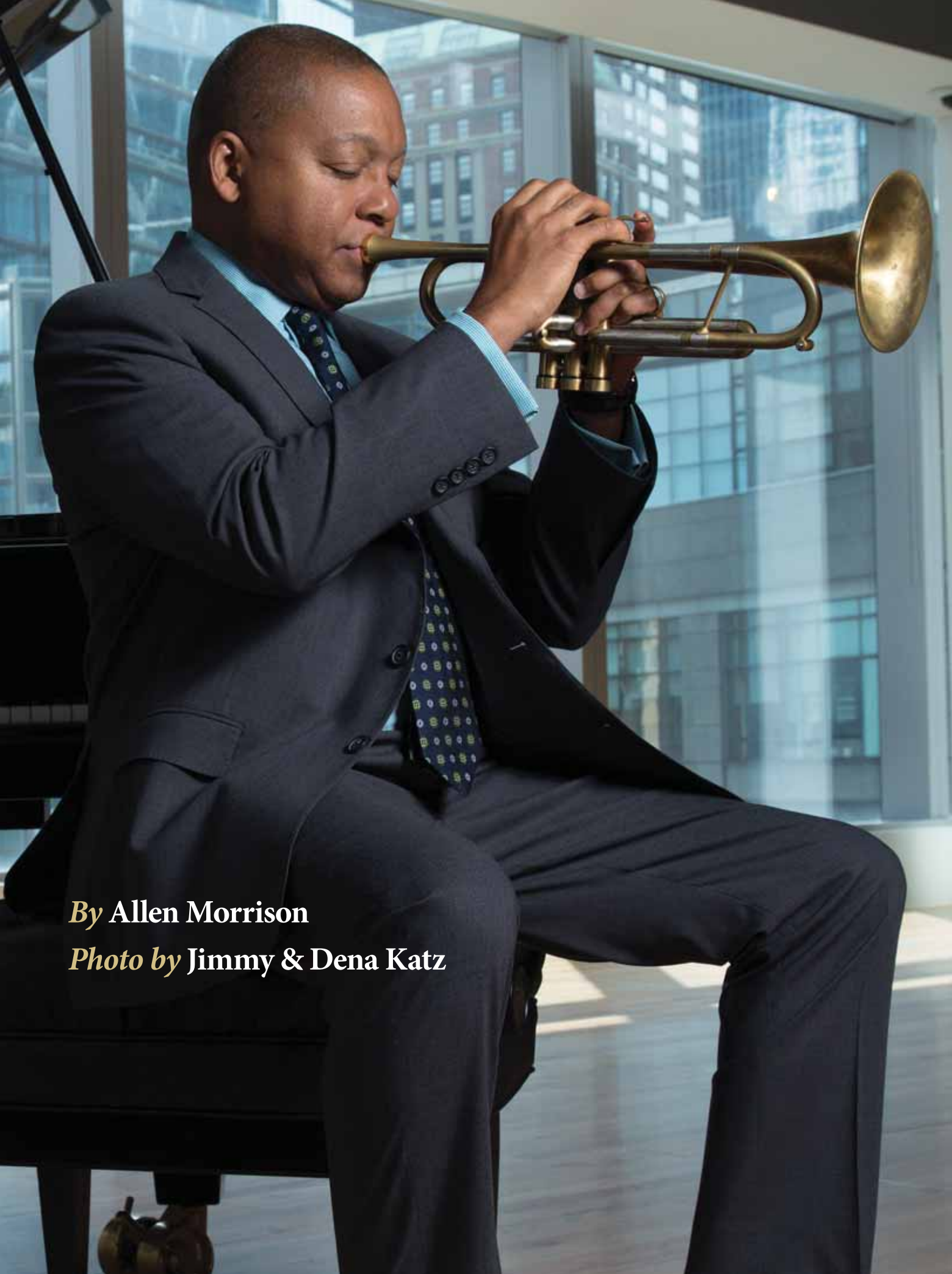


Building the Cathedral

In the fall of 2016, **Wynton Marsalis** spoke at an event in Manhattan commemorating the centennial of **Albert Murray**, the jazz historian, cultural critic and novelist who died in 2013 at age 97. Murray had been a longtime mentor to the trumpeter and composer, ever since he was an 18-year-old Juilliard student. He talked about some of the key lessons he learned at Murray's knee in the older man's modest, book-lined apartment on West 132nd Street.

Marsalis said, "If you could get past thinking that Count Basie was 'old' ... if you could come to grips with time, and how things unfold in time, you could then perhaps put yourself in a context." Reinforced by many years of tutelage by Murray, he took that lesson to heart: that understanding the historical context of one's life and work was central to achieving both wisdom and excellence as an artist. It may have contributed to Marsalis' personal credo: "All jazz is modern," now the guiding principle for Jazz at Lincoln Center, of which Marsalis and Murray were co-founders.



By Allen Morrison

Photo by Jimmy & Dena Katz



Wynton Marsalis at Jazz at Lincoln Center on Sept. 15

'I've been surrounded by absolute killers for a long time. And the depth of the love I have for them is hard for me to express.' —Wynton Marsalis

At 56, Marsalis is among the youngest living artists ever inducted into the DownBeat Hall of Fame. If he had only been the leading trumpeter of his generation, there's little doubt he eventually would have made it into the hallowed hall. But it's his tireless work as an educator, bandleader, fundraiser, non-profit executive, and advocate for jazz and American culture that probably sealed the deal so soon.

His accomplishments are the consequence of soaring ambition, outsize talent, charisma, thirst for knowledge and a fierce work ethic. His Twitter bio is as accurate as it is succinct: "Internationally acclaimed musician, composer, educator and a leading advocate of American culture. Managing and Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center."

That description understates his fame. He is

arguably the most famous jazz musician in the world, but beyond his celebrity, Marsalis is also jazz's most renowned intellectual and fiercest champion. No individual in jazz has done more to advance both jazz education and the international appreciation of jazz in the last 50 years.

Most jazz musicians who have risen to the top of their profession would be happy to have a Grammy or two. For Marsalis, however, his nine Grammy Awards are just the tip of the iceberg. He is the only musician to have received Grammy awards in both the jazz and classical categories in the same year (1983), and he repeated this remarkable feat in 1984. He has released more than 60 jazz and classical albums since 1982.

As significant to jazz as any music Marsalis ever wrote or played was his central role in creating Jazz at Lincoln Center in 1987. A pivotal moment—for both the organization and jazz in general—came in 1996, when JALC, which had started as a program and grew into a department, was incorporated as a new and equal constituent of Lincoln Center, alongside the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera and New York City Ballet. It represented a major achievement in Marsalis' lifelong mission to foster the appreciation of jazz in the country of its birth.

Today, JALC is the largest nonprofit organization promoting jazz in the country, with a \$43 million endowment and a staff of more than 140. After a herculean fundraising campaign, it moved into its current home at the Time Warner Center in 2004. The complex houses three concert and performance spaces (Rose Theater, The Appel Room and Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola) engineered specifically to enhance the sound of acoustic jazz. JALC webcasts hundreds of concerts a year, all available for free.

JALC's educational outreach programs include the Essentially Ellington program, which now provides jazz curriculums to nearly 5,000 high schools in the United States and sponsors the country's biggest national competition for high school jazz bands; an expanding archive of about 1,000 free instructional jazz videos; and many other initiatives. It also launched its own record label, Blue Engine, in 2015.

DownBeat spoke to Marsalis in his dressing room at Jazz at Lincoln Center. There was a corner desk strewn with family photos and sheet music, a Steinway baby grand and framed pictures on the wall of Clark Terry and other trumpet heroes.

As leader of the 15-member Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JLCO), he has become close to the musicians, all of whom are outstanding soloists. Ten of them compose and arrange for the ensemble. At any given performance, most of the arrangements and many of the composi-

tions are by orchestra members, with the strong encouragement of Marsalis.

"I've been surrounded by absolute killers for a long time," Marsalis said. "And the depth of the love I have for them is hard for me to express."

The musicians love him back. Trumpeter Marcus Printup, who has been with the JLCO for 24 years, said, "I've never met a bandleader who is so unselfish. Everyone understands our roles in the band. We also know who he is. But Wynton doesn't like it to be about himself; he wants it to be about the band. Sometimes I'll say to him, 'This is your band,' and he'll say, 'No, this is our band.' There are times when I'll have two or three solos, and he'll have just one. And I'll say to him, 'You should play, because people want to hear you.' And he'll say, 'No, I've been playing for 30 years, man. I want the people to hear you.' That's just the kind of cat he is."

Although his career has been marked by controversy—and he continues to be a lightning rod in internecine jazz world disputes—most jazz historians and critics agree on his importance. In his book *The History of Jazz*, author and critic Ted Gioia wrote, "Marsalis must be seen as the key figure who, more than anyone else, vehemently asserted the centrality of [jazz] tradition in the face of fusion and free styles, and aimed to be its preserver, propagator, promoter, and publicist all rolled into one."

These days Marsalis is more interested in talking about Jazz at Lincoln Center and praising his JLCO colleagues than he is in talking about himself. "When I was younger," he said, "anytime I won something I'd have to say something negative. And one day, a lady came backstage and gave me a compliment. And, of course, I was like, 'I can't play, I didn't do this or that'; I was being self-deprecating. And she said, 'So what does that mean for my compliment and my taste?'" He smiled. "So I'll just say I'm grateful for every opportunity to be considered in any way, at any time. ... As I get older, I try to become more grateful and more humble, take up less space. I find that's the best way to improve."

In 1982, the year his eponymous Columbia album was released, *DownBeat* declared 1982 "the year of Wynton Marsalis." Readers crowned him Jazz Musician of the Year, the album was named Jazz Album of the Year and he was voted the best Trumpeter ("handily defeating Miles in each category," according to an article in the December 1982 issue).

"No major jazz figure—not Ellington or Armstrong, Goodman or Gillespie—had become so famous, so fast," Gioia later wrote.

"Our whole field was struggling," Marsalis said, reflecting on his initial rise to fame. "I liked jazz, but I knew I couldn't play. It created a kind of pressure between me and the other musicians who could play much better than I

could, but they weren't getting that kind of publicity. This is not me looking back now—I felt like that then.

"Clark Terry could play. [Harry] 'Sweets' Edison could play. I grew up in the jazz world. They were like uncles to me; I knew them since I was 13 or 14. My father [pianist Ellis Marsalis] could play. It wasn't like I was thinking I'm like [the next] Clifford Brown or somebody. I was not under that illusion. I did feel, from a philosophical standpoint, I was stronger than normal. I felt like ... [intellectually], I was capa-

ble of holding my own. ... But I didn't confuse that with the thought that I could play. It wasn't just me. We all knew we needed to learn how to play. Branford, Kenny Kirkland, [Jeff] 'Tain' [Watts]—we all knew we were gonna try to learn how to play."

He didn't ask for all the publicity, and all the petty jealousies and controversies it inspired. "But when I would be interviewed," he said, "I had views, philosophically, many of which I still hold very strongly."

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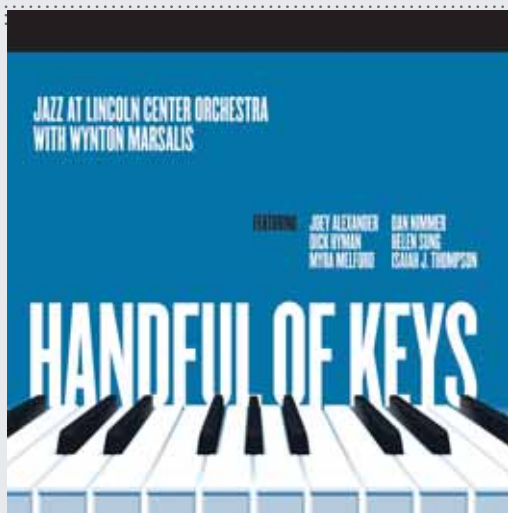
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A CENTURY OF JAZZ PIANO

In June 2015, Jazz at Lincoln Center launched its own record label, Blue Engine Records, with the release of *The Jazz At Lincoln Center Orchestra With Wynton Marsalis—Live In Cuba*. The label plans to continue to release both live and studio albums, some of them drawn from the organization's library of hundreds of concert recordings dating back to its founding in 1987.

At the label's launch party, Marsalis said, "We have over 28 years of recordings—performances by big bands, small bands, collaborations with all types of musicians—everybody from Aaron Diehl to Willie Nelson. We are going to release as many of them as we can."

On Sept. 15, Blue Engine released its sixth album, *Handful Of Keys*, a live recording culled from three 2016 concerts that celebrated a century of jazz piano. *Handful* documents six gifted pianists playing a variety of styles, from 1920s Harlem stride to avant-garde, with big band arrangements that extend and complement the piano.

The concerts featured a multigenerational cast, from 13-year-old whiz kid Joey Alexander to 89-year-old piano master Dick Hyman. Also along for the ride were pianists Myra Melford, Helen Sung, Isaiah J. Thompson and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra's Dan Nimmer.

The album opens with Hyman playing his own sparkling arrangement of the James P. Johnson 1930 stride masterpiece "Jingles." From there the program bounces merrily around the decades, with particular emphasis on repertoire from the 1960s: Bill Evans' "Very Early," interpreted with emotional maturity by Alexander; McCoy Tyner's high-energy "Four By Five," with Sung playing her own arrangement; and Thompson tearing it up on "Lulu's Back In Town" à la Thelonious Monk. Thompson returns to summon the spirit of Oscar Peterson on "Hymn To Freedom," performed in trio with bassist Carlos Henriquez and drummer Ali Jackson. Hyman returns to play on Benny Carter's arrangement of "All Of Me."

A show-stopping highlight of the album is the contribution of West Coast pianist/composer Melford, who plays her own composition, "The Strawberry." The piece is a survey of jazz piano genres, including gospel, blues, Latin and a highly percussive brand of free-jazz. The album closes with the hard-swinging, versatile Nimmer playing Wynton Kelly's "Temperance" from 1960.

—Allen Morrison



Milles Davis (center-right) presents his portrait of Wynton Marsalis (center-left) to the artist himself backstage at the Louis Armstrong Theater in New Orleans on April 25, 1985.

©PAUL NATHAN/PHOTO RESERVE, INC.

thought of as perhaps the most gifted jazz trumpeter in a generation. Today, while his trumpet playing has lost none of its luster, it takes something of a backseat to his prolific composing. His primary instrument today is the JLCO, although sometimes he writes for smaller groups like string quartets and his septet, and sometimes for larger ones, like symphony orchestras.

Alto saxophonist Sherman Irby, who played with the JLCO from 1995 to '97 then rejoined in 2005, said the Marsalis trumpet style has continued to ripen.

"His sound has gotten fatter and bigger as the years have progressed," Irby said. "He thinks he doesn't have as much control as he used to. But he's able to put more emotion on one note, like Ben Webster. He did me a solid by playing on my new record. ... [At one point], he took one note, and the vibration that he put out on his horn had more emotion than anybody else. That's getting to the essence of what music is all about."

Marsalis seems to always be composing a major work. A partial list includes the Pulitzer-winning *Blood On The Fields*, which included elements of blues, work songs, chants, spirituals, New Orleans jazz, Afro-Caribbean rhythms and Ellingtonian big-band jazz; the epic *All Rise* for big band, gospel choir and symphony orchestra; *Congo Square*, with Ghanaian master drummer Yacub Addy; his 2009 *Blues Symphony* for symphony orchestra; 2010's *Swing Symphony* for orchestra and jazz band; the 2014 *Concerto In D* for violin; *The Jungle*, for the New York Philharmonic and JLCO; the list goes on.

While Marsalis has long acknowledged his debt to Duke Ellington, he indicated that another composer had an

equally profound effect on him.

"Jelly Roll [Morton] has had the most influence on me in terms of how I put my music together," he said. "I realized that he uses small components and connects them together, like an Erector Set. When I was in my early 20s, I started to transcribe "Black Bottom Stomp" and other music by him. ... The first piece I wrote that used the Jelly Roll type of concept was called 'Blue Interlude.' ... Then [I studied] Duke's original scores. If you look at them, they'll say, A, B, C, D. Then he'll put D-C-A; A-D; A-B; A-C. He's putting it together in that same Jelly Roll type of way. Duke and Jelly Roll are the two that I thought wrote New Orleans counterpoint the best."

He also studied classical symphonic forms—sonatas, scherzos, slow marches, rondos—and began thinking about jazz in a somewhat similar way: "What are the fundamentals of *our* thing? I started to write music with those fundamentals." He often includes blues, African American church music, train sounds (which have a mythic meaning in the South, he said), sultry Johnny Hodges-like alto saxophone wails, brassy Afro-Latin trumpets, call-and-response and New Orleans march rhythms. "I try to always keep all of my music in the music that I write," he said.

Marsalis disputes the notion, prevalent in New York jazz circles, that JALC has only recently become more open to a broader array of jazz. "That's been said since 1999. Now it's 2017. Exactly what year did it become more open? That's just bullshit. ... When we did Ornette Coleman's music, people said they couldn't believe we were doing that; that was years ago. When [drummer] Han Bennink [an icon of European free-jazz]

was here, people said they couldn't believe that; that was in the '90s, OK?"

The new Blue Engine release, *Handful Of Keys* (see sidebar), features six piano soloists ranging from tradition-minded virtuoso Dick Hyman to avant-garde pianist/composer Myra Melford. "Did we call Myra so somebody could write something about it, or so that we could appeal to some camp?" Marsalis asked rhetorically. "She can *play*. And we love playing with her. Our camp is very broad. We have the broadest camp in the world, yet it's [supposedly] not broad enough. It doesn't matter. The dogs may bark but the caravan moves on."

Perhaps his greatest legacy is the legion of jazz musicians he has helped to mentor, including JLCO bassist/composer Carlos Henriquez, pianists Aaron Diehl and Jon Batiste, flutist/saxophonist Erika von Kleist, singer Cécile McLorin Salvant and dozens of others.

"Other musicians and artists did it with me: Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison, Stanley Crouch, August Wilson, Romare Bearden. Romy did an album cover for me; he gave me books to read. Then there were musicians like Elvin Jones, Gerry Mulligan, John Lewis, Gunther Schuller, my [high school] teachers John Longo and George Jansen, 'Sweets' Edison, Clark Terry, all the trumpet players.

"It's a cycle and a continuum. I have been part of the lives of so many musicians. I love them all. Maurice Brown and Keyon Harrold. Russell

'Wynton has told me it's like building a cathedral: The guys who started it knew they would never see the end of it.' —Aaron Diehl

Gunn. Tatum Greenblatt. Brandon Lee. Christian McBride—I knew him when he was a 14-year-old kid, playing 'Skain's Domain' on the piano, when I first saw him in Philly. And so many more. I'm proud of them."

Pianist Diehl was a talented but unseasoned young pianist, just 17 years old, when Marsalis offered him the life-changing opportunity of filling the piano chair of his septet during a European tour. More recently, during rehearsals for JLCO's 30th anniversary season opener, a tribute to Jelly Roll Morton, Diehl, a featured pianist, found the relationship had changed. No longer a student but a peer, he found the maestro had fewer comments for him.

"After the opening night concert he gave a toast to all the musicians, including the young Juilliard students who performed in the concert [Micah Thomas and Joel Wenhardt]. He said, 'I was your age when JALC began. And older musicians like Sir Roland Hanna, Norris Turney and Joe Temperley were the age I am now, playing in this newly formed band. All those guys are gone now. So when you're in your 50s and 60s, you'll ask yourself how have you contributed to this legacy? What will you offer future generations to ensure that it keeps going?"

"It really made me think," Diehl continued. "Artists can be very self-involved. As Wynton has told me, it's like building a cathedral: The guys who started it knew they would never see the end of it."

Jazz at Lincoln Center is the cathedral project in the lifetime of Wynton Marsalis. Asked if he views it as his crowning achievement, he is quick to set the record straight. "No, I don't feel like it's an achievement for me personally, because all of us did it. And we're still doing it. Let me tell you something: Our staff and our board, they're killing themselves for jazz. JALC has never been about me. It's like John Lewis told me once: 'If this is about you, I have some time; if this is about jazz, I have all the time in the world.'"

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