

Wynton Marsalis

Since I began playing Jazz music publicly, I have been asked many of the same questions over and over by the boldest members of a given audience such as:

"Can you play something with a singer?"

"Can you play something we know, like on the radio?"

"Can you play something we can dance to like on the radio?"

"Can you play a really short fast one?"

"Can you play something really slow and soft?"

"Can you play something we can talk over?"

There has been a tendency, in our industry and culture, to view Jazz musicians as traveling circus performers who are required to have a new trick every time you see them. As high school students we were given to understand that you have to play something new like Charlie Parker to be any good. This all-consuming and incessant search for the exotic permeated every discussion on Jazz. It defined whether you were valued or dismissed. And many musicians fell prey to the pressure by trying to create or incorporate some new fad into their music every few years, while others sustained a dedication to steady development with a focus on quality and creativity.

I remember reading an interview Leonard Feather did with Monk that demonstrated this insatiable hunger for the next thing before the last thing had been tasted let alone digested. As the interview went on Mr. Feather arrived at and asked the inevitable question "What about something new?" And in classic Monk style he replied "Let somebody else create something new."

All through the 1980s, I was hell-bent on trying to create new things and demonstrate them on recordings: a new modern collective horn improvisation with my brother Branford on "Hesitation", new types of group interactions based on quick cues and open harmony on "Knozz Moe King", contemporary ways to play traditional harmonies while playing in superimposed meters on "April in Paris", playing all types of complex rhythms while keeping strict harmonic forms with Marcus Roberts and Jeff 'Tain' Watts on "Live at Blues Alley" and new ways of interpreting the sweep of the music from the New Orleans funeral to a 6/4 groove, with modulations before each solo, and a shifting improvised groove on each improvisation on "The Majesty of the Blues" with Herlin and Reginald Veal.

In the 1990s I focused on creating a new way of developing long-form composition for small group, utilizing short themes and a variety of emotions related to rhythmic setting on "Blue Interlude", a whole new concept of form and motivic development across three long movements on "Citi-Movement", a new concept of long-form related to the structure of a Mass with "In This House" and even a new way of interpreting the history, form and 10-piece orchestration on "Six Syncopated Movements". In 1997, we performed "Blood on the Fields" and in 1999 put out 13 single CDs and a 7-CD box set of music of live music from the Village Vanguard. Into the 2000s we released "All Rise" that showcased new ways to bring a symphonic orchestra and jazz band together. We

presented it to enthusiastic audiences all over the world and sold about 57 CDs to family and friends.

I won't tell you about all the new music and arrangements that come out of the orchestra now from Ted and Victor's recent commissions, to Sherman's "Inferno" and Chris' "God's Trombones", to everything Vincent Gardner touches, and on and on throughout the orchestra.

Over the years and through all that music, Still...."Can you play something really, really loud and energetic, like with real electricity and a lot of anger?" "Can you play without all of those horns?"

"Can you play something new, I mean new, new, new?"

This past weekend the JLCO played a concert that showcased a small sampling of Ellington's most avant garde compositions. Just before Saturday night's concert, Chris Christian, a very intelligent and engaged 26-year old asked me, "What is the next new thing in Jazz?" Before answering, I reflected on the fact that very few people had ever heard any of this great Ellington music we were about to play, and that even though it was about 60 years old, it was still as fresh and modern as tomorrow. I replied, "The next new thing will be that people will listen to it."

- Wynton