

“Black Codes (From the Underground)”--Wynton Marsalis (1985)

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Essay by Carl Vigeland (guest post)*



Wynton Marsalis

Inevitably, in the development of every major artist, there comes a work--often, though not always, early in their career--that is not only strikingly original but also a presage of the greatness to follow. In its rhythmic drive, melodic ingenuity, harmonic and contrapuntal complexity, technical virtuosity, and sound splendor, Wynton Marsalis's "Black Codes (From the Underground)" both reflects his early accomplishment and previews the future triumph of a musician without parallel in contemporary culture.

The most elusive search for a musician, Wynton has said, "is your sound... the sound of your personality and your attitude being projected through your instrument. Now, that sound is a lot harder to work on, because you have to deal with yourself. And in most instances that's pretty painful." To grow beyond that perceived inadequacy, to truly find your own sound, "takes courage, because it means you are trying to play in a way that nobody else has played. And of course the reason you wanted to be a musician is because you liked the way somebody played."

Sound's corollary in jazz is swing, which Wynton has often defined as "willful participation in the groove, with style"--a mouthful of words that illustrates how difficult it is to describe this basic concept. Swing is easier for Wynton to play than explain, and when integrated with the ingredient of the blues a potent combination, instantly recognizable in "Black Codes (From the Underground)."

A transformative recording, made when Wynton was only 23 years old, "Black Codes" hints at the abundant greatness that would follow in compositions and recordings not only for the septet that Wynton formed in 1989 but also his big band--the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra--and the many symphonic orchestras around the world that have performed or collaborated in such extraordinary works as his 1999 epic, "All Rise."

Columbia Records signed Wynton to a recording contract before his 19th birthday. In 1983, having left Juilliard and completed a tour with Art Blakey's group, Wynton released his eponymous de-but album and began touring with his own band. The lineup featured elder brother Branford

on tenor and soprano saxophone, Kenny Kirkland on piano, and Jeff “Tain” Watts on drums, who on “Black Codes” were joined by bassists Ron Carter and Charnett Moffett in recording sessions that took place in January 1985 and were produced by Steve Epstein.

Wynton had burst onto the musical scene at a moment that may appear in retrospect to have been inevitable, given all the hoopla that accompanied his first awards. From his ballet scores to movie soundtracks, a string quartet, and numerous works for small ensembles, big band, and orchestra, Wynton has steadily and profoundly broadened his command of composition while finding new ways to convey emotion in increasingly sophisticated and challenging forms. Simultaneously, he has nurtured educational programs, as both guide and spokesperson, and led the growth of Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Throughout his evolution as composer, bandleader, and educator, Wynton has always loved the road, which he often calls his home: the long rides from place to place, coming into another city or town where he might have played before, and if time were tight going straight to the venue for soundcheck and supper or if he were early, the hotel would be the first stop. But either way there would always be the moment when he pressed his clothes in his hotel suite or changing backstage in his dressing room, while a crowd gathered outside the venue as people lined up in the lobby, waiting for the doors to open. Wynton might speak with one of his children on the phone or answer a friend’s knock on the door, but there would be no intrusion where only his horn was allowed, “ou, ee, ah, ee, ou,” he played, signifying a sequence of notes—C, G, C, G, C...middle C, G a fifth higher, C a fourth above, another G, and finally high C, then back down—somewhere in that sound an echo of a train, a person he loved, something lost, something found, the marshalling again of energy and strength and a feeling, and soon the hushed expectancy in the venue for the kaleidoscope of experience and memory that would cross at last in the music’s response to a call Wynton first heard more than half a century ago in his native New Orleans and hears still, each day. We hear it, too, in “Black Codes.”

No less a musician than the late French legend Maurice Andre once claimed that Wynton might be the greatest trumpet player in the history of music. Hyperbole aside, it would be a challenge to find a serious musician in any genre who won’t acknowledge that the man can play, notwithstanding critical debate and differing personal taste about style, aesthetics, and purpose. And Wynton’s professional ubiquity can make him seem a legendary figure of accomplishment.

The achievement is real, inspiring the rebirth of an art form, playing an instrument at an unparalleled level, creating and leading a significant arts organization, giving selflessly to younger musicians, composing many important works that cross genres....all moving deeply toward an expression of Wynton’s response to life, transmuted as an act of courage, intelligence, and love. The intersection of his creativity and compassion that underlies his talent and charisma—manifest in “Black Codes (From the Underground)” —also defines a personal arc of reaching out to others, within a dynamic that exemplifies what Wynton’s late friend, the Swiss conductor and one of the founders of Music at Marlboro, Blanche Moysé, told him when they met years ago, before rehearsals for Wynton’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “Blood on the Fields”: “generosity of spirit begets beauty of tone.”

The author of many books and the publisher of Combray House Books, Carl Vigeland collaborated with Wynton Marsalis on "Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life," published in 2001 by DaCapo Press. A cum laude graduate of Harvard, Vigeland has also written for numerous magazines and taught writing courses for many years at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where he lives.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.