this stuff, because I don’t really know how to play it. So I not only started checking out Return to Forever, but I also got these James Brown CDs that I had had and started practicing with these records. What I learned was, after 20 minutes, using the principle that my father told me about laying the snare on the drum, [my] arm would wear out. I had no technique to do it. I said, well, got to shed. Got to practice this.

Subsequently, around this time I was getting into a lot of different things, a lot of – because during the same summer of 1993, I went to California when Branford was on *The Tonight Show*. I went out there just to hang for a little bit. I went out there with my mother. I actually did have one drum lesson with Jeff “Tain” Watts. We hung out. He talked a lot about Thelonious Monk’s music and how he was really checking that out and what he was learning from Frankie Dunlop. He then discussed the importance of listening to Afro-Cuban music. He recommended that I check out a lot of ’50s Tito Puente and also the music of Jerry Gonzalez and the Fort Apache Band, and also the importance of checking out somebody like a Papa Jo Jones. Papa Jo Jones was a name that I had heard and had been aware of, and I felt empty not having heard him, like, there’s something wrong. I have to hear him. So I was starting to get into Papa Jo. We talked about that. It was at the point where I was starting – I had just bought *Pres and Teddy*. I was listening to it and said, “Yeah, I was listening to Papa Jo. I’m going to investigate that.” He says, “Oh yeah, that’s great, isn’t it?” We talked a little. He recommended a Lester Young live thing that – *Live at Birdland*, some radio broadcast that Papa Jo was playing on.

I was really broadening my horizons, because while this was going on, I did that, got some Tito Puente records and so forth. I remember – I don’t know how we got to this, but For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

I remember once my father – we were discussing music. Somehow we got to talking about the great vocalist and singer Mr. Donnie Hathaway. He said, “If you can find it, find this record – if you can find it, there’s a record called *Extension of a Man*. It’s something else.” Okay. Not long after that, I found the record, and he was right. It was amazing.

At this point, I was getting into things other than just jazz records. I’m still expanding my jazz knowledge. I’m getting into Charles Mingus. I’m getting more details. I’m getting back into the Miles quintet. I’m getting more into the Trane quartet. I’m getting more details there, but also – Mingus is one person. I’m getting into – there’s Duke Ellington of course, who I’ve always checked out intermittently. But I’m getting more into the history of the music.

I was also checking out a lot of the newer music that was being recorded at the time, whether it was Kenny Garrett or Joshua Redman or Roy Hargrove. I just wanted to know what guys were doing.

Brown: Let me just interject here, because you’re going to be leaving here to go perform at the Preservation Hall, and you’re going to be playing trad. Now, you are a son of New Orleans. Besides jazz, funk, Meters, Neville Brothers. That’s all coming out of here. Are you saying that that was not somehow permeating any of your knowledge or influences at this time?

Marsalis: Not yet, because – I’ll explain. As a kid, I heard a lot of the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and Hot Sevens recordings. I had even heard some of Jelly Roll’s music. But I wasn’t really playing trad. I wasn’t on that scene at that time. At the same time, I did hear some recordings of Baby Dodds when I was a senior in high school, a lot of his solo things, but I wasn’t really playing – it wasn’t until I did a set – I started to get together with Dr. Michael White. I was a senior in high school. We started to meet. We didn’t meet a lot, but we’d meet here and there. I didn’t do a performance with him until, I think, four years later, where it was – four or five years later, where it was [?]. We were playing some trad, and I remember trying to do some of the more basic things we talked about, and it worked. That was my introduction into playing trad. Shortly after that, he started to call me, and I started to work a little bit more. I was aware of trad, but I didn’t really explore trad until much later.

Brown: But you talk about getting into some funk . . .

Marsalis: The funk thing . . .

Brown: . . . but you got the Meters right here . . .

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Marsalis: Well, well, well, well, but no. I'll explain that. The Meters, I didn't get into until college. Here's why: because my father didn't have a lot of those records, because he heard them live. So he didn't have those records. Also, those records were not available. That's a whole legal mess. I don't know the details. I just know that there was legal problems, and you could not get those Meters albums on CD. So the only thing that I was able to get was *The Best of*, which was a double CD set Rounder put out. I was in college, early college.

But the funk thing, I didn't start practicing until maybe, I think, was it junior in high school? That's when I started to do that. I started to see the importance of working on that and practicing that. That's when I really started to branch out.

There was funk that I heard as a kid. There was some Earth, Wind and Fire. My father was a big fan of them. I would say, though, I didn't hear Parliament until seventh grade. I was helping Delfeayo unpack. He was moving to New Orleans, and he puts on Parliament. "What is that? Damn!" It was *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*. I was like, man. This is some pop music I've never heard. This is great. Better than my generation has, even though I didn't know that my generation was going to get even worse. That was my first exposure to that.

It's funny. I've had a lot of exposure to pop music through Delfeayo. That's very odd, but it's really true. He'd come home and say, "Man, I was checking out this Bill Withers *Ain't No Sunshine*. This is killing. Check out the drums on this. The arrangement is so great." I was like, yeah, that is happening. It is nice.

We've had a lot of discussions about pop music, oddly enough. In high school there was a music friend of mine that said that – he was a lot older than I was. He was talking about the Beatles and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*. I'd say, I never heard that. Let me go and check that out. I'd think – I'd ask Delfeayo about it, and he's like, "Oh yeah, man, Beatles have some stuff. Plus, from a production standpoint, George Martin" was doing this and that. So, when I look back, he and I would have these interesting conversations about various pop music, various pop records, or rock records, or what have you.

But no, you're right, all of those things, like trad and funk, like the Meters, do come out of New Orleans, but it wasn't until a little later that I was exploring that, because I was into more of the modern jazz in New Orleans and the stuff that my brothers were doing. The funk wasn't until late high school, early college, to answer that question. It was middle of high school when I started to branch out and check out a lot of the '70s jazz fusion. I realized that it was not the music that I thought it was. Of course, I also found out how it ended up being more watered down as time went on. I did figure that out. But I did branch out and learn a lot of things from that.

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That's when, as I graduated high school, I started to explore different people to play with. In fact it was in '97, the fall of '97, that I first met – I was aware that he was in town – but I first met Bill Summers, the percussionist, who was on Herbie Hancock's *Headhunters* record. I met him. I would sometimes go to his house. He would have bata practice, the ritual drumming from Cuba. They would practice bata, and I would go there and check it out.

While that's going on, I also met another gentleman named Curtis Pierre, who was the leader of an organization called Casa Samba, and they dealt with Brazilian drumming and Brazilian percussion. I started to go with him and practice. I remember the first rehearsal. When I played, I'd play a rhythm for one hour, and then I'd go home, and I forgot what it was. I'd go back and do it again. It wasn't until maybe the third or fourth rehearsal that I remembered it.

I started to get into Brazilian music and Afro-Cuban music, and how these – this started to really improve my playing, because I started to get into the flexibility of those rhythms.

Brown: When you say you're getting into this music, are you listening to it? Or are you actually starting to learn how to perform on any of the instruments?

Marsalis: It's both. I had listened to Afro-Cuban music from listening to a lot of Tito Puente, but a lot of the details, in terms of what cascara parts and what a songo rhythm is and what – I started to get that. I hadn't had that before, but now I'm getting that, and how to play with a percussionist. With Casa Samba, I was starting to listen to more Brazilian music while I was practicing with them. So, yes, I was starting to do that, and I was starting to use that even in my own music.

Brown: But I'm saying, are you actually playing any of the traditional instruments from those genres?

Marsalis: Yes.

Brown: Which ones?

Marsalis: With Casa Samba, they had the caixa, which is the snare drums, their own snare drums and sordus, the bass drums. It was their traditional instruments.

Brown: Yeah, but are you learning these instruments, is what I'm asking?

Marsalis: Yes, that's what I'm – at the rehearsals I would play the caixas and sordus – mostly caixa though, but sordus. I didn't learn every single one. Cuica's a problem. Cuica is [Marsalis accurately imitates the sound with his voice]. I just can't – you got to get the For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

right amount of friction on the fingers and the [t?] to get the different pitches. I just can't do it.

Brown: How about pandero?

Marsalis: Whew. Pandero's a problem. I learned the technique, trying to [Marsalis imitates the sound]. That's a problem. I can't do that as well. But I was getting into the traditional instruments and learning them, and some I played better than others.

Brown: What about the Afro-Cuban?

Marsalis: Now Afro-Cuban, I must say, a lot of the hand drumming I didn't get as much into. Bill Summers did explain the techniques in terms of proper technique to play on conga, and the different drums, and how to even – I learned that, but I don't play that as much.

Brown: What about timbales?

Marsalis: Timbales I did get a chance to play a little bit. But that's stick percussion. You use stick percussion.

Brown: Right. That's what I'm saying, because you've been playing

Marsalis: That, yes, in terms of like the different ways of – like the caixa patterns that one can play, and how – when to switch to the bell, or when to use the cymbal, and how to use the drums, and the accompaniment role. So yes, I did get a chance to do that, working with Bill Summers. Eventually, with the Los Hombres Calientes band that I was in, and the Casa Samba group, which – I was in those at the same time. I was really getting a great education, playing with both of those bands. Now we're in the late '90s. By this point, I'm out of college. But those were very important to my development as a musician.

Brown: Let's backtrack and talk about your relationship with Bill Summers and the development of Los Hombres Calientes.

Marsalis: Interestingly enough, that band was Irvin Mayfield's idea. But the reason why all three of us ended up on the bill is because we all had important contributions. Irvin called me and said, "I'm going to do – I want to do this gig at Snug Harbor with you and with Bill Summers. I want us to play some Afro-Cuban tunes." "Oh, that's great, Irvin." I said, "Have you ever – have you been to Bill's house?" He said no. I said, "You need to go there on Saturdays. They're having the bata, and you need to check that out to see what they're doing." Irvin and I, we have our own history, because we went to NOCCA together, and I even went to elementary school with him too. So I've known him quite a

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ways too. He did that. He went to Bill's house, and he checked out the bata. He started to see how the percussion worked. He started to get more of the details that I was learning as well.

So, the first gig we did, Irvin had some ideas. We didn't really rehearse. I think we only rehearsed once. We rehearsed one time. But a lot of it was more, I want to do this tune this way. What rhythm would fit there? I want to do this tune that way. So it would be tunes we would know, and he would fit the percussion. Some things we rehearsed, but a lot of it would be, he'd fit the percussion on top of tunes.

That first success was very – was a huge success. People loved it, and there was all this buzz that went on about this new group. Next thing I know, like the following Monday, we're signing a contract. "What?" "We're going to make a record." "Huh? We just had the first gig. Wait a minute." So that's when we ended up recording. But yes, that's how – meeting him, I definitely learned a lot about the details of Afro-Cuban music and a lot of the rhythms and so forth, and what to use.

Brown: So you leave Los – according to the historical record, you leave Los Hombres Calientes and then take up with Marcus Roberts. Do you want to talk about that transition?

Marsalis: Yes. Marcus, we're going to have to rewind quite a bit, because I first joined Marcus's group in '94, when I was a senior in high school. Marcus is somebody I had known of course from playing – he played with Wynton. I had seen him here and there, in and out. We did this little session where I played a duet with him. That was recorded. Thankfully it was never released. But he knew then that he had wanted to work with me in the future.

He and my father were doing duet shows. They did dual piano concerts. They would go on the road. He was even asking me about – asking my father about me even then. My father said, "Jason's not ready yet. I've got some ideas. I want him to go to Eastern Music Festival and get some training, get some stuff together. I'll let you know." It was about a senior in high school when Marcus called again, and he said, "Yeah. Jason's ready now." That's when I started to play with him.

There was – we did – it's funny. When I look back on that time, we did a lot of work. In terms of recordings, we did *Portraits in Blue*, which dealt with his jazz version of *Rhapsody in Blue*. We did a trio record of original music called *Time and Circumstance*, which frankly I'd love to explore again, because at that time Marcus was exploring different ways of playing jazz trio, and I didn't have the musical understanding that I do now, that I did then. I knew what he was doing, and I played the music, but now I have a better understanding of what should be done with that music.

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We did a lot of things. There was a lot of different projects he was doing. I think that's why some may say that I left Hombres to play with Marcus. I was already playing with Marcus, but I was in school, and there was a lot going on, even in his group. We did this record, *Blues for the New Millennium*, where it was me and Ali Jackson were playing two drums for some of the record. Not all of it. But some tunes he'd play. Some tunes I'd play. Then some tunes we'd play together. Ali was in place of me, because I was in school.

So that was going on. Then we did a recording of standards, because we wanted to deal more with the standard repertoire of playing trios, like Oscar Peterson or Ahmad Jamal. We're learning more standard tunes. We did songs sung by Nat "King" Cole and music sung [*sic*: written] by Cole Porter. Get it? *Cole After Midnight*. Then we did another record of original music. Our sound is starting to get better. It's starting to grow. It's starting to get better.

With Marcus, we did *In Honor of Duke*. It's a record of original music that he dedicated to Duke Ellington. So we're developing this rapport in terms of how we want to play trio, while at the same time I was playing with Los Hombres Calientes. But when I left the group in 2000, I decided that I wanted to focus more on playing with Marcus, because there were some things that we were starting to get into and explore. I started to do that. I must say, though, that I think that I liked playing with Marcus, but I don't know if I really loved it yet, to be honest, and I've even told him this. I enjoyed the gig, and I was learning a lot, but I think – around 2000, the more that we played, the more I started to see conceptually what we were doing as a trio, because we were doing things that were very unconventional in terms of the role of the drums and the role of the bass and breaking them up, rather than just having bass and drums play behind piano. He wanted an equal conversation with all three people. So that's starting to happen.

I think, for me, the turning point was in 2003. No, it was 2002. We were doing some more *Rhapsody in Blue* concerts. We start to change how we're playing *Rhapsody in Blue*. We start improvising a little more, start being flexible. I find out that the great conductor, maestro, Seiji Ozawa, was asking Marcus about another Gershwin piece called *Concerto in F*. He's like, "I'd like to do *Concerto in F*." Marcus would say no. Every time he would ask him, "*Concerto in F*?" "No." Then, after a while, he just stopped asking him. We did *Rhapsody* at Tanglewood, where Ozawa did many residencies. I think Marcus turned to him and said, "You know what? I think I'm ready to do *Concerto in F*." Ozawa says, "Are you sure?" "Yeah." Then Ozawa got on the phone, and he set up a concert in Japan where we'd have to do *Concerto in F* and world-premiere it.

I remember summer of 2002 we did some work, a little bit, but we didn't get to finish the work until – what was it? It was 2003, where we were fortunate to go to New Jersey PAC – NJPAC in Jersey, the performing arts center there in Newark, and Marcus had a solo. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



piano show. But we were lucky. We had three days where all we could do was practice. I remember preparing for this piece. It was great, because I had a score of Gershwin's transcript, and the bassist at the time, Roland Guerin, had a conductor's score, and Marcus had a Braille score. We all had scores. I loved working on that, because we all said, all right, how are we going to do this? What can we do? Because we wanted to deal with taking that into the jazz idiom, but still playing with classical musicians. So we would have this discussion. First movement. All right. What about this part? We can swing this part. Okay, we can play this groove with the orchestra. That'll work. We can play that with the orchestra. Okay. We can do this with the orchestra. All right. We'll leave that alone. We're all looking at the score. I'm looking at it. I'm saying things like, "Marcus, right here, it's just violins, but there's no piano, which means he probably filled it in later, which means you might be able to improvise there in this part. Or maybe you can leave it alone." Things like that. We'd go through this discussion with all three movements. We were able to just practice and play it straight through. We really worked on it.

Brown: So you're saying it's just the rhythm section. You three are coming up with the arrangement, the conception for this.

Marsalis: Yes, all three of us. We worked on it. Then we had another show that we did in, I think, Alabama, and then Texas, right before we do this premiere. We were still – we'd practice it. We'd play through it straight through. Finally, we did the premiere in – it was in Japan. It was so funny, because musically Marcus was really nervous, because he wanted everything to go right. It did. But I knew things were going to be okay with, I think, one, we played through everything for Seiji Ozawa. Seiji Ozawa said, "Ah, you spend time, I see." I said, "Oh yeah. Oh yes. We have to admit that we spent time on this. Oh we did."

I noticed the New Japan Philharmonic, the orchestra, their rhythm was perfect. It was right on, and I said, we'll be fine. And it was. We did the debut, the world premiere of the piece. The rhythms just fit like a glove. I think that that moment was when I said, oh yeah, I love this, because it's playing jazz, but with an orchestra, but it's bringing these other elements out of the music that weren't brought before.

We ended up doing a performance with – later that summer – with the Berlin Philharmonic, which was a pain initially, because Berlin – I knew it was going to happen, but I was still frustrated when it was going on – Berlin's one of those classic German orchestras that's all about the music of Beethoven and Brahms and Wagner, Germanic material. Gershwin's a joke to them. So the very first rehearsals, guys are screwing up, playing stuff wrong, not caring, laughing. They didn't care, and I'm getting frustrated, because I'm having a hard time playing with the orchestra.

Brown: Was Ozawa conducting?

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Marsalis: Oh yes.

Brown: What is he doing when he's encountering these kinds of . . . ?

Marsalis: That first rehearsal, Ozawa was not happy. He told us, "I'm not happy at all. I will wake up. I will get some sleep, and I'll wake up at four in the morning and look at form. Wake up at four a.m., and I'll study score. We will go over *American in Paris*. They don't think there's music there. They'll see. We'll get music out of them." Sure enough, he got there and rehearsed them like, "Measure one. Go. No, no, no, no, no, no. This – this is how you play it. Okay, go. No, no, no, no." Over and over. It was like, ouch, oh boy. He got music out of them. So when it came to concert time, they were there.

There's a memory I have of this concert that reinforces that I'm of the belief, and I think that the jazz community proves this, that musicians in the audience are living on two different universes. We get there. Marcus is a little worried. He's a little concerned, because it's Berlin and this audience. "Classical audiences, they're kind of uptight." I'm like, "It'll be fine. They will be okay." So he plays – because he was thinking that maybe he should just play a classical – just play more of a classical improvised cadence. "They'll be fine." So he plays. After his first cadenza, or after the second cadenza, the orchestra comes in, and the audience starts applauding, which is a no-no in classical music. But hey, they felt it, it was an outdoor concert, and they went with it. I'm like, "Told you it would be all right." They loved it. We did *Rhapsody in Blue* and we did *Concerto in F*. The people loved it. They loved that show.

After that – I said, oh yeah, I'm loving this now. Since then, Marcus's music has continued to grow. What's happening now is he's going to start releasing a lot of recordings, because we've done a lot of work behind the scenes. It's not a lot of things people know about. For example, we've done residency work at Florida State University, where he teaches. We've gotten together ways of how to teach the music and methods of how to deal with drums. There's a lot that we've developed from that standpoint. But it's not things that people are aware of, because it's not out in the open, at least not yet. Right now, we're continuing to play, and we're continuing to work on the music. That's why I'm proud of some of the things we've done, and there's still a lot to go, with Marcus Roberts.

Brown: Let's talk about your focus on the vibraphone, since you've made some recordings as a leader now and you're starting to use – it seems like this is coming to the foreground as a voice for you.

Marsalis: Oh yes, oh yes, it will. It's going to stay there. Looking back, as I had mentioned earlier, my vibraphone practice was very inconsistent. I'd practice a little bit, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu



then not. When I attended EMF, I did practice on marimba, I got some things together, and I wouldn't practice as much. Then I – it was a lot of in and out. It was very inconsistent.

Finally, after I left the Los Hombres band in the year 2000, I looked over at the set of vibes and I said, I'm going to play this thing. I got to do it, because I started to get ideas of possible vocabulary – vocabulary possibilities for the instrument, and I had never explored them. So I said, I'm going to explore this. I started to practice scales a little more.

Brown: You're playing two or four mallets?

Marsalis: Two mostly, but four sometimes. It's hard, but I dealt with it. So I decided, let me get some scales and let me start learning some songs. I decided the first gig that I would do would be at Snug Harbor, our training ground. I played a duet show with my father. It was interesting, because I felt as though – even though I was in my twenties, I felt as though I was six years old again. I could barely play, and I was very nervous. My father held the show. It wasn't a great set. The people understood. They understood, okay, this is a new undertaking, and he's going to have to develop.

What was funny was, there was a while where, as far as my own shows, all I was playing was vibes. Recently there was a woman who told me – who worked at Snug Harbor – that said that people at Snug hated it. What is he doing? Why is he doing this? Why doesn't he go back to drums? But I just stuck with it. I said, no, I've got a vision. It's going to be terrible, but I'm going to keep at it.

Around 2004 is when this vision – I started to get a little better technically, and this vision starts to take shape. I start writing music for vibes. Actually, I wrote a little bit earlier than that, more like 2002. I started writing even earlier, but the vision started to take shape of what I wanted the music to be and what I want the originals to be, and my technique is getting a little better. I'm sounding like I'm 10. It's getting a little better, more convincing. So now people at Snug are starting to enjoy the show. Then it turned into, why is he doing – is he playing vibes? Is he going to play vibes? That's what happened.

Leading to current events, I was going to make a recording on vibes in November 2005, but Hurricane Katrina came in to take care of that. So that didn't happen. It wasn't until – it was 2008 that I was able to finish a recording. That's when I was able to make my first recording as a leader on the vibraphone, just to let – because I had made those two recordings for Basin Street Records in '98 and 2000, which was the culmination of the gigs I did that I mentioned earlier, where I was writing music for my groups, playing drums. Those recordings were a culmination of that. It was a culmination of that. Now, *Music Update* was a way of saying, yeah, I know it's been seven or eight years. I know
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it's been a long time, but I just want to let people know what I'm doing now, and what I've been doing is the vibes.

Now I'm brainstorming what my next move is going to be. Right now, my current idea – and this could change. I'm going to say it anyway – my idea is that in a few years I may release a record on both drums and vibes as a leader at the same time, to let folks know I'm doing both, I've written music for both, and I will continue to do that.

Brown: You must know about Joe Chambers.

Marsalis: Absolutely I know about Joe Chambers. I know about Joe from his Blue Note recordings, where he, with other people, like with Bobby Hutcherson, where they would play his music. He did a lot of stuff with Bobby, and he did some things with Freddie Hubbard. This tune called *Mirrors* that's on an album called *Breaking Point*. I know that Joe started to play vibraphone in – I think it was the '70s when it started happening. But he has made some recordings using vibes. So I'm very familiar with the fact that he plays both.

Brown: Yeah. I'm just referencing some of the things he's done in the last 15 years, where he's doing what you seem to be doing. You talk about your approach to the vibes. It seems like you have a really – like a very extra special tenacity. You said, I know I got to get to this. Where does that come from, this drive, this inner drive to realize your vision?

Marsalis: I don't know. Maybe some of it is the fact that my brothers are such hard workers. There's a lot of things that they work on. There's a lot of things that my father works on. But I'm not doing it because of pressure. I'm just doing it because of believing in music. I would hope to produce great music. That's all I would hope to do, and I'll do whatever it is that I have to do to do that. So, one of the things – I think that the fact that I started to get visions of music in terms of what music can be, in terms of what it can be. Even in high school, I started to get ideas of what had been played on vibraphone and what hadn't been played. I thought, there's a lot that hasn't been played, and I'd like to do that.

Brown: Try six mallets!

Marsalis: No. No, we're not going to be trying six mallets. It's not going to happen. I'm talking about just two. Four, there's stuff, even with that. I think what it is, is maybe the fact that there's visions of music that my brothers have had, in terms of what they wanted to do. Some of that rubbed off on me. What is it that I can do? What is it that can happen? What is it that can be done with the music? That's why it is, I'm always thinking about what can be done. I have to attribute it to that.

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Brown: Your brother Wynton has gone on record as saying that of all the brothers, you're the one who is the most gifted.

Marsalis: I guess. I guess I'm the most gifted. I think it's probably a race between myself and Branford. But whether I'm the most gifted or not doesn't really matter to me. I think what matters is what one does with the gift. That's the thing. One has to still produce when having talent. If I had more talent, but didn't play anything, so what?

Brown: What do you think he's recognizing with that statement?

Marsalis: I'll tell you why he's saying that. What he's recognizing is the fact that I was into music very early. I was into jazz music very early. The memories I have as a kid was his first record. I remember those albums. His first record, *Fathers and Sons*, and the records with Art Blakey, *Straight Ahead* and *Keystone 3*. I remember those albums, and I liked those records. I loved his music a lot. I have a very faint memory of when I was six years old and he came home. He came home for the holidays. He was like, "Check out the new record." It was *Think of One*. I remember him playing *Knozz-Moe-King*, and it blew my mind. I was like, man, what on earth is this? It's funny, because I didn't have much of a perspective of jazz or anything, but I couldn't believe what I was hearing, the fact that he had this melody that – there was a lot of these starts and stops with the band and the rhythm section, and he had this melody that the rhythm section responded to, like a chime. It's like, what? What is this? And then the cats would solo, and then he would play a signal, and it would stop. I just couldn't believe it. I'd say, I don't believe I'm hearing this. I remember those solos, all of them. I could say them back. I was that much in love with the music. That's probably why they said that I was the most talented, because I loved jazz records and would sing along with them. So I think that's where it started.

Now the perfect pitch thing was more of a rumor. I actually had relative pitch. I had to develop perfect pitch. I'd just say, my pitch is relative, like I would use notes on a violin to figure out what other pitches were. But I'd just say, well, they say I have perfect pitch. All right. I'll work on it. Let me see what different tones sound like, this note and that note. Okay. This is the sound of a B-flat. This is the sound of an F-sharp. Okay. All right. Cool. Then I'll hook it up. So then later I was able to then pick out notes and say what's what.

But I think that's what it was, the fact that I had a love for music and I was always aware of music. Like, for instance, there's one little funny story. When I was a kid, probably seven years old or eight years old, and I was watching Loony Tunes cartoons, Wynton was watching them with me for some reason. Wynton then says, "I know one thing. This music sure is hard to write." "Yeah." When he said that, I said, "You're right. This is hard to write. I hadn't thought about that." I've always paid attention to music ever since, in film, in t.v., ever since he said that. So I think it's just an awareness that I have for

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music. There's certain moments that involve music where I'm trying things that a kid may not try. I think that's why they said it.

Brown: But you also say – you also mention Branford. So what is it about you and Branford that you share in common, that may be recognized as the gift?

Marsalis: Branford – this is why I say it's a race with him. Branford can just get stuff quick. Even in high school. There's people who know, who witnessed this. It'd just be sitting around, not doing anything. "Come on. Play this." "Okay." And then have it. "What?" Meanwhile Wynton would be practicing for two hours trying to get it. "What did you – how did you . . . ?"

Branford told a story about *Sister Cheryl*, from Wynton's first record., where Branford got a soprano. He bought it somewhere. It was a great horn. He buys it. He's like, okay. It's a great horn. Never played it before. He brings it to the studio, and Wynton's like, "Let's try soprano on this." "Okay." The guys in the studio – Herbie Hancock – are like, "Wow. You sound great on that horn. You must have been playing that for years." Branford, "Yeah, right. I got this yesterday. Whatever." It was a great horn, but he hadn't hardly played it at all, and there it is. He has the gift to figure out stuff quick. I don't know if I have that. There's things I can figure out, but at the same token, there's some things that I got to sit down and really try to organize, like, okay, what is this? I'll get it, but I got to really – there's some things I got to sit down and figure out and try to see, okay, what is this exactly? So that's why I think it's a race between me, because he'll figure out things quick and didn't even have to practice on them for a week.

Brown: If we're describing the gifts of the Marsalis family, what about Delfeayo? How would you characterize his specialties?

Marsalis: To me, he's a – it's funny. He's a great organizer of music. That's something that I learned from him. He always understood the organization of music, how to organize a record and how to produce it, because with production, there's a lot of things that he understood about production, and not only that, but different things that folks have done in terms of how to use microphones, how room sounds have been used, how pop records are produced, and how this – so he's understood how to organize a record. To be honest, even in the old days, Branford and Wynton were struggling with trying to organize a record. They learned it eventually, but they were struggling with it. But Delf first, he knew, okay, I'm going to organize this.

Sometimes the personnel – sometimes the method may be very disorganized on the surface. He'd have all kinds of different personnel. It seems haywire. But he can organize it at the end of the day. The result – Delfeayo told a story about this tune called *The Crucifixion*, where he was getting Branford to open up these parts. I vaguely have a – I vaguely remember this day, because Branford was in the studio, all upset. Delf's like, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

“Okay, play. Start. Stop. Start. Stop.” “What are you doing, man? Man, this is sad. What are you doing? This is horrible.” Getting all upset. In fact, I was horsing around, talking to somebody, and Branford’s in the booth, “Man, shut up.” So then he’s like, “This is horrible, sad.” Then, when the tune is finished, Branford hears it. “Oh yeah. That sounds good. That sounds good.” So sometimes the method of getting there can be very haywire and disorganized, but he organizes it at the end of the day. He can put it together.

I’ll tell you another gift that’s very – this is unusual. This is not something that a lot of people know. Playing trombone, one thing that he does very well is playing ballads. That’s not well known, but that’s something that he can do really well. I think some of that may be the fact that he has a mind that goes back to not only the songs, but what the words are and how it’s constructed. That’s what I mean by the organization, how music is organized. That’s something that he really has a gift for, is playing ballads. In my view, more so – there’s other things he can play, but for me, ballads – that’s something that’s amazing.

Brown: To me, during the course of this interview, it’s so surprising that your interest in classical musics seems to have been precipitated by Branford rather than Wynton, because Wynton, when we look at his – the trajectory of his career, he’s known for being a virtuoso in both genres, jazz and classical. What else would you identify as Wynton’s gift, looking at the four brothers that we have here?

Marsalis: Wynton’s gift, I think, would be his drive and determination and his discipline to get it right, because he’s another one – he organizes in a different way from Delfeayo. They’re both organized, but it’s in a different way. I think he’s somebody – usually, the pieces are in – the pieces are usually in place. A lot of times, with Delfeayo, the pieces aren’t in place, or it’s a puzzle all over the place. He gets these – but with Wynton, the pieces are in place. More like, what is it I can do to facilitate this? Like, for example, even with the band that he had for *Black Codes (from the Underground)*, he wrote the majority of that music. He knew, okay, I got this band. I can write this to produce this with these people. Even when he did *J Mood* with Marcus Roberts, who was new, he said, all right, we’ll hook up some music that’ll work for this group. The pieces will be in place, but he’ll know, I can cook this up. I can get things together with what I have now. So he’s a different kind of organizer. Really, he’s somebody that’s about getting it right. That’s something I learned from him. He’s very detailed. He’s got to get it right. It’s got to be done the right way. Make sure that it’s correct. That’s something that I saw from him in terms of – somebody that really works hard on the music and would really work hard on composition to make sure that I have a great product at the end of the day. That’s what he’s striving for, and that’s what I’m striving for. I probably get it from him. I’m trying to – that’s, in my view, really his gift, the drive and determination to get it right. “We will work on this music two hours a day until it’s correct, it’s right, and it’s satisfactory, and we’re not going to stop until we get it satisfactory. You understand?” That would be what I learned from him.

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With classical music, I wouldn't say that I got it from Branford. I had heard it. I heard it as a kid. I had played it. But the interest just happened. That story earlier about Branford and Wagner, that is something that happened. I was already starting to listen to classical music. But that was something that had already taken place. With Branford – he was into it. He's really into opera. But I'd gotten . . .

Brown: Which operas? Italian? German?

Marsalis: All of them.

Brown: All of them.

Marsalis: He's a big opera buff.

Brown: Even the Berg operas, *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*?

Marsalis: Huh? Probably. He probably has some kind of material on that. But nonetheless, I'm saying – but that's a good question, because I did learn something from each of them, including my father. I learned something from each one of them. I think that's what it would be. I think what I learned from Wynton was the drive to get it right. I think what I learned from Branford was letting the music take over and seeing what happens. I think from Delfeayo it's the organization of the music, because he was the first one that I heard – at least to me – that I heard talk about having a record conception. What is the record going to be? What is the music going to sound like? What is the band sound? What is the concept of the record, whether it's themed or not? What is the concept of the music? That's the first time I heard about that, and I started thinking, okay, a record that's an organized presentation. He's the first one that got me to think about that.

I think that, from my father, I would have to say teaching, thinking about how to teach the music and how to preserve the music to present it to another generation of people that may not have the experience that you have. That's something that we've – he's talked about teaching for a long time. In fact, I'm going to go out on a limb and say that I believe that a lot of what Wynton does is – Jazz at Lincoln Center was to him to basically have the funding and to implement a lot of my father's conversations about music. That's what I believe it is, because the fact that – okay, I'll give you one great example. I've heard for years my father say, "Jazz is a homeless music. A lot of times, when the music has been played, it's in clubs where the club owners are jive or the leases run out. That's not a home. That's not a hall." Classical music has various halls. Jazz is a homeless music." Wynton went and built a hall.

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Dad always talked about, “Jazz is a music that must be codified.” It’s the exact opposite of most jazz critics. Jazz critics are, “We need to move forward. The past has already happened. We got to move forward.” But he’s like, “We need to go back and look at this stuff and flesh it out, have this music codified.” That’s what Wynton’s trying to do with Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Brown: Definitely.

Marsalis: That’s really – when I think of it now, that’s what I see Jazz at Lincoln Center as.

Brown: This year, 2010, all five of you have been recognized as NEA Jazz Masters. What did that mean to you?

Marsalis: What was interesting is that at first it didn’t really hit me, because I – the way it was told to me, I saw it as my father’s award. I was like, that’s great, yeah, Dad being honored. Wait a minute. They’re honoring all of us? Me? Okay. All right. I’m honored. I don’t know if I deserve it, but thanks. It is an honor to be a part of that, because it is an elite club. They have honored lots of musicians – not just musicians, but anybody that’s contributed to the arts. So it is an honor to be a part of that.

I’ll be honest and say that there were some controversies and statements that were made. There were a lot of people that didn’t think that I had deserved it or wondering, what is it that Delfeayo and I had done? There’s just various things which don’t surprise me. What I thought about it, I saw both sides of the equation. I think that, on the one hand, I can understand those who don’t feel that – or, there’s some other comments too, like there were some that didn’t know if all of us should have been honored as a group. Why not . . . ? – a lot of different things. There was one specific comment that I read, that Wynton and Branford have had big careers. What is it that Jason and Delfeayo have done? We’ve done things more behind the scenes that they wouldn’t understand or wouldn’t know much about, or they just weren’t paying attention. Delfeayo basically produced almost like maybe three-fourths of Branford’s catalog.

Anyhow, in terms of – that’s just as one example – but in terms of both sides, on the one hand, I see my career as just starting. I’ve been playing for a while, but there’s a lot of things that I haven’t done, things that I will be doing. So I’m just getting started. So I can understand the side that feels that I don’t deserve the award. But on the other hand, I think from the NEA’s point of view, I think that what they had a hard time with was, it’s hard to honor one without the other. So, for example, if you’re going to honor my father, that’s great. Then again, one of the reasons why people started hearing about him was due to Wynton. That’s why. When Wynton became successful, that’s when people started to hear about their father and him teaching in New Orleans. Then, you look at Wynton. Who’s in his band? Branford is. Branford’s in his band, and Branford has an impact on

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his music. Then the two of them had really big careers in terms of what was happening with the music. Who's producing Branford's records? Delfeayo is. Delf's behind the scenes. He produced a lot of records. He produced even some of Wynton's records, like *Standard Time, volume 3: the Resolution of Romance*, which my father plays on. Now you look at Delfeayo's own records, which he hasn't made as many. He's done more producing than recording as a leader. But his very first, *Pontius Pilate's Decision*, who's on that? I am. I'm playing on that. Then – it's just a lot of things. So I was on that record, and I had helped with that recording. I recorded on some of my father's records, and I had made a recording with Wynton, *All Rise*, which – that was a crazy story. The long and short of that record – I'll just tell the story real quick – was – it was a piece that Wynton wrote for – big piece – choir, orchestra, and jazz orchestra – classical orchestra and jazz orchestra. So Herlin Riley gets sick and couldn't make the recording. So he called me, and I said, yes. I'll definitely do this. Let me make some – make sure my schedule sits up straight. I'll do that.

I had a week to learn two hours of music. I said, just send the music, and I'll take care of it. That's what I did. I just rolled up the sleeves. I said, I've learned music before. I'm going to have to channel that and use it for this. I started. I listened to the whole thing straight through. Then I focused on the first movement. What is going on here? They gave me the score. What's this? What's that there? Every day, that's what I'd do. I'd practice some things, but I did a lot of listening. So when it came time, the first rehearsal, I was ready to go. There was a few spots I was a little rough in, but I was ready to go, and we recorded it. Sadly, that was during the time of the September 11th attacks. That was during that time, ironically and unfortunately. But we still were able to plow through. We still recorded it.

Anyway, I was on his recording, and I was on – so anyway, I'm saying all of that to say that I think the NEA just decided, you know what? Let's just hedge our bets and give it up to all of them, rather than, this wouldn't work with this one, you can't leave this one out, you can't leave that one out. So they – so I can see it on both sides. I understand both sides. But, either way, I am honored that we are receiving this. It shows me the importance of the work that we are currently doing and will keep doing. It's giving me the drive to keep going, keep practicing, and keep developing as the musicianship and the musician that I have – the musician that I am. It gives me drive to keep developing that. That's what I'll be doing.

Brown: You are a son of the wellspring of American musical culture here in New Orleans. All of you have undergone a serious, serious tragedy that we know as Katrina. How has that impacted you psychically, psychologically, spiritually, and musically?

Marsalis: I must say though, that I think that Katrina probably impacted me the most, because of this – really, overall, I think that all of us were very fortunate, but it impacted me the most, because my parents were lucky, because in the neighborhood that they were
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in, flooding was only, I think, three feet, but their house is elevated four. So they didn't get any water. They did get some wind damage from Rita, Hurricane Rita, ironically, but they didn't get a lot of wind damage. So they didn't really lose anything. Delfeayo's property didn't get any flooding. So he didn't really lose anything. My property did get water. It did get water, and it did get some flooding. The house is still there. It did have to be gutted out. Luckily for me, I only lost the material things. But I did have to leave New Orleans, and I had to live in – my girlfriend at the time is my wife now. Our daughter, who was like seven months old – they – we had to move to Jackson. The crazy thing was, Katrina happened when I was – when I went to Saito Kinen Festival to record for Japanese release *Concereto in F* with Marcus Roberts and Seiji Ozawa. That's when that happened. I'm over in Japan, trying to get ready for this record, and all of a sudden – I think it was – I found out the morning that – it was morning time, Saturday morning. I'm getting ready to go. I had e-mailed somebody about doing something, somebody from New Orleans, and he says, "I don't know if I can do that. There's a hurricane coming." I knew it was Katrina, but the talk about Katrina was, it was going to the Gulf, and it was going to go to Florida. I'm like, wait a minute. What's going on? I wasn't worried at that point.

Then, I think – what was it? – I think I got another message that my parents was on their way to Baton Rouge. I get down – no, I think I get downstairs, and bassist Roland Guerin, who's from Baton Rouge, "Yeah, your parents are heading to my parents' house." I'm like, um, what's going on? That's when I knew something was wrong, that all these folks were getting out. Then, that's when I was – we started watching the news. At first it seemed like it was okay, that there wasn't – that there was damage, but it bypassed. Then I heard from, I think, Marcus's manager. She said, "There's been a levee breach." I just said, oh, great. That's when I knew that we were in trouble, that the city of New Orleans was in big trouble.

For me, that was a very hard time. In a lot of ways it was overwhelming, because it was something that I hadn't expected. I'm having to – plus, I'm not even in New Orleans when this is going on. I would have had – in some ways, rather would have been in New Orleans with my family – which is a very new family – to be there, so we can – I can help with moving and I can help with getting the house ready. Even if it's flooded, we'd know what was what, rather than they just had to go. I would rather be there, helping them with that. Then we could go, and I could sit down and think about what's going on. Instead, I'm in Japan making a record. So while floods are ravaging New Orleans, "All right. Time to roll tape. Time to do the concert." It was crazy.

Then we were still on the road. Had another concert. Finally, when I get to Jackson, Mississippi, where my wife was, that's where it was starting to really hit, like, okay, this is a real situation, and I need to figure out what we're going to do. It was crazy, having to stand in a line of Red Cross, dealing with assistance. It was out. It was a very overwhelming thing.

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We were in Jackson for about four months. Eventually we went to New York and went there for about a year. Then – but during that time we were in and out of New Orleans, seeing about the place. After about a year we were able to come back to New Orleans and live in the house that we live in now. But I think spiritually it was – I got through it, but it was something that was a bit overwhelming. It's something that – I see it for what it is, and I don't get too depressed thinking about it, but at the same time, I do have a proper perspective on it. It was something that – it was very draining in some ways. But I try not to get too – I don't let it put me down too much, because at the end of the day, there's still work you got to do. You still got to – there's still people that's going to call me, that want to play on something or want to do this. While I had put it in proper perspective, and while I had to do that, at the same time, you still have to keep moving forward. So I think that, spiritually, that is something that the city still managed to get through. There's still problems. There's still things to be worked on. But the city just went through it. They just kept going, like, we're going to get through it. We'll come back. We'll still deal with it.

Brown: I'm going to close with one last question. It's more, I'm going to make a statement and then a question. When we look at the history of New Orleans, we look at – particularly the jazz tradition – we look at – if I could just single out a few of the families – we look at the Dodds brothers. We look at the Batistes. We look at these families.

Marsalis: Yeah, the Jordans.

Brown: Yeah, the Jordans. But last night we went to the Palm Court, and we got a chance to hear Ronelle Johnson. He talked about his family. For me, there seems to be, in New Orleans, this tradition of nurturing musical culture within the family. We can see it from the dawn of jazz up to the present, if we use you and the Marsalis family, and the Johnson family, as examples, just a couple examples out of many.

Marsalis: Yeah. There's also the Barbarin family.

Brown: Paul Barbarin. I'm a drummer. I understand that. There's so many. But I just singled out a few. Do you see that Katrina has – what impact do you think Katrina has on this culture that is so associated and indelible to New Orleans' musical culture?

Marsalis: Honestly, I don't think it did anything in terms of music lineage. There's some logistics that maybe got affected, in terms of business things that got affected. There was somebody that was talking about how there were different musicians that weren't on the scene, that came in. They may have taken advantage of some things, or – there's that. There's some guys that did leave. There's logistics. But the reason why I say that the music, to me, wasn't affected, was because it was December, after the storm, and I was on the phone – I was in New Orleans. Because I had been in and out of New Orleans
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some of the time. It was rough – but I was on the phone with somebody in December. “I’m on my way to a gig.” This is December after the storm. I’m on my way to a gig, playing with Kermit Ruffins. So that’s why I think that ultimately the music will not be affected. I think that, if anything, it may have made the music stronger, because you had brass bands getting together with some traditional guys, like Dr. Michael White wanted to learn more of the music. I think that it may have made the city realize, something that it already cherished, not to take it for granted.

So that’s why I don’t think – music – I think if it affected anything, it affected people’s lives, people’s homes. There were people who died because of it. You could argue that there’s certain legacies that may have gotten lost or cut off, but I don’t – those traditions are still there. They’re still there. It isn’t like whole – say, whole swaths of Mardi Gras Indians were just wiped out. You had some who did. But they’re still here. So for me it’s more – people, I think – livelihoods were affected, but – and maybe logistics – but I think in terms of the legacy known as music, that hasn’t gone anywhere, if that makes sense. There’s guys still playing traditional jazz, and I’m going to be doing that tonight.

Brown: I wasn’t talking about the perpetuation of the lineage so much as I’m looking at the dissolution of neighborhoods, when you go up to Lower Ninth [Ward] and you see – or you think of the fact that so many people who left aren’t coming back. So that – I think that’s what I was trying to see, if there was anything that you had to say about any of that.

Marsalis: You know what? I honestly think that the city – it is my belief the city, it’s still going to be – I don’t know. I think it’s going to be, the more things change, the more things remain the same. I think that there will be – I just think that the overall spirit of the city is not going to change.

Brown: I look at . . .

Marsalis: Like, for example, I think that – here’s why I say this. It’s because you’ll have people that’ll move in from, say, Massachusetts, that’ll want to cook, but they’re interested in New Orleans food. They’re interested in how that works. They’re not like, oh yes, let’s bring our Maine lobster way of cooking to – no. They want to know how it’s done here. You’ll have musicians that may move from out of town, but they want to learn about New Orleans music. They’re not saying, oh yes, we’re going to bring a lot of the more newer New York music to the scene. I guess that’s what I mean.

Some of the neighborhood makeups are still the same though. Some of them are different. Some of them are still the same. So I guess that’s – there’s some things that are still the same. Some of those things should change, honestly. But that’s why I think that overall, it’s still going to – even the things that are different, the past is still going to be what it is. I think you’re still going to have neighborhoods with different breakdowns. No matter how hard they try, you’ll still have that. I think that you’ll still have – there’s some things

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that I think are better, like on – what is it? – Louisiana Avenue. The projects that used to be there have been replaced with a nice house, but it's mixed – nicer houses – nicer apartment complexes, but it's mixed income. They didn't get replaced with \$300,000 condos. It's mixed income, where those who can afford it – it's a mixed income of people. So at least people have somewhere to stay, but I think that's a nicer place. So there's things that will improve, but – so I think there's things that will change, but there's things that will be the same. That's how I would answer that.

Brown: I think that's an excellent answer. I want to say, Jason, on behalf of the Smithsonian and the NEA, I want to thank you for spending this time and sharing with us your thoughts, your recollections, your life, for the historical record. We continue to wish you well and hope to see you continue to make great music. We will be there tonight to see you perform.

Marsalis: Thanks a lot. That'll be a pleasure.

Brown: A pleasure.

Marsalis: Thank you.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

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