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ELLIS MARSALIS
NEA Jazz Master (2011)

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Brown: Today is November 8, 2010. This is the Smithsonian NEA Jazz Oral History interview with Ellis Marsalis, conducted by Anthony Brown, in his home at 3818 Hickory Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. Good evening, Ellis Marsalis.

Marsalis: Good evening.

Brown: It is truly a pleasure of mine to be able to conduct this interview with you. I have admired your work for a long time. This is, for me, a dream come true, to be able to talk to you face to face, as one music educator to another, as a jazz musician to another, as a father to another, to bring your contributions and your vision to light and have it documented for the American musical culture record. If we could start by you stating your full name at birth, and your birth date and place of birth please.

Marsalis: My names Ellis Louis Marsalis, Jr. I was born in New Orleans, November 14, 1934.

Brown: Your birthday's coming up in a few days.

Marsalis: Right.

Brown: Wonderful. 1934. Could you give us the names of your parents, please?

Marsalis: Ellis Louis Marsalis, Sr. My mother's name was Florence Robinson Marsalis.

Brown: So Robinson was her maiden name.

Marsalis: Right.

Brown: Louis – the spelling of Louis – is it L-o-u-?

Marsalis: L-o-u-i-s.

Brown: Okay, good. Your father, where was he born?

Marsalis: He was born in Summit, Mississippi.

Brown: And your mother?

Marsalis: New Roads, Louisiana.

Brown: Were they married – were they in New Orleans – prior to your birth, obviously. Do you know when they arrived in New Orleans?

Marsalis: No, not exactly. Let's see. I think my father when he was, I think, about 13, because my grandfather – his father – he worked on the L&N Railroad as a fireman. I'm not sure when my mother came, because she came from New Roads to New Orleans, but the year, I don't know. They didn't talk a lot about that.

Brown: What was your father's occupation?

Marsalis: He did a lot of different things. Eventually he got this idea of starting a motel, which was right after the Second World War. He functioned with that until he retired from it.

Brown: So he ran a hotel. Where was the hotel located?

Marsalis: In an adjoining parish, Jefferson Parish. It was on River Road.

Brown: So, knowing American history at this time, it would have been segregated?

Marsalis: Right.

Brown: When you were growing up, what part of New Orleans did you grow up in?

Marsalis: I was born uptown in a section they call Gert Town. When I was about 10 years old, my father moved the family to Jefferson Parish, because he had bought this property which ultimately became the motel. So I spent from the age of 10 basically until I went in the military. Got out, came back, and then I got married. But I spent most of my time in that Jefferson Parish area.

Brown: You said "the family." How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Marsalis: One sister.

Brown: One sister. Her name?

Marsalis: Yvette – Y-v-e-t-t-e.

Brown: Older or younger than you?

Marsalis: She's younger.

Brown: Could you talk about growing up in your neighborhood. Presumably it was segregated. If you could talk about any of the schools, what the feel of the neighborhood was like growing up.

Marsalis: When we moved to Jefferson Parish, being 10 years old, I hadn't ventured much from the nest, so to speak. I went to school in the area. I was still in elementary school. The school itself was extremely rural. It only went to seventh grade, the elementary school. So I had to go to another school to do the eighth grade.

Before my father went into the motel business, he was a manager of an Esso service station – which is now Exxon. His station was about eight or ten blocks from an elementary school. He enrolled us in that school, which was – we had to use his address from the business, the service station, because it was in another parish. I spent a year there before I finished and then went to high school.

As far as the neighborhood and that area that I lived in, it was called Shrewsbury. I didn't function very much in that area, because there wasn't much going on to do in that area. Right behind the property, when we first moved there, was a dairy. A guy had a bunch of cows. We used to have to walk to the elementary school. On one side was a farm, almost all the way to the highway. There was another elementary school not far from the motel. Washington Elementary, I think it was called.

There was really not a lot of social interaction, because it was a lot like a different culture, because we had moved from the city of New Orleans to the Shrewsbury area of

Jefferson Parish, and just about all of the people in some way or another were related to each other. We didn't have much relatable aspects, in that sense.

Brown: Did you have any particular favorite subjects when you were in school? Or do you remember either excelling in any particular subjects or having . . . ?

Marsalis: I didn't really excel in anything. When I got to the eighth grade – this was a school in the city of New Orleans, I had spent two years at this school in Shrewsbury, and I was so far behind, I failed the first semester. But I always did like English, and I think when I finally had begun to figure out what I needed to know and try to catch up, it was my favorite subject. I figured out, many, many years later, I didn't like math, and it was primarily because I never had a good math teacher. I think had I had a good math teacher, my whole attitude would have been different.

Brown: Did you have a good English teacher?

Marsalis: Oh yeah. This lady, she was fantastic.

Brown: Do you remember her name?

Marsalis: Yeah, Margie Sarter – S-a-r-t-e-r, I think, or -o-r.

Brown: What do you recollect about her that made her such a good teacher.

Marsalis: For one thing, she failed – I got an F in her class, which – I don't like to say she failed me, because it really wasn't her fault. But I think – she introduced our class to poetry: James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Claude McKay.

Brown: Paul Lawrence Dunbar?

Marsalis: Right. One of the young ladies in the class would recite *When Melindy Sings.* That was the introduction to me to any and all of that literature. I really loved that class. I was only in there for a year.

Brown: What grade was it?

Marsalis: In the eighth grade. The following year I graduated and went to high school, the Methodist school, Gilbert Academy. I liked that school. It was more like a community, and the principal was the wife of a Methodist bishop. She was sort of like a mother hen with biddies. It was the same high school that Harold Battiste went to, except he was ahead of me. Andrew Young went to that school. Tom Dent went to that school. Lolis Elie, the father, he went there. It was a great school.

Brown: Did you continue on, once you go to this school, to get your high school diploma?

Marsalis: No. I had two years there. The second year, the bishop – the principal's husband – was sent to another area, and we had another lady who was principal, which – in some way during that time, a deal was made to sell the building to the Christian brothers, which ultimately became De La Salle High School, which is on St. Charles Avenue right now. So I went to an Episcopal school called [?Garlette] and finished high school there.

Brown: Were you interested in music at all during your elementary or high school years?

Marsalis: Oh yeah. I had been interested in music for a long, long time. I started playing the clarinet. I was studying at the Xavier University Junior School of Music. I started about 11. When I got into high school, I met a different group of people, and there was some interest in the popular music of the day. The clarinet was related primarily to the traditional jazz, the early jazz, and I didn't really know anybody. What I did – I didn't know that the people I knew was involved in it. My peers was into rhythm-and-blues. So I got a tenor saxophone and started learning solos off of them records.

Brown: Any particular ones you remember? Any solos? The artists?

Marsalis: The first one that I can think of was – there's a singer named Roy Brown. He had a big record called *Good Rockin' Tonight.* The tenor solo – I don't remember this brother's name, but his nickname was Badman. His solo, that was the first solo that I'd ever learned. That was right at the time, my last year at Gilbert Academy. When I went to [?Garlette], there was no music at all. It was a choir director. He was okay.

But in my senior year – this is interesting – in my senior year – see, I used to have to catch a bus from Shrewsbury, because we were still living in Shrewsbury, and change a couple of buses and go to [?Garlette]. It was about a 45-minute ride, I think, connecting all them buses. In my senior year – the bus used to pass right by Dillard University on the way to where [?Garlette] was, because it was in the same part of town. Harold Battiste was going to school at Dillard at the time. Toward the end of my senior year, when the bus would get right by Dillard, I would just get off and go over to Dillard and hang out with Harold. I met a piano player who was from Dallas, Texas, who was a freshman at Dillard that year, named Cedar Walton.

Brown: We just conducted his oral history – not myself, but the Smithsonian just conducted his oral history. He talked about you.

Marsalis: We used to jam as much as we could. But Cedar didn't come back after that year. I was a freshman the following year. Before Cedar left, I remember we had a little trio. It was some kind of an engagement – I don't remember what it was – at the Booker Washington High School. We had agreed to play – there was no money involved – because each one of us could play a little of the other instrument, clarinet, piano, and bass. We played over there, switching off on the instrument. Cedar remembered. I saw Cedar at the jazz festival one year, and Harold happened to be in town. Somebody took our picture. He was saying, yeah, this is the trio that played at Booker Washington. I've seen him through the years.

Brown: If we can go back – you said you started playing music, you were interested in music. Was there much music played in your parents' house?

Marsalis: No.

Brown: Recordings? Or any singing?

Marsalis: No. Just whatever recordings that I got. That was it.

Brown: Your instruction on the clarinet, was it only in school? Or did you have private lessons as well?

Marsalis: It was kind of private. I say "kind of private." What I mean is, when I went to the Xavier Junior School of Music, I started out in a class. Eventually – the class was taught by a lady who was a music major at Xavier University named Bernice Blasch – eventually she married a pianist from Xavier named Kelly White, and they moved to New York. Kelly had been at a couple of universities. I didn't see he nor Bernice that often, but maybe – I forgot exactly when, but Victor Goines and I were walking towards the Juilliard building and ran right into Kelly and Bernice. They were waiting to go to the Metropolitan to see this opera that night. I hadn't seen them for a minute. What do they call that, six degrees of separation?

While I was at the Xavier University Junior School of Music, I was in the little school orchestra. In fact, I've got a picture of that, of being in that little orchestra. I only – I stayed there, because I was still in elementary school, until I went to Gilbert Academy. When I went to Gilbert Academy, the nun who was over the Junior School of Music, she put me out of school, out of the Junior School of music, and she told my mother, the reason that she expelled me was because my mother sent me to an atheist school, which is Gilbert, that Methodist school.

Brown: Atheist school is what she called it?

Marsalis: Yeah. This is what? 1946, ’47. Somewhere around there. It was strange.

Some ten years forward, I was getting ready to go into the Marine Corps. I wasn’t leaving until January. So I took this job as the band teacher at Xavier Prep, which is connected to the university, just to do with the band – do the halftime shows and what have you. We were preparing to go to play – at that time, Dillard University had a small stadium, and a lot of high schools used to play football there. Xavier Prep was playing a game there, and we were getting ready to go. The nun who was sort of like the liaison officer – I say, “We’re getting ready to go. Are you going?” She said, “No. We’re not allowed on Dillard’s campus.”

Brown: Religious intolerance has a long history, I guess.

Marsalis: I don’t know to what extent it was really religious intolerance. I think a good portion of that had almost everything to do with politics. I don’t think it had anything to do with religion.

Brown: Politics in which way?

Marsalis: In a sense that both of those institutions were established primarily as a means of educating young black people. Dillard was at the university level. Xavier University was at the university level. But, when it came down to it, it was all systemically inclusive. Everybody was black, except the nuns at Xavier, see? They were in the Order of the Blessed Sacrament. Basically, when I say that, I think it was more political than religious, because there were all kinds of students going to Xavier Prep and also Xavier University, of different faiths. None of them were turned down because of that. You see? But somewhere in there – and I’m not altogether sure now. I never investigated it – there was some competitive friction-like stuff going on between those – Xavier and Dillard, which ostensibly had to be political, because there was nothing else. You know what I’m saying? It’s not exactly like anybody was violating segregation laws. But anyway, that’s the way that was.

Brown: Some places are still like that, but we’ll talk about that later. So, your high school – are you working as a musician by this time? Are you able to make not so much a living, but are you getting paid to be a musician at this time, before you get out of high school?

Marsalis: You mean in high school?

Brown: Um-hmm.

Marsalis: Yeah. I started to play some jobs, primarily on tenor saxophone. We started this band, youngsters in high school. We called it the Groovy Boys. Boy, you think that ain't corny!

Brown: Who came up with the name?

Marsalis: I think the piano player did. I think. I was talking to somebody about that today. The first job – well, I don't know if I'd call it a job. I would say, where some money was paid to a group of us – the piano player's piano teacher had a group of students, and she wanted to hold a little reception for her students, of which my friend Roger was one of her students.

Brown: Roger's last name?

Marsalis: Dickerson. So she asked him, could he put together a group just to play for these kids? So he came to us. He said, my piano teacher, she wants us to play. There was no money involved. We said yeah, we'll play. At the end of the performance, we were getting ready to go home, his music teacher and the others, they were real appreciative of us playing. So they passed the hat, and we made a dollar-and-a-half apiece. We thought about it and said if we could do that with this, we should go try to find some jobs and make more money than that, and we did. We started playing for different schools, especially high schools. We would make five bucks a gig apiece.

Brown: Are you playing dances? Assemblies? What kind of events?

Marsalis: Dances.

Brown: So you're playing pretty much pop music of the day.

Marsalis: Oh yeah.

Brown: It would have been rhythm-and-blues.

Marsalis: That's – definitely.

Brown: So you had Roy Brown, maybe Wynonie Harris, maybe – who else?

Marsalis: I don't know.

Brown: You don't remember that.

Marsalis: I don't know. There was some local people too. But that was what we did. In fact we played basically together until we got into college. We started to drift, in a way, because Roger and I were both music majors at Dillard. He was going more to composition, which he eventually went to graduate school at the University of Indiana, and he had about three years at the Viennese Academy, studying composition. I was going mostly towards jazz, listening at those recordings of Bird, Miles, and Diz, and what have you. I was still basically playing tenor saxophone and working locally. People would call, the ones who knew that I could play. It wasn't that challenging. The rhythm-and-blues was pretty simple. It was a whole bunch of 1-3-5's.

I had studied piano while I was still in elementary school. I started to go to this piano teacher. My sister was also going to the piano teacher. I was going, in a way, maybe because she was going. I was only so interested in the piano.

Brown: Was there a piano in the home, in your home?

Marsalis: Yeah. Eventually – I'm trying to think how this segued – I started to practice on the piano to hear the music that I was listening to on the records. Not necessarily doing transcriptions. I wasn't really doing that. Just trying to figure out how the music was constructed, on my own. By the time I was, oh, I think a sophomore in high school, I could play chords, and I had some facility on the instrument. I had gone to a concert at the – Jazz at the Philharmonic, which came to New Orleans, and Oscar [Peterson] was on the gig. At that time it was just he and Ray Brown playing duo. I had heard a recording of Oscar. But when I saw that, I said, wow, this is too much.

I was still taking piano lessons bit by bit, but primarily, I was still dealing with the tenor saxophone, and some lessons in the university, because I was a clarinet major. Eventually, when I graduated, I had to do a recital. I'm doing it for the whole student body. The teacher at the time set that up. I had to do that Hindemith clarinet sonata.

After I graduated – I had been subbing for people on tenor saxophone and sometimes on piano. One night, Harold Battiste and I – Harold lived right across the street from a club called the Dew Drop Inn. I went over to his house, and we walked across the street. Lee Allan, who was the tenor sax player with Fats Domino's band, he was leading a group at the Dew Drop Inn, and his piano player, John [Br?] was running late. Lee knew that I was a tenor player, because Roger and I used to go to his house, hang out, drink vino and all of that. When he saw Harold, he said, "Harold, come on." He said, "[?'s] running late. So just play until he gets here." Harold said, "No, I don't want to do that. Let him do that." I said yeah, okay. So I got on the bandstand – most of the stuff that was called was basic stuff, some blues, some *Rhythm* changes, that kind of stuff. I stayed up there for about an hour. When the piano player came, I thought, if I could stay up here for an hour, I can

really make a gig playing piano, because I had never made a gig playing piano before. That's when I started to think about playing, making a gig on piano.

I think the total switch was after I had graduated from Dillard. They used to have jam sessions at the Dew Drop on Sundays. I went to this one particular jam session one Sunday, and I heard this tenor player. We were – at that time, there were several jazz standards that cats would play. Everybody was trying to play *Cherokee.* I don't know if that's what he was playing or not, but anyway, this guy was playing, and I couldn't even follow him. So I just stopped playing and listened. He was serious on that tenor. After that Sunday, I never played the tenor again. It went in the case, and that was the end to that. Eventually, the tenor player – his name was Nathanial Perrilliat – eventually we would be in a group together, and Harold Battiste's record company recorded us as a quartet, a recording called the *Monkey Puzzle.* For the most part, that was the direction that I was headed in from then on.

Brown: Who else was in that quartet?

Marsalis: A drummer named James Black and a bass player who came from Dallas, named Marshall Smith.

Brown: Had you worked or knew James Black before this quartet?

Marsalis: I didn't really know him. The tenor player knew him. He was going to school at Southern University in Baton Rouge and was playing some jobs up there, and the tenor player said, "Man" – because [Ed] Blackwell was already gone. So we were trying to find a drummer for whatever few jobs we had – he said, "Man, there's this kid, James Black." "Say yeah?" He says, "He sounds good." So he came in. Like I said, a few gigs we had, we started to use James. Eventually it became a quartet, but not with Marshall – Marshall Smith, the bass player. It was with local bass players.

What happened, I got a call from a saxophone player named Al Belletto, who was the musical director at the local Playboy Club. They were looking for musicians. It was a six-night-a-week gig, the first six-night-a-week gig I ever had. So I got James, and I called Marshall, because the local bass player was also a band instructor and all his Friday nights was with the football team. So I'm saying, man, this ain't going to work. So I got Marshall to come down here, and we started playing at the Playboy Club. It was somewhere during that time that Harold Battiste had the label AFO. They had had a pretty big hit on a recording – rhythm-and blues recording called *I Know.* He told the guys on his board, he said, we should record this jazz group, just to document them, because he knew they weren't going to make no money off of that. So they did. We went in the studio and recorded, and it's been around ever since.

Brown: You mentioned Ed Blackwell. Could you talk more about your relationship with Ed Blackwell, please?

Marsalis: The first time that I played with Blackwell, he was living uptown, and he had an old upright piano in his living room. He called me. He said, "Hey man, we're going to jam today. Why don't you come by?" I said, wow, this cat's calling me. There was a tenor player that lived nearby. I think it was Clarence Thomas. It was just drums, piano, and tenor saxophone.

Edward was the first drummer that I ever heard play a solo on a ballad on drums. That was my introduction to him. We started to play as a quintet. Exactly when, I don't know, but we started to play as a quintet with Alvin Batiste playing clarinet and Harold Battiste playing tenor saxophone. Sometimes – there was a bass player named Richard Payne. Sometimes it was Richard. Peter Bailey – sometimes with him. And there was another bass player that I played with on a job, that Edward got, right after I got out of the military, named Otis Duvernay. He had a good feel and really could swing, but he was self-taught, and in a studio, the intonation wasn't working. He used to play like this [gesture unknown]. But he sure could swing, though. I'll give him that.

There were two guys who were local promoters, Al Smith and Clarence Davis. They used to call them Al and Bo. What they would do, they would go to a local restaurant – it's a pretty big restaurant, seated about 500 people – and they would book the restaurant for holidays, like Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. They would hire us to play during those days, as a jazz group. That was when the quintet started to come together.

Brown: Did you already have the name, the American Jazz Quintet?

Marsalis: At some point in time – that was my thing. I started calling them the American Jazz Quintet at some point during that time, yeah.

Brown: It sounds like you're already working professionally. You're going to college. What precipitated your decision to go into the Marine Corps?

Marsalis: I was in California, Harold, Edward Blackwell, and myself. We drove up to Los Angeles, because Ornette Coleman had sent a ticket for Edward to come up to Los Angeles, and I had just finished from school. I wasn't doing nothing. So I told my ma. I said, "Look. I'm going out to California." Harold decided he would go. So we all – the three of us drove up there.

After we got there – I stayed up there pretty much through the summer – I got a notice from everybody's favorite Uncle Sam, because they were still conscripting then. I say,

I'm going to have to go home, because just like what Caesar did, everybody had to go home to be taxed. So I had to go home, take a physical, and all of that.

Brown: Before we talk about your military experience, could we go back and talk about your months in Los Angeles? What was that like? What was it like meeting Ornette? Hearing the music?

Marsalis: It was great, meeting Ornette. I didn't know what Ornette was doing. A couple of times I tried to play some things with him. He had not worked out anything that included a piano. It was only a couple of months that I was up there. But it was great, just being around on that, because he was always thinking about concepts and stuff that he was doing.

When I did go back home, and I had got the letter from the military, this friend of mine and I – Roger – Roger Dickerson – we had talked about the Army's buddy plan, like, they go into the military. Well, he went to graduate school while I was teaching at the prep – at Xavier Prep – which was from like late August, September, around football season.

Brown: This is 1956?

Marsalis: Yeah. Harold Battiste, we went in a studio and made a recording with Blackwell and – who was on it? maybe Richard. I almost forgot – but we were recording music that everybody wrote. Harold wrote. I wrote. Alvin wrote. Not long after that was when I went in, in January of '57.

The reason why I ended up going in the Marine Corps was, at the time, since they were conscripting, I had passed the physical. I say, I'll just wait until they call me. They never did. The guy from the Marine Corps called me. He say, "Look. We got this two-year program." Well, the Army was two years. So I says, "I don't know." He said, "I could send you. You could go to Paris Island." I said, "Ain't no way that I'm going to Paris Island. You can forget that." He said, "I'll tell you what. You can go to MCRD. That's in San Diego." I said, "San Diego. That don't sound too bad." So I say, if I go, then I can get the two years out of the way, because by this time I was 22, I think – something like that – and I wanted to finish with the military obligation. So I agreed to go and join the Marine Corps.

It was a great experience all around, running that grinder with that M-1, eventually going into – finishing up with boot camp, which is 12 weeks and going to infantry training, falling behind that tank, eating dust, and all of that. But when I got my duty assignment, I had listed that I was a clarinet player. So they sent me to El Toro, which was an air wing at the time. It's a state park or something now. While I was there, not too long after I got

there, this buck sergeant came in the band area. He said, “Hey man. I heard you was a piano player. How’d you like to be on t.v.?” I’m looking at this clown. I’m saying yeah, right. He say, “No, no, no. I’m serious.” He said, “The t.v. show, and the piano player’s enlistment is up. We got to get another piano player.” So I said yeah, okay.

It was a show called *Dress Blues,* which was primarily a recruitment tool for the Marine Corps. They used to show it on Sundays at 12 o’clock, as if anybody was looking at t.v. at 12 o’clock on a Sunday in Los Angeles. It emanated from CBS, which at that time was on Melrose and Vine. So I went, auditioned for the gig, and got that. It was a quartet: a master sergeant by the name of Bill Jolly was playing guitar; Fred Bassett was the bass player; and Don Von [?Bulewitz] was the drummer. That’s pretty much what I did for the enlistment.

Brown: Play on a television show.

Marsalis: For about a year. About six months before I was due to get out, the television show went away, but the lieutenant picked up a radio, and we did basically the same thing on the radio that we were doing on television.

Brown: Live broadcasts?

Marsalis: No, it was recorded. It was recorded. The t.v. show was recorded. But they had Kinescope then. They didn’t have tape or any of that. So I did that show on the radio until it was time for me to get out, and I got out.

Brown: Before we pick up your return to civilian life, I wanted to go back to that brief trip to Los Angeles and ask you a couple of questions. One, did Battiste get a chance to play with Ornette during those months? Was there any musical experience?

Marsalis: Not that I know of.

Brown: When you got there, did you guys stay together for those two months? Or did you guys branch out?

Marsalis: There was no gigs. Ornette used to play at his house sometimes, and sometimes he and Blackwell would play, just the two of them. Sometimes we would go over to the union building. Whatever practice room was empty, we’d run in there and set up and practice until the next person who was scheduled to be there would come. We’d go anywhere that we could play. But there was no gig.

Brown: Did you interface with any of the other musicians there in Los Angeles?

Marsalis: I did one job, as I can remember, because at that time, Charles Lloyd was at USC. I played with Charles at the school, I think. Billy Higgins was playing drums. I don't remember who the bass player was. But that was the only time I remember actually playing, because I couldn't do it legally, because they didn't let you do it. If you're in the military, you can't work any jobs. So if it's one of them under-the-radar kind of jobs, fine. See? But that was it.

Brown: Do you know how Ornette and Blackwell first got together? Do you know anything about their early . . . ?

Marsalis: Exactly, no. Ornette had been in New Orleans for a minute, but I'm not – I don't know how they got together.

Brown: It seems as if Blackwell had already a reputation by the time you first started collaborating?

Marsalis: Oh yeah. He . . .

Brown: What was he known for? How would you describe his style or anything that was significant?

Marsalis: He was in the style of Max Roach. He was known locally. How can I put that? See, Blackwell was somebody who never hung out. He didn't go hang out at no clubs. None of that. If he wasn't working, he'd go to his house and practice on his drums, work on them, or whatever. So he was known among musicians to be the talented drummer that he is. When I look back, the whole bebop, as they call it, attracted a certain amount of musicians which seemed like more musicians than there really was at the time, when I look at it. There were places where you could play rhythm-and-blues and even at the beginning of a show play some jazz pieces. I know the tenor player, Nathaniel Perrilliot, he was out on the road with some blues person – I can't remember – and he and another tenor player named Earl Battiste used to practice on *Koko*, that Charlie Parker. They learned it. Eventually it got to be a part of the show, with the two tenor players playing this, before the regular gig started. Ray Charles used to do that. He used to come here a lot. When he would start – because he played alto and he had these arrangements – he would play alto with the band with these arrangements, and then maybe an hour in is when he would start doing *The Night Time is the Right Time* and *I Got A Woman* – all of those kinds of things.

Brown: Do you remember the first bebop tune you heard? Do you remember your reaction?

Marsalis: No. I don't remember the first one. My reactions most of the time had to do with live performances. There was a radio show here for a while, maybe in the late 1940s, that did play more modern jazz, bebop. I would listen to it, but I didn't really – it had a certain appeal to me, but I didn't know what they were doing. The first bebop experience that I had was going to a concert and listening at that band that Dizzy had in '49, that band. They came here. I said, that's what I want to do, right there. I had a chance to talk to Dizzy about that. Boy, Dizzy was a nut.

Brown: '49. You would have been about 15. Pretty young. Talking to Diz about. Was he open? Was he receptive to . . . ?

Marsalis: I didn't talk to him then. I talked to him later on. But I went to the concert. The concert was at the Booker Washington auditorium. Mixed concerts was forbidden. So Norman Granz say, we ain't playing no segregated auditorium. So what he did, he brought the concert to Booker T. Washington High School auditorium, and they figured out how to segregate it anyway. That was kind of funny, in a way. Downstairs – and how I found out was sheer accident – I had a ticket for seat whatever it was, E-3 or whatever. All these white people were sitting around me. The cat said, "Man, let me see your ticket." I showed it to him. He said, "Oh, it's on *that* side" in the same row. That was when I heard that band, and I knew that that was what I really wanted to do. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew that that's what I wanted to do.

Brown: You were talking about when you were doing your – with that band, I think that you were saying that you were doing recording. You were all contributing music. What was the music sounding like? Who were the major influences on these original compositions that you were all playing?

Marsalis: Basically, the influences were the beboppers of the day, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis. We played – there's recordings of that on the AFO label, some of the things that we did. And Harold Battiste put together a book of those songs, which he called the *Silver Book.* They are available to be played. But basically it was bebop, our versions of that.

Brown: Maybe we should stop here. He's got to change tape. Then we'll pick up with you coming out of the service.

To pick up where we left off with your career, you got out of the military, got out of the Marine Corps, and then did you come right back to New Orleans after that?

Marsalis: I did. I didn't really like L.A.

Brown: Why not? What was it about L.A. that you didn't like?

Marsalis: It had nothing to do with it. Music, not the music I wanted to play.

Brown: What year was this, by the way?

Marsalis: '58. See, rhythm-and-blues was just beginning to come to Los Angeles. Earl Palmer, who was a great drummer, he did all of the sessions here. He went to Los Angeles. He left here and went up to L.A. I would see Earl every now and then while I was in the military. The studios had guys who were used to playing studio music, backing Sinatra and all of them – the Hollywood types. There was a whole cultural change that was going on. Hollywood, all the clubs were frequently by stars, all of a sudden started to get the long-haired hippie-looking people, who had money in their pocket, but they weren't the stars per se. All of that started to change. I remember I started – I read in the newspaper, in the *L.A. Times*, about the beatniks, and I'm saying, "Beatniks. I wonder what that is?" They said, in the paper, they said it was beatniks and Cosmo Alley. So I say, okay, I'm going to go check out Cosmo Alley. I went down to L.A. and went over to Cosmo Alley. It was a real small place. When I went inside, there's all these people sitting there, suit and tie. There's a comedian on the stage with a suit and tie, telling jokes, and I'm saying, this don't look like no beatniks, not what they had described. Anyway, the comedian on the stage was Lenny Bruce. When I left that club, I started to think about some of them people that I was hanging out with, and I realized that that was the beatniks, turning the t.v. sound down, putting records on, sitting on a log stretched out into the living room. I said man, man, Jesus, the beatniks.

It was a very interesting time for me in L.A., because when I'd go downtown – I ran into Sammy Davis one time. He was telling me about putting up the SRO sign around the corner at the Moulin Rouge. Basie was playing at the Crescendo at the time. MJQ was also playing at a different time, but it was so noisy in there, John Lewis got upset. Told them, said, "Just be quiet." There was people like Tom Lehrer and – what's this guy's name? He was really funny too. He's another comedian. He used to go – he used to read the *New York Times* every day and formulate his whole routine off of the newspaper. It was a very interesting time to be in L.A. Mort Saul, that's him. He used to work one of the clubs downtown.

I was only there for two years, and then I got out in December of '57. That's when it was. I got out in December of '57, because I went in in – no, wait a minute, wait a minute, no.

Brown: It would be '58, because you said you went in in January of '57, I think.

Marsalis: Yeah, I did. I went in in January of '57, and I got out in December of '58. I had a '56 Buick, and I drove it home.

Brown: What rank did you achieve?

Marsalis: Corporal. That was it.

Brown: You didn't have to do any duties other than what you described with the music.

Marsalis: That was it.

Brown: Boy, you lucked out. It wasn't going to get any better.

Marsalis: When I went in, it was after Korea and before Vietnam. So even had I not been doing music, there wasn't much else going on. But it fairly close in Lebanon. I remember we were in the studio in Los Angeles, at CBS, and getting ready to tape a show. The lieutenant got a message. The message was all active duty personnel has to be on the base, no more than 50 miles from the base. We were already more than 50 miles. In the newspaper, this thing flared up in Lebanon. So that evening – see, what I used to have to do, I had to take the car and drop off everybody, the lieutenant, the buck sergeant. It would be on the way to the base. Some lived in like – I don't know – Whittier and Norwalk, all of them towns. That night – most Americans didn't even know this – that night – there was 13 squadrons of planes that took off for Lebanon that night. All the talking heads on t.v. and in the newspaper were saying one thing, and these guys were gone. We – the lieutenant was talking about the possibility of us going and entertaining troops, but we never left.

Brown: When you're done with your military obligations, you came right back to New Orleans, you say. What was the first thing you – what did you want to do? Return to music? Be a professional musician?

Marsalis: Yeah, basically.

Brown: You had the G.I. Bill, and you had other opportunities.

Marsalis: I didn't use that.

Brown: You didn't use it.

Marsalis: I didn't use that. It was interesting about that. I didn't use it. I didn't understand the military too well, because I got married not long after I came back, and I didn't even understand that I could go to that – what do you call it? – the PX or whatever.

Brown: The PX and the commissary.

Marsalis: Because I had four more years . . .

Brown: Reserve?

Marsalis: . . . to go, even though I wasn't on active duty. I didn't even understand none of that. So I let a lot of that pass me by. As far as the G.I. Bill was concerned, I didn't try to use the G.I. Bill, because not long after I got married, I was playing, playing gigs, wherever I could find a gig. It was pretty slim, because everything was changing at the time. So by 19- – what was it? '61 or '2. I think it was somewhere around there, which is when Belletto called me about doing the gig at the Playboy Club – somewhere around there.

Brown: Who were you working with when you came back to New Orleans? You were saying jobs were scarce.

Marsalis: I had a gig with Blackwell for a while. Blackwell had a gig in a place called the Jazz Room in the French Quarter. It's basically Otis Duvernay.

Brown: So he – I'm sorry. Blackwell had gone with you in, I guess, '56, or you had gone with Blackwell to hook up with Ornette. So now he's back in New Orleans . . .

Marsalis: Yeah, he came back.

Brown: . . . instead of having continued his career with . . . .

Marsalis: Yeah, he came back.

Brown: Do you know what precipitated his leaving Ornette or returning back to New Orleans?

Marsalis: No. I don't know. I was playing at this club for a while. Eventually Edward was able to get Nat Perrilliat on the gig. So it was really a quartet. But me and the owner got into it, and that was it. I was gone.

Brown: Which club was this?

Marsalis: The Jazz Room, where Ed Blackwell was working. I'm trying to think. That was before I started playing at the Playboy Club, but eventually I did start playing at the Playboy Club. When I started – at that time we were hired to play behind all the black artists that the Playboy Club had signed. Ironically, the club in New Orleans was the second club that they built. It was even built before the one in New York. So we must

have stayed on that gig for about two or three months. Eventually the black artists stopped coming, and we didn't have a gig no more. That was it.

Brown: Where was the club located?

Marsalis: On – let me see – on Iberville, I think. Right off the corner of Bourbon – I think Bourbon and Iberville.

Brown: Here you are. You have a college degree. Did you graduate from Dillard? Is that correct?

Marsalis: Yeah.

Brown: I don't understand why you weren't able to go to OCS or some sort of officer training, rather than being . . .

Marsalis: They didn't commission musicians.

Brown: Ah.

Marsalis: The shrink asked me that.

Brown: The shrink? Wait a minute.

Marsalis: Oh yeah, everybody. You got to go past the shrink when you get in the military. He said, "Why didn't you apply for OC?" I say, "The Marine Corps don't commission music majors," for whatever reason, not that I was looking to be a Marine officer anyway.

Brown: But you have this music – you have this degree. You're back in New Orleans. You're trying to get gigs. You've just recently married. I presume you would like to state the name of your wife?

Marsalis: Dolores Ferdinand. She had gone to Grambling and finished – graduated in home economics, which was considered one of the best home-ec departments in the whole state.

Brown: Did you know her before you had gone into the Marines?

Marsalis: Yeah. But it was all mostly about gig hustling. By 1963 I decided that I'd try a club. My daddy and I talked about it and literally forced my mother out of that house. She came – she moved in this house. Harold Battiste used to own this house. My daddy had

bought it from him. So I bought it from my dad, and my wife fixed it up. This space here didn't exist. There was one downstairs on the other side. That didn't exist either. It was like a shotgun.

By 1963 I started teaching at a later version of the Shrewsbury school that I had gone to, but it was not the same. It was a little different. I only stayed there for a year, because I went over there with the intention of developing a band, and the politics at that school – they had me teaching two or three science classes in there.

Brown: Science classes?

Marsalis: Yes, and a couple of general music classes. At the end of the day, the last period, was when I was supposed to develop the band. No band room, no instruments, no nothing. So I said no. If I can't help these kids, I'm definitely not going to cripple nobody, not because I need a job. So in '64 I took this job in a little town called Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, about 150 miles from here. Needless to say, my wife was not pleased with that. Looking back at it, I don't blame her, because we didn't really – I was in a desperate mode and just took the job, with no discussion or anything, and went up to – it's about seven miles out of Lafayette, Louisiana. I stayed up there for two years. It was like a six-day-a-week job, just about.

It was a pretty good band that was left by the previous band instructor. He was a trumpet player that I knew. He moved to Opelousas, which is about 25, 30 miles from Breaux Bridge. We had this band that we called The Directors. Everybody in the band, with the exception I think of the drummer and a singer that we had, was a band director at some school in the vicinity. In fact we were supposed to back up Otis Redding on something, but I don't know what happened to that. It didn't happen. We played dances in and around the area. I left there in 1966.

Brown: You already have a family at this point. Branford was already born.

Marsalis: Yeah, we had four kids, and we came back here. By this time, Lyndon Johnson had changed all the laws around. So when I started working at the Playboy Club again, it wasn't segregated. I stayed there – I don't know – maybe a year, two years. I forgot. By 1967, I got a call from a clarinet player in Al Hirt's band, asking me if I'd join it. So I joined Al Hirt's band from '67 to '70.

Brown: Had you played in a traditional context before? Did you . . . ?

Marsalis: There wasn't much traditional in that band.

Brown: Was it more pop? I'm just thinking of Al.

Marsalis: It's hard to describe it. He did play a couple of things. He played *Fidgety Feet.* But he had three recordings that was hits for him: *Sugar Lips, Cotton Candy,* and *Java.* They were pop-ish. The musicians that he had in the band when I came in, they were all young kids, the organ player, the drummer. He didn't have a bass player. The organ player was in the band, and the drummer. He had a saxophone player from Ohio, and his main man, Pee Wee Spitelera, was playing clarinet. So it wasn't really trad, per se.

Brown: Did you tour much?

Marsalis: A little, yeah. We went out. The most that we ever went out consecutively was about 28 days, but otherwise than that – we would go – he liked to be at home. So a lot of times, when he was at home, we would play at his club without him.

Brown: What club was that?

Marsalis: It was his club, Al Hirt's.

Brown: Oh, his club.

Marsalis: Without him. It was on Bourbon Street. That was an interesting experience too. I got to hear Duke's band there, Erroll Garner, Jimmy Smith, Father Hines. A lot of people came and played at his club.

Brown: When you started deciding that piano would be your main voice, who would you consider your main influences?

Marsalis: O.P. [Oscar Peterson] probably was my main influence, but my mental approach – I don't know if that's the best way to put it – I started out as a band player. I was not a piano major, which means that I had never played Chopin and *The Well-Tempered Clavier.* None of that. I used some of that just for some technical things, but I was always in a band of some kind. So I was primarily – like I said, I was just in a band situation, and it was fairly comfortable with that. So I didn't really need any model of any particular piano player, because I wasn't functioning either as a soloist or even in a trio. I would eventually start to do that.

Brown: So you leave Al Hirt's band in 1970. Was there a particular reason why?

Marsalis: I played a job with the tenor player one Sunday. He and I were playing with Wallace Davenport. Technically, the union does not permit you to play seven days. It was the seventh day, because it was a Sunday. Well, he fired me and the tenor player. He really wanted to get rid of the tenor player. So the clarinet player called me up and say,

"Look, man, Al didn't want you to go. Why don't you come back?" When I was talking to my wife, I say, "You know what?" I say, "I don't think I need to go back to that. It was good while I was there, but I don't want to go back to that." So I didn't.

I started freelancing and picking up odds and ends. I was with – what was it? The Southern – not the Southern. Theater. It was a theater company that was either started or run by June Havoc. Different acts would come in. There was a comedian called Lee Allen. We played behind him. Then there was a musical called the Burds – B-u-r-d-s – which was written by Tim Rice. I think this was before *Red, White, and America* – I think. Tim and June got into this thing, whatever that was. So they were looking for a piano player who could come and at least read some notes and play chord symbols. The show, *The Burds,* was like – remember a t.v. show called *This is the Week that Was*? It's a bunch of one-liners, almost. You come on, you get fed a line, and you go to the next one. The first night that I played, June Havoc was there, and she was feeding me the music. The second night, she wasn't feeding me the music, and it fell apart. It was a disaster. So I just went home and shedded, Act I, Act II, all that day. When I went back to the show, it was okay. There was a hypnotic guy who came. I remember what we played behind him. It was an assortment of things that came to this theater. I don't remember why – if the stuff ran out. I don't remember quitting it.

But anyway, I was still doing freelance stuff. At some point I started to work at – let me see. I might be jumping ahead of myself – at a place called Tyler's Beer Garden.

Brown: Is that before working at Le Club at the Hyatt Regency?

Marsalis: No, that was afterwards. That's another thing. I had forgot about Le Club. Le Club opened around 1977. In fact, the hotel opened before they'd even finished the top floors. Let's see. Let me see. Where am I? '70. Oh. The same year that I joined Hirt's band, in '67, I started doing adjunct teaching at Xavier University, a course that they were building in African-American music. But it really wasn't. It was sort of like one of those electives that people could take, like a music appreciation kind of thing, but it was an elective. I started out with 12 students, and before I left I had 50-something that come in. I stayed there from '67 until '75, I think, because by '74 I started to teach at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. But even before that – I have to back up some – I started playing at a club called Lu and Charlie's.

Brown: Lu and Charlie's?

Marsalis: Yeah. L-u and Charlie's. The way I happened to get that job, alto saxophone player called me, named Earl Turbinton. I got two or three jobs because Earl either didn't show up, or whatever. But at Lu and Charlie's, Earl didn't show up, and Charlie said, "Man, can you put a band together?" I said yeah. So I put this band together with James

Black and John [?Br] – because [Br?] had been playing with me at the theater gigs, a trumpet player, at the theater gigs – and Ralph Johnson. We had an assortment of bass players. There were just all kinds of bass players. The last one that I remember was a guy named [?] Johnson. All of them except one, I think, was electric bass.

I stayed there until everything started to get stale, because nobody – James was writing, but James was writing some different kind of music at the time. My plate was getting full, just in terms of I was doing – teaching at Xavier plus doing this gig, and I wasn't organized enough to handle all of that. So somewhere around 1973, I think, I left that job. I don't remember exactly, clearly, the sequence of events, but I do know, while I was still playing at Lu and Charlie's, the dean of music at Loyola University, Joseph Buttram, he and one of his faculty named Tom [?Tubbs] came to hear the band. It was during this time that I was thinking in terms of going back to school, because the chairman of the music department at Xavier University, where I was still doing adjunct, he said, "If you get a master's, I'll put you on full time." I say oh, okay. When I mentioned this to Joe Buttram, who was at Loyola, he say, "You really want to go back to school?" I say, "Yeah, I got a chance to get this full time job," because I still didn't have a full time job, and by then I think we had five kids, or six really, I think. Anyway, Buttram said, "Come talk to me." So I went and talked to him at Loyola. I told my wife, I say, "I got a chance at this job at Xavier full time." I was saying, "I never did use my G.I. Bill." But what happened, it expired. But Richard Nixon brought it back, because what Nixon did was bring it back to reward the people in Vietnam. So I was under that umbrella, even though I was only in for two years. So I say, okay, fine. I went through the process and would get them little checks and was going to school.

I was – I wanted – it was a music education degree. So I had to take music ed courses and philosophy. Also, I took a Suzuki class. I took a history class, which was awful for me, because really, I didn't know European music history. But the best thing that happened for me, the first class that I took was – I can't remember the name of it – but it was teaching us how to write a dummy thesis. Joe Buttram, the guy who was chairman of music – dean of music – was the teacher. The crux of that was it started to help me to learn how to write. Not to become a writer, but it involved research too, because we had to turn in a title. Then he'd say, "Okay. This is not researchable. Look at this. It's too broad. You have to narrow it down." I said, oh, okay. So I'd do that. We had a book – I can't remember the name of it – that we used as a guide for doing the research. It was great for me, because I had never been asked to focus as concise as you have to do if you're going to be working on a thesis.

Brown: Do you remember what your ultimate title was or the focus was?

Marsalis: Eventually what I tried to do was to get to do a thesis on the development of a rhythm section. There was a guy over there – they had a Communications Department at

that school too – there was a guy who needed a project. I talked with him. But I couldn't get all of the things together, because I wanted him to do the shooting, the camera. I was going to get these people and then go through the process of – I had the drummer, but that was it. Finally the guy had to get a program, because he had to graduate. I did finally do a text on the development of a rhythm section, but it really is not that good.

It took me forever to get out of that school, because I started teaching at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts in '74, the fall of '74. I had started graduate school in the summer and picked up nine hours in two different sessions. In fall, in September, I started at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. The job for me was primarily with an emphasis on jazz for the incoming students. I would turn in what I had written for my thesis. The committee would look at it, and about two weeks after that, I'd get it back. I had two weeks with the kids, at this school, and all the stuff that was in there, I had learned something that was different from that. So then I changed all the stuff around. I did that for a long time, until finally one of the – my first major professor had left the university and went to another university – finally the cats said, "Look, man, don't change nothing. Turn it in, get your degree, and get the hell out of here, because you could be doing this the rest of your life." And I did.

I stayed at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts for 12 years. 1986 was when I went to Virginia Commonwealth. I stayed there for three years.

Brown: How did that position come about?

Marsalis: I was disillusioned – no, I was disenchanted with the situation at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, because I didn't have students that I needed to keep going the way we were functioning, because it was a high-end program. It was not some of those jazz programs where they spend all of their time teaching you rock-and-roll and call it jazz. It was not that. I didn't have any students. So I was telling my wife. I said, "I'm tired of this. I don't want to do this no more, because I don't have the students that I want."

I had been instrumental in touching base with the National Endowment for the Arts and also recommending a friend of mine who had been the sister of my first piano teacher, Antoinette Miller, because they were looking for somebody to come and take over the music contingent. The guy who was already there asked me if I would do it. I thought for a minute. At first I was going to do it. I said, it would be nice to be in Washington, away from here. But then, when I thought about it, it's like a voice said, "Hey, man, do you want to spend all your time on The Hill, hustling money?" And I said to myself, no. I knew enough about what you had to do, and I was not interested in that. But I did recommend Antoinette, because she was looking for something at the time. She had been

a classical flautist. She wrote a book on – her mentor was – what's this woman's name? She wrote this book on African-American music.

Brown: Eileen Southern?

Marsalis: Yeah. Her mentor was Eileen Southern. She wrote one book on black composers and another one – I can't remember what the other one was. The third one, she passed, and her daughter told me that she was going to get the book out, but I don't know if she ever did or not. Anyway, I recommended her. She in turn asked me to be on the jazz panel. I spent four years on that panel.

Brown: Was this Antoinette Handy?

Marsalis: Yeah. Antoinette Handy-Miller. I spent four years on that panel. I wasn't supposed to do that, because I think it was a three-year thing, max.

Brown: I wonder if she was – I think she might have studied with Geneva Southall. Is that right? Or did she study with Eileen Southern? But that's okay. I'll check that.

Marsalis: Who studied with Geneva Southall?

Brown: I'm just trying to figure out – you mentioned about the woman who wrote the history of African-American music. I know Eileen Southern. I know Geneva Southall was also – but anyway . . .

Marsalis: Geneva Southall wrote the book on Blind Tom. Geneva Southall was Antoinette's sister.

Brown: That's it. I knew there was a connection. That's it. Thank you.

Marsalis: That was her sister.

Brown: That's right. That's the connection.

Marsalis: And that was my first piano teacher.

Brown: There you go.

Marsalis: Six degrees of separation. So basically, I went up – in fact I was on the panel when Antoinette first introduced the idea of giving a jazz award to jazz masters. I was on there to vote for the first one. It was a great experience for me, because I had never read

grants. There's a lot of stuff that you have to see through and wade through when you're dealing with them grants.

By that time, not long after that, when I was getting ready to leave the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, Antoinette gave me a list of names. She said, "Call up the Smithsonian and see what's over there." And she gave me Murry DePillars's name, who was dean at Virginia Commonwealth. So I called Murry DePillars, and I didn't get any further than that. Then I went to Virginia Commonwealth. I stayed there until the chancellor at UNO came up there and said, "Man, we want you to come back home." So I came back to UNO, stayed there for 12 years, and retired in 2001.

Brown: What were you teaching when you were at Virginia Commonwealth?

Marsalis: Jazz courses. I had a piano – I had a studio. I had a combo. That kind of stuff.

Brown: Now you're coming back to University of New Orleans. Resuming teaching combo jazz? Or branching out more?

Marsalis: No, I had come back to occupy that Coca Cola chair. So I was chairman of the division. I did assorted teaching, but what I would look at is to see what students who came in, what they needed and then create a class related to that. Also, there was the curriculum. We started out. We had 123 hours, I think, or something – or 126, something like that – but we looked at it, and we whacked it down some. It had to coincide with what it would take for them to graduate. They had to take a course in piano. The guy that was teaching piano, that was a joke. So I developed a course that I called Jazz Keyboard, which everybody, regardless of what your instrument was, had to take that particular class, because they had a keyboard requirement already in the catalog. So I just inserted that, and I was teaching that. Eventually I did have a big band. In fact I took the band to Brazil.

Brown: Do you remember what year that was?

Marsalis: I think probably 2000, not long before I retired. I also had a class that I developed – what did I call it? It had to do with jazz – I never really succeeded in getting the vocal part off the ground, because I didn't have the students. But the students that I did have, I would get a rhythm section who would come in. They would play. The students – the vocal students who were primarily in there would have to learn a song, work with the rhythm section.

Brown: Did you have any students who have gone on to make a name for themselves?

Marsalis: Not the vocal, no. It was – there was a lot of attention to that music program, but there were too many braves and no chief, and I couldn't do what really needed to be done from the position that I was in, because the music department – see, we didn't have a department. It was a jazz division within a music department, and the music department – I used to think of it – it was sort of like a battleship in a fleet, and all you got is the battleship. You get out there in the ocean, and all you got is the battleship. You need a fleet, the whole works. Anyway . . .

Brown: When you say absence of the chiefs, that means more leadership, people with vision, people – so it must have been frustrating for you then. But you still had your students. So I guess you derived satisfaction from . . .

Marsalis: It was a little, anyway. I was able to do some of the things, but I was never able to get the quality of students that was needed. There was a few students who really could play well. There was one kid named Andrew Baham, trumpet player. He's playing with Big Sam's Funky Nation now. He was a good player when he came there. Irvin Mayfield, he came through for a minute. There's a young bass player named Peter Harris. He's playing around, a real good bass player. He was there. Sometimes it's hard to know.

Brown: It's surprising to hear about your frustrations in dealing with the academic institution, yet you've made such a contribution to music education in this area and in the field of jazz. It sounded like the culmination of your career didn't really pan out in a way that was satisfying for you and your educational endeavors and vision.

Marsalis: When you start out trying to figure out how to play jazz, the first thing that you encounter is the real world. You don't escape that. Ain't nothing to do with academics: club owners whose vision is limited to the bottom line. Eventually – I used to resent that, but eventually, when I started to look at the whole picture, there's some club owners that came – most of the black clubs was started by people who had to put a hustle together to make a living – most of them came from the country, came in the city. That was not – when I say that, what I mean is, there was no supper-club mentality, and even if it was, it wouldn't have nothing to do with jazz. At the time, the music that we referred to as jazz was in a very infantile stage, because as long as the music was in a dance mode, where you had those dance bands – Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman. Those fellows had dance bands. They played the theaters and played dances. As long as you had that, then jazz became like an incubator, because when people like Lester Young, and Stan Getz in Woody's band, and Zoot Sims – they all was developing them solos inside of those bands, because that's how they were making a living too. Lionel Hampton's band. Lionel Hampton's band had Art Farmer, Clifford Brown.

I stayed in New Orleans. It was an independent approach to what I was hoping would pan out. I didn't necessarily – I had really wanted to go to New York, like a lot of people did,

but I couldn't figure out how I was going to go to New York with the kids that I had unless it was set up. I wrote a letter to a cat at Hunter College, I think, yeah, because I had a friend that was teaching over there. Nothing came of that.

The main thing is, I think the thing that eventually helped me, pedagogically, was having to come through the ranks of reality with club owners. The schools were essentially like the club owners with a suit on, but the same mentality. It wasn't much of a change.

The changes that occur – that are occurring in the country now – are not really changes. The Tea Party ain't a change of nothing. It's the same thing, because in America, what you get is people who stick another name on something. I remember Lou Rawls was interviewed by somebody, and he said, "All I know, man, they used to say that I was a rhythm-and-blues singer, then a soul singer, then a pop singer." He said, "I don't know, man. I was just doing what I did." Essentially, it's that way across the board.

When I was growing up, I had a certain resentment for club owners that didn't want us to play. I had no experience with this adult person in terms of understanding where this person was coming from. I was just a young kid trying to play some bebop. I didn't – what did I know? I'm thinking, he jive, simply because he don't want to let us play.

Brown: But the reason why he didn't want you to play is because he couldn't make his bottom dollar? He couldn't make his overhead?

Marsalis: There was no – first of all, there were ways that it could have been done, but it would had to have had a certain level of vision. I've seen a club where the guy made money. It wasn't that he didn't make any money. You see? But I only remember one club owner who really seemed to have figured out how to book modern jazz across – and keep a club going across the week. He didn't do it every night. It's a guy named [Fred] Laredo. He had a club on Magazine Street called Tyler's Beer Garden. I used to work on Wednesday nights with a bass player – wonderful young bass player at the time – named Reginald Veal, and a drummer named Noel Kendrick, who had gone to New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. We used to also – we'd back a singer from here, Germaine Bazzle. Every night Victor Goines used to come and sit in with us. So that worked fine, because on the weekends he would have – Friday, Saturday, Sunday – James Rivers Movement, which is a tenor saxophone player, rhythm-and-blues cat. He was a good saxophone player, but he played more. You couldn't even get in there. Them college kids was like that on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. There were people who came to hear us on Wednesday, but it wasn't like we were trying to replace anybody. He understood all that. That's what the difference was, trying to look at the terrain and deal with the situation the way it is, and then place people in the spots that they need to be in.

Unfortunately, that's one of the things that Wade Phillips didn't figure out for the Cowboys. Unfortunately, he's gone. I look at the Saints, and I think about, it's the exact same thing. You have to know who to get, where to get, where to place them, and what spot to get your desired amount.

Jason started playing with me when he was 13. He had been playing anyway. As he got older, there was some bass players that would be playing, and they was getting in the way of his development. So they went, and I'd get somebody else, because the whole thing of the teacher in me was always out there. I was lucky in New Orleans, because of Snug Harbor. The guy who owns Snug Harbor owns the building. That's what he wants.

When you get – when you look at the overall landscape – there's a lot of things that schools could do, but there's no vision. You can't do anything with no vision.

Brown: We're going to end this tape soon. When we resume this interview, I want to talk about your vision and how you were able to either achieve it or what still remains to be achieved at this point. Obviously your musical education and your modeling has had a tremendous impact not only on your students, but on your children as well. So when we resume this interview, we'll try to talk about that and talk about more of how you developed your pedagogy and talk about this, the real world.

Marsalis: I have no idea.

Brown: And dealing with the issues of jazz being institutionalized, versus the way you came up and the way – the old school versus the institution.

Marsalis: I don't – like I said, I don't have no idea.

Brown: Okay.

Marsalis: I've – see, here's the thing about it. When you have to deal with something like jazz, the first difficulty you have is that the very word that's used to describe the music has no meaning at all. The next thing, you have to do a considerable amount of reflective thinking and be able to corral these different approaches into an organized, systemic approach. I don't know that when I started trying to teach. It was like, what am I going to do today? What do I do tomorrow?

Brown: But obviously you have arrived at a place where you, through your reflective thinking, realize that this is the key to your pedagogy.

Marsalis: Yeah, but I don't have any students now. I don't have any students. I'm not – I'm no longer teaching. And I guess in a way that also allows me to do a certain amount of reflective thinking.

Brown: Do you have plans to continue disseminating some of your knowledge, education, and experience?

Marsalis: Yeah, I have some exercises that I've been working on that I'm going to put into – I'm going to digitize or get them put on computer and deal with some materials that can be used in an instructive manner which includes the oral tradition. I know – in a way, I know it's difficult, because in America, most of the people are running as fast as they can away from any of the oral traditions, regardless to what it is.

Another thing that's very difficult is that if you're going to deal with the oral tradition, it's too hard to lie. As long as people are continually dependent on whatever politician that they elected, it's always going to be difficult. I've gone through experiences talking to the chairman of the music department at a college. Me and my friend Roger, we'd bring Dave Brubeck's stuff in there with Paul Chambers – I mean Paul . . .

Brown: Desmond.

Marsalis: . . . Desmond, playing *Blue Rondo a la Turk*, and saying, "Man, maybe you can check this out," but without fully understanding, hey, this cat is out of another tradition. What he did was super, super bad. He had a choir that was killin'. After a while, you begin to say, wait a minute. You can't convince these people to do anything other than whatever it is that they're doing.

I remember my son Ellis told me an anecdote. He say they had a young Japanese farmer who had studied rice growing. He had this farm that would yield more rice. Instead of trying to talk to the Japanese farmers who had been doing this for 4,000 years, he decided not to do that. So he got a small plot right next to them and employed what he was doing. They was looking at him, saying aw, man, what is this kid doing? Came harvest time, they harvested the rice. He harvested his. They was finished. He's harvesting, harvesting, and so on. So you can't ignore that.

I think that the school situation now is really in turmoil, especially when it comes to any kind of arts. It's just in turmoil, especially here, and even in places where they have courses involved. It doesn't – it has nothing to do – I remember Harold Battiste used to listen at something. I'd say, "What do you think about that?" He'd say, "It's correct, but it ain't right." We got a lot of that. The best we can hope for is multiple amounts of Socratic circles, otherwise than that.

Brown: What do you mean by that? I know what Socratic and dialogue, etc., etc. What do you mean by . . . ?

Marsalis: The Socratic circle, people didn't have to graduate. They didn't have to take standardized tests. It reminds me. I saw an interview. It was very interesting. It was a kid about 12, certified genius, one of them brains, 140 IQ, whatever it was. He took this test, and he failed it. This is not some precocious kid trying to get back at anybody. But it was worth an interview for the reporter. He asked him. He say, "What happened to you? You're certified at genius level. You're all of that." He say, "How come you failed that?" He say, "I read what was the story line and instructions and everything." He say, "I thought I needed to think about it." When you think about it, the clock runs out, and you fail. But when you're a certified genius, who cares? But see, we don't have that. There's no thinking about it. So consequently . . .

Brown: I think both of us – we're all educators here. We understand there's some real serious, serious – I'm not even sure how I can put it euphemistically. But in dealing with a tradition, jazz, which is primarily oral tradition, unless you know somebody playing, unless you get it master to student, you're not going to get the full education. You can't really get it out of a book. You can't really get it just in the practice room. You've got to get it by standing next to a master, and he or she relaying through their modeling it and also being able to answer your questions.

Marsalis: You don't have to. There's other ways of doing that. The materials are not in place. I've often wondered, who was in them classes with Einstein? We all know that name, Albert Einstein. What made me think of that, there was an old man who was at the University of New Orleans. This was well before me. I wasn't teaching there then. He pioneered optics. He was about 80 then. I started thinking about that. I don't even remember his name. I said, these people cannot function alone, by themselves. They had to be in some classrooms somewhere, and there was other people in there. The fact that Einstein's name made it, and Fermi's name didn't make it – Fermi was one of them cats in Oakdale, working on that bomb. There was a slew of physicists there. You don't have to have – because the masters die. They're not around. See, it can be done if the materials are systemically organized in a way, and people are allowed to think.

Brown: I think what we'll have to talk about is how to systemically organize the materials so that students of jazz can learn it in a way that maintains not only the technical and virtuosic demands of the music, but also the spiritual and the cultural grounding of the music.

Marsalis: See, there's where you get the problem. In all of the years that I taught, I was present for one student to see him make a breakthrough, just one, in the classroom, where he really made a breakthrough. I had never seen that. There are other people. They do it

somewhere else. You see them years later, and they're playing. I had a guy come up to me not long ago and say, "You saved my life. You told me this at UNO" and all that. I just remembered his face, but that was all.

The thing is, that's what I was saying. The whole idea of reflective thinking is that you can't put a time line on that. You can't. You don't ever know. You can organize the materials in such a way that they can be presented so that the students understand what they have to do. But the growth factor – you can't control the growth factor.

Brown: No. I understand that. We're all individuals. All the students figure or process the information in their own way. We just have to figure out, as educators, how to systematize the information and present it in a way that can reach – I presume that we have to do this in the academy so that we can reach the greatest number. I think that that's probably where all those concessions and those kinds of gives and takes may somehow lessen the ability to impact what I'm referring to as some of the essence of this music. Because you – it has to – we're fighting the issue of standardization. We're fighting the issue that you can't go to college for 40 years. You got to have a life. So we got to cut it off somewhere. So it's looking – again, using your word "systemizing," to create a system that's going to reach enough students so that it is a viable educational experience.

Marsalis: Yeah, it can be that and still don't produce no Charlie Parker.

Brown: Do you see that we're going to produce any Charlie Parkers out of the academy?

Marsalis: Who saw it?

Brown: Say again?

Marsalis: I don't see them producing it out of them clubs that they used to play in? It's not – see, another thing too. We have to get to a point where we have to realize that it's not really that important. See . . .

Brown: What is not really that important?

Marsalis: Whether or not we can see that there's a Charlie Parker out there. The point is . . .

Brown: I don't see that as my role as an educator, to produce a Charlie – I cannot assume that as a goal, as an educator, because that's a genius. You're talking about genius. You can't produce genius as an educator. That genius can be shaped. It can be somewhat

cultivated. But that's on them. As you say, that student came up to you later and said, "You saved my life." You had no idea.

Marsalis: No. See, just in terms of systemically trying to create information in such a way that the student can ingest that and utilize it – the academy is good in a sense of organ[izing]. I remember when I discovered there's only two things that you can get out of an academy. One is a system of organization. Two is a source of reference. That's it. There ain't nothing else to get. If the students can be helped to understand that – the growth cycle is definitely connected to the individual. I think it's a common – I think it's fairly common that the growth cycle of some people occurs – the ones – especially those which we later considered to be geniuses – not all of them – for example, people talked about Methuselah, in the Bible, lived 900 years. What'd he do? If you follow the Christian Bible, Jesus made it to 33, and people are still talking about him. Charlie Parker made it to 35. Clifford Brown, 25. The point is, I think that a lot of times the academy eventually grows into itself, to a point where it creates more importance than it really and truly means for itself, as far as the student is concerned. There are people who are castigated because they can't really conform to that structure, that lineage thing. Like you say, eventually you have to graduate. No, you don't. Wynton never graduated from nothing. Branford never graduated from nothing.

Brown: Duke, Charlie Parker. Yeah, of course.

Marsalis: Dizzy.

Brown: And Debussy went to the academy, but he didn't graduate either. I understand that.

Marsalis: So consequently, the open-ended situation – when I say open-ended, there was a young lady that I heard – I didn't get to know her that well – went to Virginia Commonwealth. By the time I got to Virginia Commonwealth, she was doing a senior recital. She was a vocalist. I think that was her main thing, but I don't know. Anyway, she had to sing the usual three languages, Italian, French, German. She had also been studying in the jazz studies division with the band teacher, arranging. She arranged two or three pieces for jazz band. What – the overall program that she did crossed all them lines. I asked about her. She went on and off at that school for eight years. To me, that's conviction. I don't know if I could do that. But the point is that I don't know in a lot of cases that one needs to do that.

The biggest mistake that politicians make – and they make a lot – is that the ones that are determining the funding that goes into the – especially into the state universities – have used as a criteria, how many people graduate? What makes that a fallacy is this: Bill

Gates ain't finished nothing. I just found out lately. You know the cat on the NBC News, Brian Williams? He went to three different junior colleges. Didn't finish none of that.

The point here is this: if there was a formula in which the university – and they could do it easily – can say, okay, between 2010 and 2012, we enrolled X amount of students. During that same period of time, there were X amount of students who dropped out. The following two years, there was a return of a certain percentage of the students who had dropped out. So eventually, you get a picture of, let's see, the effectiveness of the institution was that it was here for the students to come and go, come and go, come and go. So rather than say, okay – because from what I understand, 50% of all of them schools lose – they lose about 50% of the students. That's what I understand. I don't know. But when you get to – if you start out with a thousand, and four years later, 400 graduate, so the legislature penalizes them? Because 1,000 didn't graduate?

Brown: Sounds like they're back to the bottom line. They're looking at it . . . .

Marsalis: They have never left it. The problem is that the people who put them in office, they don't understand any of the process anyway. So the politicians will come up with any process and say, okay, let's see, they'll buy into this. Run it out there. They say, oh, they'll do that? Okay. Then they'll do that. How many times have you heard the term "welfare reform"? Go look at the pie. You know that pie?

Brown: The pie chart?

Marsalis: Um-hmm. The pie chart? Find welfare on there.

Brown: They haven't reformed. It's been erased.

Marsalis: But do you think that that matters to these people? It's stuck in their brain, "welfare reform"? Some guy driving around a project in a Cadillac. I never saw that, and I know I've been around a lot more projects than someone else. That's the whole point. So when you start to think about – I just read about a school that's opened here. It's like a charter school. It's Science – I think it's called Science Academy. It's a real long article. It's in the *Picayune*, maybe today or yesterday – one of them. A guy who finished from Harvard – I mean, not Harvard – from Yale, worked at another school here and didn't like what he saw. So he started his own school here. They talk about it in this very long article. They even have ways in which they congratulate each other. They snap their fingers. They gave – the writer gave an example of one young lady. There was a problem to be solved. If a person left from New Orleans east, went to Marigny, came back to New Orleans east, and went to Marigny, how many times could they go? There was a number involved. How they figured it out, if I can remember that, was not specific miles or any of that, but just the trip itself, back and forth. It was 21. One of the students say, "No, that

can't be right. It was four times." "No, it wasn't. It was only three." When she thought about it, she said, "Yeah, I get that. I see that now." The teacher congratulated her for following through and thinking about it and ready to challenge, not in a negative way. This is a school in which they take everybody comes through the door.

The highest rated school in the city is Benjamin Franklin. Their English test's a hundred. But you have to take a test to get in there. But this school, "Y'all come." They had discipline problems. One dude, they had to lock him in the bathroom. He kept pounding on the door, trying to get out. They don't let people quit. There are people coming, reading 3, 4, 5, 6 grades below what they do. It's the best example that I've seen of the current situation.

Jeffrey [?] got some interesting stuff up there in New York, but I don't know anything about what he's doing except what I've heard. Do you know about him?

Brown: No, but what I can say that I think we both agree that, systemically, the academic institutions, they have some serious shortcomings. I think that's reflective of what you brought up earlier about the Tea Party and that there's nothing really new. They've been around for – I mean, that mindset has been around for a long time. I think we're looking at an America where there is no concerted or organized way to try to get its citizens to be critical thinkers. That's what you are basically saying. Allow people to think. Allow people to process things. That's not what America wants. That's not going to produce that. They don't want a citizenry that is critical thinkers, that is creating how to think, because we wouldn't have these people in power if that was the case.

Marsalis: Well, they would.

Brown: They would figure out some way to do it, but it would be a hell of a lot harder to control the populace if you let them think. We saw what happened in the '60s when they started opening things up and people started saying, we want this, we want to change things, and we're going to be systematic about – we're going to be organized.

I just watched the *Faubourg Tremé.* My eyes were opened to see that the Civil Rights Movement was already organized here long before – before the turn of the century, with Plessy, and to unpack – so that we understand as a legacy. We know we have to be organized. We have to be thinkers. We have to think through our situations. The schools . . .

Marsalis: Who is we?

Brown: We as people. Are we going to talk about communities? We're jazz musicians in this room. If we want things to change, we have to understand what the problem is and

come together and have a synergistic meeting of the minds, so that we can try to come up with some ways of dealing with this. I think that that's – we all are grappling with that. We're all suffering because we think . . .

Marsalis: It's nice to think that, but I don't think that very many people are grappling with it.

Brown: Of course, because they don't want that. They don't want people to recognize what they're in. They don't want people to recognize that the media's got them under control. They don't want to recognize that you can elect this person, but there are already things in place: lobbyists and corporations. Everything's in place. It's all smoke screen. The reality that the American people see is not the reality that exists – or what they've been fed or have been taught to believe or have been fed to believe. So I think that that's the systematic and plays out in the academic institution. But we're dealing with jazz. We're dealing with our music. Our music has a history that dates all the way back to the spirituals. If we did not have our music, we would not live here as people, as black people, Africans in the New World. That's what I want – if I teach jazz, I want people to understand, this is a legacy of this music. This is why it appeals to people around the world. We can't explain all the reasons why, but it does. This is what I think is the power of this music, and this is what we need to instill in these students. This is not just about being able to play these ii-V-I's or being able to play whatever scales. It's about understanding the legacy and the heritage of this music, so that you can – you have a sense of the purpose. You can start to inculcate that, not in yourself, but to share that as an educator. That's what I want to try to do as an educator.

Marsalis: You got students who understand that?

Brown: I'm trying.

Marsalis: No, I'm talking about the students you have. Do you have any that really understand that?

Brown: That's what I'm teaching them. I'm teaching them the values. I'm saying, if you want to understand jazz, you have to understand where it comes from. It's not about just the marriage of African rhythms and European harmony and melody. No. You have to look at not just what is being combined, what is being mixed. You have to look at who's doing the mixing, because that's going to determine what the end product is.

Then if you stretch it all the way back – what I do is, I teach them African music. That's why I brought up Ollie Wilson. I teach them that these are the values. It's communal. There are these conceptual approaches that come from Africa, and you can see them manifest in variety in almost every genre in the New World. If the Africans are creating

it, you're going to see these conceptual approaches that are going to be manifest, regardless of the genre of music.

Marsalis: Which African music are you teaching?

Brown: Which African music am I teaching?

Marsalis: Yeah.

Brown: I'm looking at the West Africans. I'm looking at from along West Africa. I'm teaching music of the Pygmies, because they're the oldest people on this planet. They've been dealing with this human condition longer than anybody, and their music is so highly sophisticated. So how – and it's just voices and sticks. They've got all three textures. They got monody. They got polyphony. They got harmony. They've got hocket going, and the creation of melody. They've got counter – they've got cross-rhythms going. They're playing with sticks, and they're singing, and they're blowing one-note whistles. So I'm saying, if this is people who are nomadic, and they're coming – this is what they developed, and they've been developing this longer than anybody, we can learn from that, because we can see some of these concepts manifest in funk, rap, r-and-b, jazz, gospel. All these are going to have the shared core of conceptual approaches that manifest itself in our music.

Marsalis: There's a little too much politics in that to grasp the naturalness of what takes place in the bush. I think Harold was talking about – he said, "When the African makes an instrument, he has to make that instrument in such a way that that instrument speaks." It's not like some holes here and a mouthpiece or any of that. I remember when Alvin Batiste took his students to Africa, one of the Africans asked him, he said, "What do you do in America?" He said, "I teach music." He said, "Why does anybody have to teach music?"

Once you get out of the culture from which you are acclimated, to that with a narrative, therein is where the problem comes. I stood on the campus of Xavier one day for about half an hour, me and a pianist on the faculty, wonderful, wonderful pianist, great interpreter of Beethoven. He said, "I don't think it would be a good idea if jazz was institutionalized." I said, "No, I don't think you're right." So we talked back and forth. It's friendly. It wasn't hostile. Finally, I got to a point. I said, "Hey, man." I said, "Tell me this." I said, "Name me one jazz group, any jazz group." He thought for a minute. He say, "The Three Sons?" So I'm realizing that I've been talking for a half an hour . . .

Brown: To somebody who don't even know what he's talking about.

Marsalis: . . . to a guy who doesn't even know about jazz. Eventually – the university eventually started to bring Mitchell and Ruff there. One of the – another pianist on the faculty came over to my class. He said, "Do you know Mitchell and Ruff?" I say, "Yeah, I know." He say, "There's been a meeting on the Lyceum committee, and they're talking about bringing them in." I said, "You come back on Thursday." I said, "I'll teach – my class will be about them," because I had recordings of Dwight Mitchell and Willie Ruff. So when he was able to hear what Dwight Mitchell was doing.

On another situation, he comes back later. He says, "Man." He says, "Malcolm" – the guy who was chairman of the department – "he's not going to let them use the grand piano." I say, "You don't have to." I say, "But Dwight is going to come in, look on the stage, see that thing, turn around, and catch the plane and go home. If that's what you want. That's what you're going to get." Somebody convinced him of that. Now, once they heard Mitchell and Ruff, ah, they were the darlings.

Brown: We're back to dealing with ignorance.

Marsalis: The whole problem in all of that is like that current expression coming out of Jamestown: they drink the Kool-Aid. Once they drink the Kool-Aid, that's it. And if there ain't none there for them to drink, they'll make some.

I think invariably it's a long haul. I think we have to chart out what our contribution is going to be in that long haul. The first information that I ever got from an African was a guy. He billed himself as [?Ashagi]. He's from Nigeria, but he lived in the bush. He came to America. When he first came to America, he went to Washington, I think, either Washington or Boston or New York or whatever. He said that he encountered people who honestly thought that there was a Tarzan. They were serious. So he went back and formulated a way to tell the story of the bush, not highlife in Ibadan and Lagos, that music. Not that. He came back a second time, and he talked about it. He talked about how the multiple marriages occur, what the process is, that if a single woman is looking at your family, the African, the male, the wife, and maybe children – if she wants to join the family, she gets a gift, goes to the wife, and says, "I would like to join your family." The wife says okay. She talks to the husband. If they agree, then she joins the family. The first wife is always number one in the overall situation, even if there's an additional wife. Also, if there's some problems between a husband and the wife within a tribe, the men go take the man and talk with him. The women go – they go in your house. The women go in and take the woman and talk to them. I'm listening at that. I say, man, this ain't got nothing to do with the nonsense that I heard. It ain't that I believe there was a Tarzan. It's just that I didn't hear anything that was constructive about the way they lived in the bush.

Even now, there's things that I – my son was telling me about – in South Africa – he had a friend from there. When she would go home, there was a bus that would run and take

her to the village where she lives, but it was run when it ran. It was no particular time that it would run. There are a lot of things that they would talk about. She was telling him about the Kikuyu. She said, “They ain’t no good. They ain’t no good at all,” which, that’s her opinion about that.

I pieced together a lot of little things about Africa without actually having been there in things that I’ve read about the Luo, Kikuyus, Hausas, Fulani. That’s a drop in the bucket. But there’s information you can get about all of them. Now, with computers, ain’t no telling. You can get all kinds of stuff.

Brown: I think I’m going to have to return to your valorization of the oral tradition. My training in African music comes directly from C. K. Ladzepko and came here in the ’70s with Ollie Wilson. Ollie Wilson encouraged him to come back here. He’s the one that I learned about African music from. He’s a scholar. He’s got his Ph.d. in music. He’s . . .

Marsalis: Yeah, well, these people ain’t got no Ph.d’s.

Brown: But I’m saying that there are ways to learn about African culture and music that can come directly from the source.

Marsalis: Oh yeah, of course.

Brown: That’s what I value. I also treasure somebody like Hale Smith, who I’m sure you know of. And T. J. Anderson. Those are the folks who have been schooling me for the last 30 years. I love Hale and Juanita and of course you know they know Dwight and Willie. They talk to them all the time.

But what I’m really trying to in some way make a contribution, because I do value this, the musical legacy of our forefathers and foremothers, and I want to see that that same value, that same honor, that same respect, gets transmuted whenever somebody’s trying to play this music. I look at music as a language. You got to bring some respect to it. Unless you understand the depth and the breadth and the profundity of this heritage, I think you’re missing the boat, just because you can play *Cherokee* in all twelve keys. To me, that’s not an achievement. But to say that I’m trying to advance an art or a musical expression that has this lineage, to me that’s a value, and that’s what I’m trying to bring to these students.

Marsalis: How old are your students?

Brown: I’m fortunate now. I used to teach at U.C. Berkeley, but I’ve chosen not to, because for various reasons and frustrations in dealing with the system, that I’ll teach at a school called The Jazz School in Berkeley, which is just all people who want to study

jazz, maybe not as a performer, but study the culture and the music of jazz. So I feel like maybe I – this is where I need to be. This is where I need to be able to teach, because the people, as you say, in my classroom, they're taking notes, and I'm having them tell me – I'm saying, this is what I learned from C. K. Ladzepko, this is what I learned from Ollie Wilson, this is what I learned from Hale Smith, T. J. Anderson, to try to get them to understand that this music is much more than what they have come to know through regular mainstream systems.

Marsalis: T. J. Anderson. He still in North Carolina?

Brown: Yes. I just saw him. We just – I don't think – do I have it with me? We just contributed to this book on John Coltrane. T. J. wrote the forward. I contributed one chapter. Actually, then I interviewed Ollie Wilson for it. T. J. wrote the forward for that.

Marsalis: John Coltrane.

Brown: Did you ever meet him?

Marsalis: Yeah. I met Trane. Right here.

There's an interesting book that just fairly recently came out, written by a minister in a – I think he say a non-denominational church. I can't think of the name of that book. He talks about his experience when he was going to divinity school. He would go listen to this jazz group. Eventually he made some friends with the jazz musicians. He talks about jazz – I just can't remember the title – jazz – it's a spiritual reference. I can't remember the name of it. He talks about Trane and what Trane had to do to kick the habit, how many days, and all of the spiritual things that came as a result after that. But I wish I could – I tell you what. If I got your e-mail address, I'll send you the title of it.

Brown: I would love to.

Marsalis: It's very interesting. A very good book. It's one of the few books that I have read on any subject that didn't have a pro and con. It's hard to find that.

Brown: I don't think everything has to be a dialectic.

Marsalis: I know, but I mean, of the things that you find that's out there, there's usually a protagonist up in there somewhere. Robin Kelley's book on [Thelonius] Monk is interesting. His book on Monk is deeply historical, because I think he is a historian. He teaches somewhere, somewhere in California, I think.

Brown: At U.S.C.

Marsalis: You familiar with his book?

Brown: No, I haven't read it. I know Robin. We've served on panels together.

Marsalis: His book is very good. His book is good. I haven't finished it yet. It would be perfect for a movie, in the right hands, but I can't think of any right hands right now, because the first thing that people got to do, is they got to go get some money from somebody to make the movie. They're subject to have Denzil playing Monk, which would be interesting. I can't think of none of them dudes that I've seen that could play Monk anyway.

Brown: Maybe Delroy Lindo or Avery Brooks.

Marsalis: Avery Brooks?

Brown: Yeah. I worked with Avery when he did Malcolm X, with Anthony Davis in that opera. He knows music. He knows it. He loves this music.

Marsalis: I met him at the Atlanta Jazz Festival. That was a long time ago.

Brown: Delroy, I've worked with him as well. He seems to work a lot down in Washington.

Marsalis: We talked about – me and Delroy. He was talking about making movies and coming here to do it, because there's all kinds of movies being made here, because there's tax credits.

Brown: Yeah, they ain't making too many in San Francisco any more. They're making them down here. I understand that.

Marsalis: If they get the tax credits – Denzil was saying that on one of them t.v. shows. It might have been [Jay] Leno. He said, yeah. He said, "It's all about them tax credits. If we can get the tax credits, wherever that is, we can go make the movie."

Brown: I hope – I wish them well, finding not only the performers, but, as you say, they got to underwrite it. There's got to be some – we know there are people like Cosby, Quincy, Kareem. There are some folks – and even Danny Glover. There are folks who have some resources and truly value this music, but to try to get them on board for something, it seems like it's pulling teeth.

Marsalis: Yeah, but it ain't that many people who really care enough about this music to be interested [in putting] serious money in it. People who have been relatively successful even in getting a movie made about a jazz musician – one of them was – I just saw this cat on t.v. the other night. I forgot his name. He used to be Rowdy Yates, years ago.

Brown: Oh. You're talking about Clint Eastwood.

Marsalis: Yeah. Clint Eastwood . . .

Brown: We don't want to talk about *Bird.* We won't talk about that. That's a travesty.

Marsalis: Of course. I remember – what's his name? I saw him in the movie.

Brown: In that movie? Forrest Whittaker?

Marsalis: No, I didn't see him in the film itself. This guy, he's a critic. He either is or was. I don't know if he might have passed. When I saw him in the theater, he say, "At least he got the movie made." It's some more of that bottom line stuff.

Brown: I still want to talk to you about how we can help to change the system.

Marsalis: You can't.

Brown: We can't change the system? There's no way to change the system.

Marsalis: First of all, what is *the* system? We . . .

Brown: Well, okay, I'm guilty of not qualifying my terms, but we have identified shortcomings in the system that we have, that I'm continuing to deal with, that you have dealt with, and that's the academic institution of higher learning.

Marsalis: No, I don't – personally, I don't see – the thing about academic institutions, to me, is that they're dragging up the rear. Whoever manages to come up with anything that's going to be of a progressive way of thinking, the academic institutions will fight it until they can't fight it no more, because there's too much invested in Harvard being Harvard, and Yale being Yale, and all the rest. It's too much invested in that. So, when it comes down to it, they're not about to surrender to anything.

Brown: I think you're right, and I think we're both on the same page. We can't change those. Those are entrenched, just like we're not going to change the U.S. government. But what we do is we just change the nature or create new ones. That's what I think has happened with The Jazz School. I think that's what I hear you saying when we first

started this conversation, is trying to change it, trying to change it in a way. You said, go back to oral history. Go back to the oral tradition, because that – you can't lie. But maybe we – I think we're going to run out of time, but that's where I'd like to pick this up, because this is what I'm about, as an oral historian. What I wanted to do when I left the Smithsonian as a fulltime curator was to come back to the West Coast, under the guidance and auspices of somebody like an Ollie Wilson, and have Hale Smith – have a brain trust that were looking over my shoulder as I was creating a curriculum for this music that was based on oral history – all the oral histories that I've been collecting with the Smithsonian, all that they have, pull from all the oral histories, so we can tell the story of this music and the words and the voices of the people who created it, not these critics.

Marsalis: Did you know Martin Williams?

Brown: I did know Martin Williams. As a matter of fact, I took his place, coming to the Smithsonian. I know. He could not read music. He was not a musician. He had taste, and that's all – that's what got him by. He had taste in music. It's the same thing with Orrin Keepnews. You're not recording, are you?

[end of session 1]

Today is Tuesday, November 9th, 2010. This is day two of the oral history interview conducted by Anthony Brown with Ellis Marsalis in his home in New Orleans. Good afternoon – good evening, Mr. Marsalis.

Marsalis: Good evening.

Brown: Hope you're feeling well.

Marsalis: As well as it can be expected.

Brown: Okay. I'd like to ask you, since I was just talking with Bobby Jackson, who's in Cleveland, a radio personality, and he shared with me that he had written some notes about your current release, a CD release, a feature of Monk material. I just wondered if you'd like to talk about that as being your most recent recording.

Marsalis: The open invitation to Thelonious, which is the title of the CD [*An Open Letter to Thelonious*] was conceptualized primarily by Jason. He was thinking that a lot of what Monk would work very good with some more – I don't want to say funk drums, because it's not straight up, but more liberal approaches to the drum set and the way that he envisioned it to be.

I had been working at Snug Harbor with Jason and a saxophonist named Derek Douget and a bass player named Jason Stewart. Eventually, they left. Jason left basically to do his own thing. Stewart went up to New York. In fact, he's in that two-year program at the Juilliard. He's studying with Ron Carter. The saxophonist got married, left town, and he's back. We just started hooking up since he's come back, but we went in the studio and recorded five or six – I forgot how many now – of Monk's compositions.

Brown: Who chose the selections? Jason? Or yourself? Or was it a group decision?

Marsalis: It was a combination of things. I did – I think I did *'Round Midnight.* It was solo. I think, anyway. Some of the pieces – *Jackie-ing* was definitely Jason's decision, and *Teo* was also Jason's decision. I had arranged, in a way, *Monk's Mood,* whenever possible just using what Monk did, Monk's voicings, Monk's chords. I had done a transcription a while back of *Crepuscule with Nellie.* So we recorded that. We did *Epistrophy,* and *Straight No Chaser* in the right key.

Brown: Meaning which?

Marsalis: Meaning not following the mis-directions of Miles Davis, who played it in the wrong key.

Brown: The right key being?

Marsalis: B-flat.

Brown: Got it. Why did Miles change it? Do you know?

Marsalis: Yeah, it's easier to play on the trumpet in some of them other keys Miles changed the keys to.

Brown: *Straight No Chaser*. Okay. The first two selections you mentioned, were those arranged by Jason, since you mentioned that you arranged most of the others?

Marsalis: I forgot what the first two are? Was it *Jackie-ing*?

Brown: Uh-huh.

Marsalis: Basically, what we did was to play the head just the way Monk played it. Basically that. So I think *Jackie-ing* – that's a real tricky song anyway – and whatever was the other one that I said.

Brown: *Teo* [Tee-oh].

Marsalis: Oh, *Teo* [Tay-oh]. Right.

Brown: Excuse me. Teo Macero.

Marsalis: We did basically the same thing that Monk did. *Crepuscule,* we just used that transcription that I did, because *Crepuscule* doesn't have any solo in it.

Brown: Right. Through composed.

Marsalis: We added a little on *Monk's Mood* at the very end.

Brown: How does Monk figure in influencing you and your musical conception, both as a composer and pianist?

Marsalis: I'm not sure if I know exactly how to answer that, because in the earlier years, I didn't appreciate Monk at all. There was a lot of people, musicians that I know – people would say – would call him "Thelonious Plunk." This is musicians doing that. Monk was a little beyond, but eventually I started more and more to appreciate and actually deal with Monk's music.

In my situation, I did not always have a group. It was an in and out thing, because I don't – my wife asked me one time about playing with all these young kids, and I said I have to, because the ones that is my age or older, they either dead or they don't play no more. So I don't – it's not like this is an option. There were some times when I just didn't have a group, because I didn't have the players to do it.

The '70s was a peculiar period. I don't know if I can get off on that, because it needs to be researched in a way that has yet to be done.

Brown: When you say a particular [*sic*: peculiar] period, are you talking about in terms of jazz? Or . . .

Marsalis: Yeah. Well, it was peculiar, period. Not just jazz, but then you can get into the lateral approach with the politics and what was happening in Washington and all of that.

Brown: That was Nixon in the early – in the first part of the '70s.

Marsalis: But in terms of the music, things were really strange then. 1970 was the year that Miles Davis recorded *Bitches Brew,* for which he got a Grammy for that. It helped the music to go in a direction which was – I don't know who coined the term fusion, but it helped to go in that direction, and a lot of some real good players during those times,

like Freddie Hubbard and – oh man. Who's that trumpet player? Good player. [Donald Byrd] – anyway, a lot of the players were straddling the fence, so to speak, not necessarily dealing with the music earlier. When I say earlier, I mean at least the bebop idiom. Because Trane put everybody in a trick bag. When Trane started doing modal stuff, some musicians didn't particularly want to do that. Sonny Stitt, he didn't like that, which is cool, because Sonny was a monster at what he was doing. It took me a minute to figure out how to deal with modal stuff, just in terms of voicing chords and how to use them. Eventually, when Trane went from there into a more freer expression, with *Meditation* and *Om* and a lot of the religious aspect, there was – the usual taken for granted models were just not there. When I was growing up, Bird was the model, and then there were the disciples of Bird, all the saxophone players except Johnny Hodges. He didn't care for it too much. But for the most part, there was not a situation in which jazz was – I don't want to say compartmentalized. No, not that. I can't think of the word I want to use, but there was no sequential approach based upon what had come previously.

For example, the period in European music after J. S. Bach died was followed by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, which in some ways – I think that they refer to that as the Romantic period. As far as I'm concerned, that's up for grabs. But that was a staple for other composers that followed. The tradition was there. You don't get really a serious departure until the French composers, which viewed the orchestra completely different.

Now the earlier periods of jazz, twentieth-century, Louis Armstrong was like the Pied Piper. What Louis Armstrong was doing was like, hey, this is the direction you go in. Jelly Roll did some great things, but Jelly Roll was a piano player. It's a funny thing about that. There's something about trumpet players and the influence that they have on music, from Pops on to Dizzy and Miles and a lot of other people, trumpet players.

We had a discussion one time with somebody. He say, "I wonder what he would have been like if Wynton would have played a saxophone?" It's all speculation now.

Brown: Did anybody come up with a possibility? What happened? Did anybody come up?

Marsalis: No. There's no way to get into a intelligent discussion of that, because we just don't know.

Then when you put it into context of the history of the music, trumpet players have had a very special role in Western music. For example, in John Phillip Sousa's band, the trumpet players and the cornet players – this is where the melody was. The more Americanized it gets, the more we move away from the European emphasis of strings. Even now, if you go and hear these brass bands, the trumpet player's playing the melody. There used to be clarinet players, but they don't hardly have any clarinet players now.

Brown: Why do you think that is?

Marsalis: It's a couple of reasons. For one thing, the band programs in the school that used to have those real great band teachers, they ain't there no more. The next thing is, if given a choice between clarinet and saxophone, most of them kids will take saxophone, but clarinet's hard. And there's no leadership – the only bandleader that in know of in this town who's a clarinet player is Michael White. Michael White was sort of a disciple of – can't think of the old man's name.

Brown: Sidney Bechet.

Marsalis: No, no, no, no.

Brown: Oh you're talking about – oh, okay. I'm thinking about Alvin Batiste personally.

Marsalis: No. Uh-uh. Definitely not. I played with him one time too. Anyway, I can't think of his name, but he's a trad player. He never did get to the national status of some other players. Sidney was a monster player, but he went to France. So what might have happened here couldn't, because he wasn't here.

Brown: But he didn't go until the '50s, right? So he was here for a little while.

Marsalis: He was like a lot of musicians. They came and went. Because he was over there when – what's her name?

Brown: Josephine.

Marsalis: Yeah, Josephine Baker. He was over there in that band. But at some point he just went over there and basically stayed.

Brown: Like Kenny Clarke, Kenny Drew, Dexter Gordon, a lot of people.

Marsalis: Yeah. Dex came back.

Brown: He did come back.

Marsalis: I saw Dex in the airport. It was interesting. I spoke to Dex. He stopped for a minute. See, I played with Dex in the place of Elmo Hope in L.A.. But I didn't say – feel like, "Man, do you remember me?," because I didn't – Dex didn't really know me. All he knew was that – this was interesting. There was a club in Los Angeles on the east side called the La Chris. A lot of people played at this club. It was shaped like a – what is it?

Not a square, but a long – rectangle, from front to back. I was still in the service, but I would come in when I was off from duty. I never got to really know Elmo. I went into the La Chris looking for somewhere to sit. This was a straight shoot to the bandstand. So when I came in, Elmo saw me and he jumped up from the piano, ran down the aisle, and say, "Play the gig until I get back," and he leapt up and run out the door. So I played until he came back.

So Dexter asked me to play the next night, which was Sunday. That was the last time that I actually had the privilege – I don't know if Dexter left to go out of the country after that, because this like '58, around that time. The only thing that Dexter ever said to me, he said, "You play good, kid," and that was the end of it. So when I saw him in the airport, I say, well, I ain't going to go through all of that, because it's been too many years.

Brown: If you are recounting when you were in Los Angeles in the late '50s, '58, there were other pianists there. Hampton Hawes. Did you get a chance to . . . ?

Marsalis: Yeah, Hamp was there.

Brown: And Curtis Counce. Do you remember him? Curtis Counce?

Marsalis: The bass player?

Brown: No.

Marsalis: Yeah. Curtis Counce was a bass player.

Brown: Yeah, right. But I'm thinking of . . .

Marsalis: Art Hillary was a player.

Brown: Art Hillary. I'm trying to think of another one. Who else?

Marsalis: I think Jimmy Bond was there.

Brown: But how about Hampton Hawes? How . . . ?

Marsalis: Yeah, I dug Hamp. Hamp was – I saw Hamp in a club in Hollywood. He had some of those problems. He didn't say much of anything. He would just say, "We're going to play a song by Charlie Parker." And then he'd play. Next song, we're going to play whatever, and just kept playing.

Brown: So he was a monster.

Marsalis: Los Angeles was an interesting place at that time, but I could never really connect with L.A. It was too – I don't even know how to describe it, because it was some good people in L.A., but by – I think by 1960, Charles, Ornette, Cherry, Hig, all of them, they went to New York. Garnet Brown was out there too, and he did the same thing. Eventually Garnet, I think, went back to L.A. But it was – and it still is a very strange place, even today. It pretty much – like my grandson said, it is what it is.

Brown: I'm thinking, Gerald Wilson's been out there for a long time.

Marsalis: Oh yeah, Gerald.

Brown: They got Snooky Young out there.

Marsalis: Yeah, well, Snooky went out with *The Tonight Show* band.

Brown: Right.

Marsalis: When I saw Gerald – I knew Gerald pretty good, because I met Gerald when I first went out there. I never did – the t.v. show that I was doing, *Dress Blues*, a lot of singers and some musicians did that show. It was one of those freebee things. I'm sure at one time something – Gerald played – he's a trumpet player – he played with somebody who did that show. It might have been Chico Hamilton, because I know when Chico Hamilton did the show, Eric Dolphy was playing alto with him. In fact, we ended up in a jam session, me and Eric, playing *Cherokee.*

Brown: What was that like?

Marsalis: It was a rehash of what I had been doing in New Orleans for years with Alvin and them cats. It was – I used to have – I tried to put together something like a resume in which I listed – as many as I could think of – the people that had done the show and some of them that I had played with. It was an interesting experience for me, because I got a chance to see on the inside of how the television functioned. It was – the director of the show we did, *Dress Blues*, his name was Alex [?Runselin]. He was so-so. He had a lot of routine things that he would do. One of the more interesting directors was a guy who volunteered just to come and do our show, to be experienced with doing musical television. His name was Danny Gingold. At the time, Gingold was the director of *Playhouse 90,* [John] Frankenheimer's t.v. show, which is a great t.v. show. To meet a lot of people who were floating in and out of CBS.

Brown: Did you run across – cross paths with Buddy Collette?

Marsalis: Yeah, I ran – Buddy was in – Buddy was playing with Chico Hamilton.

Brown: How about Red Callendar?

Marsalis: I did, but I don't remember him doing that show. But I did run across Red Callendar.

Brown: Before we digress to talking about Los Angeles again, we were still talking about the '70s, and you were trying to explain why there was – seemed to be a schism or break with the tradition at that point. You were talking about fusion and Miles and the modal thing. But somehow you were saying that it took you a while to get a grasp of the modal thing?

Marsalis: That was even earlier. Because when Trane – Trane was already dead by '68. Just listening at some of the things that he was doing, and the thing that Miles was implementing in terms of modes. But it mostly the stuff that Trane was doing with McCoy [Tyner], trying to figure that out. It was difficult, because I didn't have a grasp on the types of modes, between the medieval modes and the Greek modes. I think mostly what was taking place, the modes that were being used by the jazz musicians I think were medieval modes. Then to try and listen and figure out how it was being done, especially by McCoy.

The thing about the '70s, it may be too close to me to be emphatic about certain things about it. I think there was a turning point which was before the '70s. 1964 was a very interesting year. '64, Lyndon Johnson, instrumental in passing the civil rights bill. What that did was to eliminate the physical vestiges of segregation. No more screens on the buses. No more signs, drinking fountains. All of that was gone. The following year, in '65, he did the same thing with the Voting Rights Act, but then, we have been voting down here for years. So I didn't necessarily see any particular change in '65 with the voters' rights act. I didn't see that. But nonetheless, one of the things that also struck me as being significant was in 1964, the Beatles arrived in this country. That was a marked change in terms of the audience that used to support jazz music, because the parents of the Beatles were the ones who were going to support earlier days, the clubs and jazz. By that time, most of the clubs that was in the black community was either dead or dying. The whole concept of instrumental music being the mainstay of some of those clubs, you get [?]. I remember one guy who was a pretty good manager. He was manager of a club attached to this brother's motel. Friends of mine used to play there: Red Tyler, tenor saxophone player, all jazz musicians, straight ahead. Eventually he left, and he got a much bigger space on his own and was doing the same kind of thing, but it failed. I saw him after that. We didn't get into a conversation of exactly what happened, because there's always many things that can cause a business to fail. I was – I had a club for about

six months, and it died. I wasn't even sorry. But one of the things that I did realize – first of all, in my case, I was not a club owner. That's the first thing. In his case, the guy, he really knew how to run a club. So I don't really know what happened. But there was one thing that ultimately stood out to me in later years. The group that he had, he didn't have a piano. He had electric piano. It was a while before I started thinking, you cannot really have a jazz club with electric piano. It doesn't work, because you detach a good percentage of the music from the historical context. What you get in the '70s is what Chick [Corea] was doing, Herbie [Hancock] was doing with Rhodes and the various – eventually the Kurzweil and a lot of those other instruments. It ceased to have a direct relationship with what we knew to be jazz, going all the way back to Louis Armstrong.

I had that. I had the RMI, the fuzztone, the wa-wa,the Echoplex, the Rhodes. I had all of that. I remember the last time, I had started teaching at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts in 1974. This is an aside, but it was very important for me. I brought the Fender Rhodes to my class one day, and I gave a test, ear-training test, with the Fender Rhodes. The best students in my class couldn't hear, couldn't hear the pitch. I'm saying now man, these people – because ordinarily, I had an acoustic piano in the room. I just brought that Rhodes there. It's kind of a lark, if you will. But I couldn't figure it out. The more I thought about it, eventually I realized something, which essentially is based on the principle of physics. The Rhodes had metal pieces that extended out and little square, soft, cottony-type things. It would hit the metal bar, and the length of the bar would alter the pitch, depending on where you went. But all of the bars was a manifestation of a pure tone. Now a pure tone – like a feedback of a microphone. That's a pure tone – it doesn't really have a pitch, and it doesn't have a pitch which could be identifiable in any sustained situation. You can play it, and you can associate it with different keys and effects, but for the most part – for example, I never heard anybody play solo piano on a Fender Rhodes, as much as Oscar talked about it. Pete[rson], he had all of this information, and he loved tinkering with gadgets and all of that. He wrote in a magazine. Evaluated a series of electric pianos. I never heard him play none. I think maybe one. I think maybe once, but otherwise than that, when I thought about it, it connected to the whole movement thing which was going on in the '70s and all of these guys that was playing electric instrument. There was a slew of them.

I started to do what the musicians call a green sheet gig, what is a trust-fund job through the union. It's just a green sheet you have to sign and turn in. So it picked up the moniker of a green sheet gig. The organization – it started in Baltimore, Maryland, too. What's the name of it.

Brown: The Left Bank?

Marsalis: Oh no. It's not – didn't have nothing to do with jazz, the one that started in Baltimore. What it was, was that they made a matching agreement with the musicians

union, and musicians would go into schools and play the green sheet gigs, because the musicians union was administering the gig. That's ridiculous. I can't think of what it was. But anyway, I started to do some of these jobs. I had about 40 of them, always by myself. I wasn't really playing music in the absolute sense, because they were all schools, elementary schools mostly. I had to deal with that piano by myself too. So I had a 73-key Rhodes, and I had a guitar amplifier. I would sit the Rhodes on top of guitar. So the height was good, I would stand up and play. After the last one that I did, school number 45 or whatever it was, I told my wife, I say, "You know what? This is it. I'm going to sell this, and if I never get another gig in my life, this is it. I'm not going to play these electric instruments." Because, like I told you, I had had a bunch of them. That was it. I sold it to a friend of mine who wanted one.

Around sometime in the 1980s, it started to look like, as far as jazz was concerned, that the electronic thing was more like a fad, because it became more and more involved with pop music, and the companies who made them – for example, there was an 88-key electric piano that – this Japanese instrument. I borrowed one to play, because sometimes we would play gigs in the park or outside somewhere, and I could have an electric instrument that was really great. I loved it. I said, man, I'm going to go try to get one of these, just to have it. By the time I went to look for it, they didn't even make them no more. Now, the rationale from a business standpoint of view is that they could make one inside of like this, they could make one like this and then have multiple sounds. So all of those – that instrument – catered primarily to the pop industry, because you could get all these different sounds, which also helped me realize that, no man, this is going some other direction, and that's not the way I'm going.

Brown: We were talking earlier about Jason's involvement in your music. We had the opportunity to interview Jason a couple days ago. He talked about how his development as a musician started with his own personal interest, but he talked about how you would encourage him to go to perhaps this summer workshop or taken to [?] on particular things. He seemed to benefit greatly from your mentorship in helping him shape his musical career. I was just wondering, was he different than the rest of the sons that you have insofar as your involvement in their career? Or is that pretty much the way you interfaced with all of your sons, from Branford through . . . ?

Marsalis: Yeah, he was definitely different. For one thing, Jason was born in 1977. By then the rest of them were gone. It was a totally different thing. I know people ask Jason sometimes, what is it like growing up with all of them? He said, "I was three years old, and they were all gone."

To answer another part of your question, in any other city but New Orleans, what I did – not just to help Jason, but across the board – couldn't do. I couldn't have done it in New York. Definitely couldn't have done it in L.A. – because the culture here reinforced

musicians who was a part of the primary industry. The primary industry here is the tourist industry. So that's the reason that you see – what other city where you're going to find at least 15 brothers making a living playing the tuba? These guys are all over the place.

Brown: True. Yeah. We were just in Jackson Square. There must have been two or three already down there.

Marsalis: That has a lot to do with the culture. There was always some jobs that you could work and play more modernistic. Not a lot, but if you really wanted to concentrate on music as a primary source of income, like Jason does, Preservation Hall, the Blue Nile, down the street from Snug Harbor, Snug Harbor. He used to work at the Cigar Bar, Dos Jefe's. I can't even remember some of them. People all over the world who think about music and New Orleans, a lot of them, and clubs, they always think about Bourbon Street. No more. It's gone. Now it's Frenchmen. That situation has a lot to do not only with the bottom line mentality, but also with who is now the owner of those clubs or the managers or whatever. People still flock to Bourbon Street. If you have a space on Bourbon Street, you can make money, because people will go along Bourbon Street. So you don't need to be concerned with jazz or any other kind of music that people have to listen to, any of that. You see?

But, for the most part, I know the three years that I spent in Richmond, there was a guy that opened a club in Richmond. He had some bad luck, but first off, the way he built it, he built the bar right in the middle of the club. Beside that, it was in a building, and the guy who owned the building, sold the building. So there went that club. It was a restaurant also, where every now and then they would bring in somebody – not big names – to play at this restaurant. But when you went into this restaurant, there was all these pictures on the wall, all these Virginia politicians from the 19th century.

Brown: In a jazz club.

Marsalis: Well, it wasn't a jazz club. It was a restaurant.

Brown: That's right.

Marsalis: They would maybe bring somebody in. It would be like – there was some effort put forward, but for the most part, Richmond is not a music place.

Brown: They have a symphony.

We know that Jason benefited tremendously from your mentorship. When Branford and Wynton are starting to play music, was there any – perhaps not comparable, but was there

some encouragement from you? Or any guidance? Particularly when they started to show an aptitude for music?

Marsalis: As far as Branford and Wynton were concerned, one of the things that I knew was who that I could get ultimately to teach them on their instrument, because that was not something that I would do. A lot of people would say, "Did you teach your son?" I say, "Well, I don't know how to play no trumpet." And I had stopped playing the clarinet years ago. So I was able to get the teachers.

When Wynton was a sophomore in high school, he was going to this Catholic school, De La Salle. He wanted to study music, but he couldn't come to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, because the school didn't cooperate with that. So he left that school and went to another school, the public school, and he started to study music there, with the whole thing, the theory class. But mostly, with the exception of maybe the guitar players, the electric bass players, and the drummers, all of the other instruments studied with classical music teachers, people in the symphony. So the skill of the instrument was acquired from that direction.

Branford and Wynton was also playing in a band called the Creators. They used to play for dances. The few gigs they had, they made more money than me. They had a pretty good band, one of the few bands in the city that could play Earth, Wind and Fire.

Brown: That's saying something.

Marsalis: They did that – Let's see. Branford graduated first from high school. When he finished – was it? '78, I think. Somewhere around there – he went to Southern University in Baton Rouge. In fact he and Donald Harrison did. When they finished, they both went to Southern University in Baton Rouge and played in the marching band, but also studied with Alvin Batiste, because Bat was at Southern at the time. Branford stayed at Southern I think for a year. I think it was a year, two at the most, and he went to Berklee in Boston. He stayed there – he stayed at Berklee until – I don't think he – he was there for about a year and a half. I remember I was in New York, and Clark Terry would get these kids from different schools, a lot of them from Berklee, make a band out of them, and take them out, play. Branford was in Clark's band at that time. He was trying to figure a way to get to New York anyway. So the band went to – I don't remember where they played, but they went to New York.

Wynton was already in New York, because when he got out of high school, he went to Tanglewood for the summer and then went straight into the Juilliard. So he was already there. He stayed at Juilliard for about a year and a half, and Buhaina [Art Blakey] asked him to join his band. So he left the Juilliard and joined Blakey's band.

Brown: Then while in Blakey's band, somehow Branford ended up in Blakey's band as well.

Marsalis: Yeah, eventually he did, but I think he was playing alto.

Brown: Um-hmm. I remember seeing that band quite often at Keystone Korner in San Francisco, a lot of times, a lot of times.

When Jason was talking about his brothers, he spoke so fondly of Branford as being a natural. He said he can just pick up anything and start playing.

Marsalis: Yeah, that's true.

Brown: How early did he manifest this ability? It must have been . . . .

Marsalis: He could – it was like somebody as a kid who could fix anything, music or otherwise. He did manifest it at a young age.

The 12 years that I spent at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, I don't want to say that I was bitter, because I wasn't, but I realized during those 12 years that the whole thing of talent is misconstrued by most people. I don't necessarily mean coming up with a definition of it. I saw so many kids who came through and had serious talent. They either fell by the wayside with some drugs or – not a lot of them did that though, I'd say – but most of them, music wasn't reinforced enough, I think, in their personal life. That's conjecture on my part, because you only get to know students so well for so long, and you never really know. There was one kid I knew – he didn't even go to NOCCA. He was a kid in the church. He was younger than me and displayed serious, serious talent on piano. Both of his parents were principals. They didn't want no musician. They wanted a doctor. So eventually, he did take a shot at Tulane and pre-med, but didn't make that. In the final analysis, he did go to the University of New Orleans, got a Ph.d. in communications. I think he's playing now. One or both of his parents has passed. But when you see or hear a kid who has the ability to transcribe [Art] Tatum when he's 10, that's some talent. But his parents put the kabosh on that. He finally managed to do – I don't know where he is playing. He gave himself the nickname "The Panther." Billy Taylor heard him when he came down here during the World's Fair.

Contrary to that, when you get the kind of support, especially parental support, which you get as a kid with a lot of talent, both parents are very supportive of him, then you get a Harry Connick, Jr. His parents are very supportive. His daddy was a D.A. His mother was a judge. She passed early in his life. When you get a situation like that, where somebody really has the talent and the support – but when you get to a point where you don't have the support, and there's some talent there, you're like swimming in syrup.

We never did discourage our kids from playing, and like I said, I was always – always was able to find somebody who could teach the instrument and knew what they were doing. Unlike medicine, anybody can hang out a shingle and say "music teacher" and don't go to jail.

Brown: Did either Branford or Wynton take classes with you or perform in your ensembles?

Marsalis: Yeah, at the school, they were both in the jazz ensemble that I was directing. Also, there was a class that I taught on sight singing and ear training. I developed that at the school. It was a unique situation, because there were only three of us on the faculty. It was a woman – she recently passed – whose primary emphasis was classical vocal. At least one of her students is in the Met[ropolitan Opera] right now. And Bert Braud, who was instrumental – classical instrumental – and me. But we spread the chores across. So even though my primary emphasis was jazz, I would end up teaching sight singing and ear training to everybody.

At the end of the semester – the first semester, which was in December – all the kids did graduate – no, they had to come back to the school. When they would come back, there was a big room downstairs. We would have all of our students meet in there. The kids would come in, some from Juilliard, Eastman, schools like that. Our attitude was, okay, you tell us what we didn't do to prepare you to go where you went. We would eventually shape the curriculum based upon the information we got from the kids who went to these conservatories. We could do that. We didn't have an idiot for a principal. That's basically what we did.

Brown: I know we only have a few minutes. We'll pick this up if we run out of tape. Your sight singing and ear training: were you able to incorporate jazz?

Marsalis: There's no such thing as that. There's Western music. In other words, there's no such thing as a jazz C-major scale. There's no such thing as a jazz perfect fifth.

I had a great textbook that was developed by three guys at the University of Indiana. I think it took them about 15 years to do it. It breaks down everything. The front part of the book was all rhythm. In the rhythm aspect of it – most teachers would teach 1-2-3-4, 1-and-2-and-3-and-4, 1-e-and-uh-2-e-and-uh-3-e-and-uh-4-e-and – and that's it. This text broke it down to ta and te. So when you were doing, say, eighth, notes, you would do 1-te-2-te-3-te-4-te-1-te-2-te. If you were doing 16ths, 1-ta-te-ta-2-ta-te-ta-3-ta-te-ta-4-ta-te-ta. And 32nd, 1-ta-ta-ta-te-ta-ta-ta-2-ta-ta-ta-te-ta-ta-ta, like that. You could see the notes in front of you. At the same time, you had to conduct in the meter in the right hand and

tap the rhythm with the left hand and read them notes. That was the kind of thing – I picked that up in graduate school at Loyola, which enabled me to do that.

I've talked to some university teachers who said that they didn't teach it, because it was too hard. I said, "Hey, man, I was teaching it to high-school kids," regular, ordinary high-school kids, not somebody whose mama took them to something at three years old. None of that.

There again, that was one of the things that – I just got an e-mail from a guy who is – who used to be principal at the Duke Ellington School in Washington. He is now at a school near Swarthmore. Is that it? Swarth? Is that what it's – Swarthmore?

Brown: Um-hmm.

Marsalis: He said that it was – I forgot the term he used, but it was one of those schools that had a lot of problems. He's trying to set up an arts program there. He wanted my address, because he wanted to send me some material that he was doing. It made me think. Every time there's a school that has some problems, the administrators think that the arts can save them. Now, when the school's doing great, you don't hear nothing about no arts. They don't even care.

Brown: It sounds like a good place to stop, because that's what we're dealing with now.

Marsalis: Yeah.

Brown: Okay, we're back on.

Marsalis: I've used that book for a long time. In the process of moving and going up to here and there, I lost it.

Brown: We're talking about the Ottman book that's the standard text for sight singing and ear training.

Marsalis: The problem with sight singing and the way that the academy does it in most cases, is that they make it an appendage of theory. So consequently, one hour every now and then, they'll go what they call sight singing. I used to watch that where I was teaching. It was out of my area. So I couldn't say nothing to them, because that was what they did.

I used to – I broke this down to Jason one time, and a few other people. I said, let me break this down to you, so you can see exactly how the academy works. I say, at the top of the food chain is the composer. If they have a really, really serious budget, and a really

serious chair, then you get – say like [Vincent] Persichetti was at the Juilliard. I say, the composer takes whoever they choose. They audition. If they don't want you, they don't want you, but if they'll take you, they'll take you. It's a fulltime job, but all they have to do is just write music and get it played by orchestra X or Y or Z or whatever.

Right under the composer is the theory teacher who really wishes that they could be a composer, but most – a lot of times don't have what it takes. So they teach what they call theory. I've always had a problem with that, because when they would use those chorales of J. S. Bach – there's 369 of them, and they would use that in a theory class, I'm trying to figure, what's theoretical about that? The man had wrote the music already. So how could you be teaching this and calling it theory? It didn't make any sense to me.

Okay. Underneath the theory teacher is the musicologist. These are the guys who study the history of the music. They get all these romantic subjects, the opera. In fact, a friend of mine who used to be chair at a Midwest university, when he got there, there were five musicologists on the faculty. He said he managed to get rid of one. He said they'd go to Italy and sit around and drink tea and write stuff. It's the whole thing about the history.

Under them is the music education teachers. You get you a Ph.d. in music education, you join the education organization, and you write a little something in the journal. So you join either the MENC, and basically that's it. You just teach about music. You don't really teach no music. You just teach about music.

The people on the very bottom of the totem pole is the most important person of all, and that's the player. What they do, you get one credit hour for what they call applied music. So you see, that's the academy for you. That's the way that that thing shakes out.

It took me a lot of years to figure out what these people were doing, because I didn't really understand what it was. It is interesting, because Heinrich Schenker developed an approach to analysis of J. S. Bach, and he created these terms like upper neighbor, lower neighbor, appoggiatura, passing tones – all of that stuff. Bach never used any of that. Any notes that they found was basically, I played in this key for a certain amount of time, and then when I thought I should modulate, then that's what I did. In the back – this book used to be published. They called it the Riemann Schneider – in the back of it, they have what is called a figured bass. So the teachers would assign you a figured bass. All you've got is a bass line, and you have the numbers on top of that, which are the intervals of the notes that was to played – the other three intervals.

It was a long time before I understood what Bach was doing. First of all, without necessarily paying attention, each one of those chorales was probably ten measures, just about, and all of them had religious titles. Every single one of them. When I taught theory for a year over there, just trying to prepare students for more advanced theory, on the

faculty at NOCCA, I found at least three of those chorales that was based on *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, because, see, Bach was a kappellmeister in a Lutheran church. So what he would do is write out the bass notes for the continuo player, who is really the bass player. Everything else – I had – there was a chorale director at Dillard. This guy knew the Baroque music so well. Occasionally, whenever he felt like it, we would have assembly. He would go in and sit at the organ, and he would improvise with that in a Baroque style. It was gorgeous, because he knew all of that, and he could improvise in that style. That's not something that they can teach you how to do. You have to really want to do that and understand how that works, because what Bach was doing had a lot to do with certain aspects of improvisation – not a lot, but to some extent, especially with that figured bass.

These people were building all their reputations – I remember, the teacher gave me an assignment with the figured bass. So I went home, followed all the rules, brought the paper in, turned it in, gave it to the teacher. Got a D on it. So I said, "Doc, how come I got a D?" He said, "It ain't musical." That's all he said. I thought about it. What I did – because you're doing SATB. The soprano's where your melody is. I went back and looked at it, what I had written in accordance to the rules that I understood. It sounded like [Marsalis sings a two-note melody.] I say, okay, he's right. It ain't musical at all.

When it comes to dealing with music, during those music – in those days – in my case, it was '51 to '55 – teachers would give examples of intervals to help you, and they would give examples of popular songs. Like if they wanted to do the augmented fourth, they would use *Maria* from *West Side Story*. Or else they would do an octave. They would use (*Somewhere*) *Over the Rainbow*. That was an octave. They had a lot of songs like that. I never thought about it one way or the other. First of all, I never did have any problems with that. So therefore I didn't have to think about, nor did I have to use, that system. But later on, when I started teaching, there were a lot of things I started to realize about what they did and why they did it.

Now, when you listen to the popular music of today, the intervals are out the window somewhere, the music, the song. It's not applicable to those Western scales. You listen to Alisha Keyes and any number of those singers who are mostly influenced by gospel music. There's nothing wrong with gospel music, but it's sometimes difficult to get students who decide that I'm going to go to the university and major in music – oh, really? – and have not had the opportunity to really listen to music with those intervals. So what you get are kids who come through there, especially the singers – and there it is.

Brown: What about – we talked about the music of the '70s. What happens to the music in the '80s?

Marsalis: I think the highlight of the music in the ’80s was that it started to return to more acoustic music, not overwhelmingly so, but there started to be more attention being paid to some of the few giants that were still around. That too is kind of close, to be emphatic about it, because the decades don’t break down evenly. They’re good for some things. Like, I would listen to Jason talk about various periods, and it would break down into decades. He’d talk the ’80s and the ’70s, and then in the ’90s. All that’s left me behind. I don’t know these people. For the most part, I’m not really sure how to describe ’80s at all.

Did Jason talk to you about Jazz Nerds International?

Brown: No, he didn’t talk about that.

Marsalis: That’s interesting. I’m surprised, because he’s got a blog where he wrote Jazz Nerds. He talks about jazz musicians who get stuck in a period and refuse to go back and listen to anything earlier than whatever – wherever they are. There’s more to it than that. He wrote it out.

Brown: When I think of Wynton’s ascension to receiving acclaim, listening to his first records, his vocabulary seems to have been very much formulated from the Miles of the late ’60s, and expanding, expounding, extrapolating from that. I don’t hear any traditional or any vestiges or any influence from the New Orleans trad sound until much later in his sound. Is that something that he revisited or came back to after he pursued or explored other musics? Or was trad something that he had heard, obviously, as a kid here in New Orleans, but didn’t include that in his vocabulary early on in his development?

Marsalis: A lot of it wasn’t recorded. He was aware of trad, not just because of being here. Because when those kids are growing up, they’re into whatever their peers are into. I was the same way. I didn’t really get into the trad until I was 40 years old. I was working with a group called the Storyville Jazz Band. That was in the ’70s. I knew of it. But the first person who started to try to turn my head in that direction was Danny Barker. He gave me a recording of Willie “the Lion” [Smith]. I realized eventually that there’s ways in which you have to listen to that music. You can’t really listen to some of that early music with some of them later ears. You have to understand two of the most important things in life, form and content. If you listen, you have to really pay attention to it.

I had an English teacher that used to say, “There’s no good reading. There’s only good re-reading.” You got to keep revisiting these things. One of the things I remember, I was with this band I was telling you. I was playing in the Storyville Jazz Band. Bob French, who’s a drummer, the son of Albert French, who used to play with Papa Celestin. His brother George French played electric bass, but his bass didn’t really sound like a rock-

and-roll electric bass. They – the two of them – had come into the music the same way all of them, in rock-and-roll. That was what you wanted to do. Eventually, his daddy turned him on to some earlier style.

In the Storyville Jazz Band, there was a trumpet player named Teddy Riley, who had really wanted to become more of a bebop-type player, but he went on the road I think with Roy Brown. I forgot. By the time he got off the road, he started to work what was the most prolific jobs around, which was trad. He was an older guy, anyway. He was in the band. There was a young trombone player named Freddie Lonzo, who he mentored. Teddy Riley mentored him. So Lonzo learned a lot about playing trombone in that idiom. We had a stable clarinet player, because the owner didn't want to pay the money. So every now and them we would get a clarinet player.

When I joined that band, I was – I understood enough about trad harmony, because there's not a lot to understand about it, just in terms of the chords and everywhere. So mostly what I was doing was just playing chords that I knew, but in the keys that they would play in. I would play solos – it was kind of like a bebop-ish solo.

Now, the trumpet player, Teddy Riley, he wasn't doing that. He understood how Pops played and all of that. The drummer also understood how the older style drums played. I thought about that. I said, this is not what I should be doing. It'll work. So I tried to play stride. Everybody in the band laughed. I thought about it. I said, wait a minute. I was not trying to be funny. I wasn't trying to make fun of the music. But they was laughing. I had to try to figure out what it was that was funny. So I went back and got these recordings, like The Lion and Jelly Roll. I started listening to them. The first thing that I realized, I say, wow, these guys have ideas that they're playing which is peculiar to the time that the music is being played. So when I tried to do that, what I became was somebody who was doing a caricature of the music, because I didn't really understand the style. I didn't understand the rhythms of it or any of that. So then I started practicing at home, playing some of the rhythms. I could work out solos in some keys, not all, because what a lot of people don't know: there's a lot of modulations in trad music. It goes to different keys. One night, after I had – was pretty confident in it, I started playing it. The guys in the band say, "Yeah, man."

The club that we were playing in was called Crazy Shirley's. It sat right on the corner of St. Louis and the street where Preservation Hall – right on the corner from that street. There were glass doors all the way to corner. Sometimes they would be open, and the music would go out into the street. Most of the older guys – I'd see Percy Humphrey and Willie Humphrey. These guys, they would walk down the street, turn at the corner, and go to Preservation Hall. I was playing one night, got to play my little solo, and a couple of the old guys that was on their way to Preservation Hall, they stopped and came in and just stood there and listened. When I finished, they just looked at me and kind of said,

okay, all right, and went to their gig. I realized, say, all right. I must be headed in the right direction with this, because that was their way of saying, I was hearing you.

I started to incorporate a little of that when I was teaching. But the university was always very difficult to do that, especially where I was teaching, because I never got enough of the right students to do that. Mostly it was that, because we could set up a flexible schedule and a flexible curriculum, but it was just a matter of trying to get the right students.

Eventually I had brought in a guy who was a good banjo player. He had a trad group that he was working with. I don't remember how long that lasted. It's very difficult to get a music department and a curriculum that runs across the gamut of the styles on a consistent basis. I think there's some kids out there who would do it, but it becomes very difficult at the university level, because once the students come there, they're already on the conveyer belt to graduate in four years.

Brown: So trad, or any kind of education or instruction in trad, would be a diversion from what is designed?

Marsalis: No, no. Uh-uh.

Brown: So why was . . . ?

Marsalis: It wouldn't necessarily be a diversion at all. It's just that – it's like a statement that's used every now and then: "Don't confuse me with the facts. My mind's made up." See, teaching music across a spectrum like that is something that has to be done at the high school. By the time they get to a college – during the time that I was teaching, I was always big on sports metaphors, always. I remember I did a workshop with some kids. It wasn't here. It was away from here. There was supposed to be an honors band. Wasn't nowhere close to being an honors band, but anyway, that's what they called it. It was a regular conventional band. The kids came from different places. There was one kid in the band that was really good. It was a piano player. He had worked on something. The rest of the kids was just some kids that was there. They had either played in a band at their home school, or whatever.

First thing I'd always do is try to find out if everybody in the band could hear everybody else, because a lot of times, you go into these situations and these kids is like glued in to that, and nothing that way. There was a baritone saxophone player, a kid on the end of the reed section. When I went down to that end of the section, I asked this kid, I said, "Hey, man. Have you ever heard of a baritone saxophone player named Harry Carney?" He said, "No." I say, "What about Gerry Mulligan? You ever heard of him?" "No." Well, you know, wasn't no sense in talking about Serge Chaloff, because I'd struck out, if you

don't know them. So I asked him, I said, "Hey, man, the school you go to." I say, "They got a football team?" He say, "Yeah." I say, "They got any wide receivers on the team?" He say, "Yeah, they do." I say, "Do you know any of them? Any of the wide receivers on the team?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, let me ask you something. If you went to one of those wide receivers, and you asked them, who was the top wide receivers in the NFL today, do you think that they would know?" He thought about it for a minute. That whole emphasis – I'm just as much of an armchair quarterback – love the Saints – as anybody else. Played a little intramural football when I was in college.

It boils down to several things, but one of the main things is value. There a friend of mine from many years who taught – she's retired now – she taught at a all girls school here, at Xavier Prep. I can remember, she used to get so frustrated. She would teach the kids how to read when they were freshman, so by the time they got to be juniors, they could read, they could do some music. So when they get to be a junior, the nuns would come in and say, "They can't take her this year, because they got to take Latin." So that's three years down the drain. There's no value there.

Brown: Just for a point of clarification, when I said – portrayed studying trad as a diversion, that wasn't – I wasn't trying to portray that as your opinion. I was saying, that's perhaps the way the institution regarded it, as a diversion from their set curriculum or pedagogy.

Marsalis: Well, if they have a jazz program, no. They don't . . . .

Brown: Right.

Marsalis: If they don't have a jazz program, then we don't have nothing to discuss.

Brown: Right, but in the same way that you're talking about with the nuns.

Marsalis: Yeah, well see, they don't have no jazz program there. But it's just the mere fact that here's somebody who was teaching a skill to young students in order to take them to another level of performance of music that is acceptable in their institution. But the value is not there enough to respect it and say, okay. To take Latin?

Brown: When they've already invested three years of their life, trying to develop their musical acumen.

Marsalis: That's all that I'm saying. When it comes down to it, there's really no value there. I used to go to meetings every now and then. Some of the – the assistant to the mayor or somebody would be speaking there. One time I went and they were talking about the music programs at these schools. So I said, "Hey man, wait a minute." I said,

“There ain’t no music program at all.” I said, what you’ve got is a very, very dedicated band teacher with no assistant, who organizes the group. They come at 7 in the morning to practice for a halftime football show. When the football season is over, they go in, and they start to work on concert music. It’s that one person. I’ve been there. In a little country town, I was it. It wasn’t that that bothered me so much. It’s just that the local political establishment doesn’t really seem to understand.

There was a guy who was the basketball coach at St. Augustine. There was some serious players coming out of there, going into college, and eventually some of them in the pros. The local newscaster was interviewing him one day and was asking him about his basketball team. He said, “No, wait a second. You got this confused.” He said, “This is not a basketball team.” He said, “This is a basketball program.” It was easy to back it up, because John Thompson, when he was at Georgetown, this was one of the towns he came to. Now, you don’t get people like that coming to your town to look at players if you don’t have a program. You can go on any street and pick up someone and do pickup games and have a goal that’s on the telephone poles. But basically, that’s what we have. We don’t have . . .

Another interesting point. During the time I was teaching at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, the superintendent at that time was a part of a group that went to China, another group of superintendents. Like sometimes people will do, as they were getting ready to depart, our superintendent was talking to the minister of education in China. He says, “If you ever get to New Orleans, look me up.” The dude shows up, from China. So the superintendent is trying to figure, what am I going to do with them? So he calls up the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, which is all that he’s got. Otherwise than that, we had a Rodney Dangerfield in the system, you see, but he’s got nothing else to show. So he brings them over there. It was the minister of education and the guy who was in charge of music over there. So we had a session with the guy who was in charge of the music over there and asked them about what is it like to be over there? What do you have to do? Same, same thing. They didn’t get no respect either. The same thing, when it came to it.

Brown: You talked earlier about how the institution, the academic institution regarding music study seems to be inverted or inverse insofar as the importance or priority, given that it’s music, and music performers are responsible for the music that they’re studying, responsible for the theories that they’re trying to create, but it emanates from what you – from what the academy places at the bottom of the hierarchy. So we have – let’s imagine that Ellis Marsalis has just now received an endowment and you can start your own institute of music. How would you re-invert those – that hierarchy? What would . . . ?

Marsalis: I wouldn’t have to. That was similar to what happened to me at UNO, because I was the occupant of a chair which was funded by Coca Cola. That was interesting too, because Coca Cola funded a million-dollar chair, aside from the fact that a bunch of

people in this town thought that Coke gave me a million dollars – I won't even go there. The school, to start, we had about $12K on the books, and I just wanted to get a few little things. Couldn't access the money, simply the requisitioning. I went to the chairman of the music department. He didn't know jack, how to do any of that. So I went to the provost. He say, "The endowments are not under my purview." Finally I went to the chancellor. See, being a chair holder, I didn't have to go through none of them, because I go straight to the chancellor. When I get to the chancellor, I just asked him, I say – I knew they had the money on the books, because there was this woman who was in charge of it, all of the endowments – it's this big ledger book, and every page was devoted to a chair in the university. I told him, I said, "How come I can't get no money? Nobody seems to know. The provost don't know. The chairman don't know." So he explained to me how that thing worked. He say, "What it is, is that Coca Cola puts up a certain amount of money every year." This is why the fiscal year is very important, because when the fiscal year starts around July, then the corporations meet, and then they start dealing with the advertising budget, which is where most of that money comes, out of the advertising budget. So what they would do, they would send increments of money, like $100,000, 106-, something like that, during that session. The agreement between Coke and the university, to make it a million-dollar endowment, Coke would have to put up the 60%, which is 600-thou. At that point, the state would kick in 4-, not until then. Then you got a million-dollar endowment. So it took six years to get that to kick in.

To make matters even worse, the university – the state of Louisiana had such stringent rules on investment, until the chancellor – the provost told me one day, he said, "Look man, I thinking maybe we'll just give the state their 400 back and invest the 6-, because we could get more money doing it that way." At the end of the – near the end of the school year, you look on the book and say, what is this? Got almost peanuts. I say, man, I ain't no economist. I say, but you give me a million, and believe me, I could invest it and get more money than this on the return.

Those are the kinds of things that you have to learn about, and they don't teach that in no kind of music nothing. You don't even learn any of that. The only reason why I learned it was because I happened to be the occupant of a chair which was funded by a major corporation. So then it was like, oh, that's how that works. Okay.

But we were able to establish the curriculum pretty much the way we wanted to. We eventually got a graduate program, got some assistance from one of the people on the music faculty, in fact happened to be a musicologist. All you do is just go to the committee, present what you're going to do, how many hours is it. It's around 33 hours to get a masters. They vote on that and say okay. So we were able to get a graduate program based on what we were teaching.

Brown: Was it an M.A. or an M.M. or – what degree were you offering?

Marsalis: It was a liberal arts degree, because the program was under the College of Liberal Arts, but it was – I don't remember if it was an M.M. They may have used the M.M.E., because it wasn't a department. It wasn't a jazz department. The music department was under the purview of the College of Liberal Arts. So what you got was – I don't know if they even had one. We had one. I don't know if they had one or not, whether they even had enough students to get that. But invariably, that was what we did. I think it might have been an M.M.E. I don't know. That's what I got from Loyola when I went. But they had a graduate program. They didn't have a jazz program at the time, and even if they did, I didn't want to be bothered with that. If I'm going to school – because I told my friend who had told me to come talk to him about going back to school. Just a a precautionary thing, he say, "You know you're going to have to get the regular work and stuff." I said, "Man, look, if I can't learn something, I ain't interested. I'm not coming here to mark time and hope that I can play a couple of blues and you give me a degree. No, no, no."

For the most part it was a great experience, because there was a lot of stuff that I was able to piecemeal. And I was able to take my band to Brazil. That was a good experience. But see, when I say that I didn't have the kind of students that I really needed: my first trumpet player – we're getting ready to go to Brazil. He can't go, because his girlfriend said he can't go. So we had to go with no lead trumpet player.

Brown: I want to just fill in a blank. We were talking about Michael White's influences as far as clarinet, and I thought, maybe Johnny Dodds?

Marsalis: No.

Brown: Okay. So who were they?

Marsalis: I mean, he knew about Dodds. This cat was alive. What is this old man's name? I never really cared much for his playing. I played at least once with him. But anyway, he had a pretty good reputation.

Brown: Then when you were talking about the shift in the music in the '80s, going back to more acoustic, and you said there was more focus on some of the masters who were still alive, who were some of those that you can recall?

Marsalis: It wasn't so much that there was a focus on them, but the acoustic music was starting to creep into some of the programs. To give you an example, Loyola University had a jazz festival which was over three days for a long – for a pretty good while. Bands would come from Texas, some parts of Louisiana, and maybe even Alabama, to participate in the jazz program. In the '70s, it was common to see bands – high school

jazz bands – come and have some kid walking a bass line on a keyboard. There's a nine-foot Baldwin piano shoved in the corner. This is – finally, the guy that was the director would send out the information to them and say, "Please, no rock-and-roll."

I don't know that it's like that now. I have been over there when they've done it. But it seems to have improved, at least from a standpoint of some schools.

Like the thing that Wynton is doing at Lincoln Center with that Essentially Ellington – I haven't been to that. It's kind of a shame. I should have been going to that. But the schools that have been winning that, for the most part – well, you're not going to find nobody walking bass lines with a keyboard in those schools. He's had some arrangement with the Smithsonian, and he's able to get those Duke Ellington arrangements. They would send the arrangements to any of the schools that wanted to participate in the Essentially Ellington program. As far as I know, it's still going on.

I've seen some pretty good young piano players. I saw a kid Friday night, at the end of my gig. I was waiting on the guy to come take care of some business. This kid is from Honduras. He's in New Orleans to audition at LSU and UNO in the jazz studies program. He was on the stage playing. It's obvious that this kid can play, even though I didn't hear him in a band or nothing.

Are you going to check out the Monk group tonight?

Brown: That's what we were thinking.

Marsalis: I'm supposed to meet with this kid who's a piano player in that group. We've been missing each other.

For the most part, I think that there's more opportunities now, because the schools are at least amenable. And there are more and more schools who are hiring people with jazz pedagogical skills. I remember when a former student of mine, Victor Goines, was teaching at Juilliard. Northwestern, in Illinois, there's a woman came in that's chair. She looked at the jazz program, didn't like what she saw, and just killed it dead. So Vic resigned from Juilliard, and within two days she had already called him, checked with the school and all that. She – the two of us played phone tag, but I eventually sent a recommendation in for Victor. She hired him, just like that, with the understanding that he is in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. That is value. She's a classical pianist. She's chairman of the department.

I think there's probably more of that, maybe incrementally, but there's a little more of that, because as it stands now, the schools can do a lot. The former student of mine at Tulane, he's in a graduate program and he's also running a little space. They call it Der

Rathskeller. It's a basement thing. He brought a young lady in who's a tap dancer. He brought her over to Snug Harbor, and I met her. I didn't see her do it. But he brings a lot of people into the Rathskeller, and I think he's able to get some money from over there, because Tulane has some money.

There's more and more of some things that's beginning to happen with some of the schools. Basically, I think that's primarily – I don't know. I won't say that, because I don't know what's going to happen. I think that opening up spaces to play – not necessarily a club. It could be a restaurant, because Snug Harbor is a restaurant-nightclub. So there are people who will come in there with their children in their arms, because they legally can do that because of the restaurant. I don't have any confidence that the hotels would do it, but then there's some jobs that happen in some of the hotels.

Brown: More performance opportunities. I see it. We're always going to need that.

We're in the year 2010. I know we only got as far as talking about music in the '80s, and we're talking about 2010 now. This year is a watershed moment. The entire Marsalis family has been recognized as Jazz Masters.

Marsalis: Well, no, no, no. Just me. They see the opportunity to try to get all of them to play, but they don't – I mean, hey, Jason. How could Jason be a jazz master? Jason's 32 years old. That's ridiculous. All of the Jazz Masters get a stipend. They don't get nothing. But I think it was a pretty slick move, because there's a certain amount of prestige that not only goes with that. We never played as a group. We did last year in Washington, and it took a whole year to get that together. The Duke Ellington festival, which is now called something else – the D.C. festival, I think – donated some of the funds toward the center. Have you seen that building?

Brown: Lincoln?

Marsalis: In the village. In the Musicians' Village.

Brown: No, not the center. We went out to the Musicians' – did we see it? We went out there, but we didn't see the center. We just saw some of the houses. We'll get to that, but please finish what you're saying. I'm going to ask you about your involvement with that, as well.

Marsalis: I'm mostly a consultant. I'm – that's basically it, because I am not teaching. I may do some teaching, but for the most part, when it finally does open, there'll be people that are teaching. I might stick my nose in a little bit here and there.

Brown: How did you become associated with the center?

Marsalis: Branford and Harry [Connick], Jr., came here and was wading through all that water. When they saw the damage, the two of them started to talk and said, there's got to be something we can do. So they started to think about establishing a center. The Musicians' Village was already underway here, because the Habitat had been building houses down there for a long time. The Musicians' Village was already there. I think that the property came from the school board. I think there was a school there before it. The management, Ann Marie Wilkins, her agency, who is their manager, Branford and Harry, said okay, let's do it. She's been raising money, getting funds and all that, to set up an endowment for it. The money to build it had been in the bank for a while. So it's almost done. In fact I'm surprised you didn't see it, because if you're going up there, it's kind of hard not to see.

Brown: I think we did. Maybe it just wasn't identified, the site.

Marsalis: You went to the Musicians' – because Brad Pitt is building houses down there too.

Brown: Right.

Marsalis: Were those the ones you saw?

Brown: It wasn't clear. We had Andrea [? Du Plessis] who took us out there to look at – to see some of the developments out there.

Marsalis: I don't know. I don't know if you saw the Musicians' Village or not.

Brown: She identified it as such, but I don't recall seeing the center.

Marsalis: Maybe it was. Anyway, the building is pretty much close to – maybe not move in, because I think they're supposed to finish it in the spring. But it's definitely a community center with an emphasis on music.

Brown: Now you reference all that water. Your house here was flooded during Katrina?

Marsalis: No. See, this is – the uptown section, there was maybe about four feet of water in the street, which wasn't enough to come into our house. We have an electric gate, and the box on the gate, that water cooked it. It was finished.

Brown: Shorted it out.

Marsalis: But this area . . .

Brown: Which is called?

Marsalis: It's just uptown. There are different names. This particular one, they call it Pigeon Town. Actually, it started out as Pension Town, because the people who lived here were people who were on pension. That was a long time ago, and it got convoluted to Pigeon. All of the uptown area – New Orleans is shaped like a bowl. This area is a little higher in the bowl, and the people who built houses here, they built them on brick pillars, because they had a lot more respect for mother nature. I think what got a lot of people was that the concept at the end of the Second World War, when the G.I.s was coming back, somewhere up around Pennsylvania, I think, they were building slab houses, like you put about a six-inch or eight-inch slab, all of the plumbing, equipment, and everything, and then you build a house on top of that. That don't work in this town. It might work somewhere else. There was a lot of houses that was built like that, and the water came. But it didn't get in this house, because it's an old house.

And it didn't do much to the French Quarter either. That was funny. After the hurricane, which was August 29, we started back at Snug Harbor in October. There was still some problems, like the lights would go out. We'd be on the stage playing. All of a sudden, the lights would go out. It was great for what we were doing. I remember being in Saskatchewan, in Canada. There was a rock band that was playing. The lights went out. Nothing, dead, yeah. But see, we just kept right on playing. The people dug it. So eventually the management came out, and on everybody's table, they just put candles. It was like – it became sort of like an adventure. It didn't happen once. It happened several times. One time there was a singer, was singing, and the mic went out, and she just kept right on singing.

It was interesting during that time. But since then, everything is – the first thing that went back to normal, from a business standpoint of view, was the Superdome, because the Saints is a very important economical entity in the city. The Tourist Commission, whose job it is to go to different corporations and lobby for them to hold their conventions here in New Orleans – I had read an article about they had difficulties. This was a little earlier part, but it was here. They were talking about going to different places and trying to get people to come here and how many people that they spoke to thought that New Orleans was still under water, 2010. The only thing that really, across the board, changed their mind, was when the Saints won the Super Bowl. When the Saints won the Super Bowl, then all of a sudden, everybody say, oh, they must not be under water. And now they're just coming.

[recording interrupted. It resumes in mid-sentence]

. . . north of here, called Abbeville. In the area of Abbeville, they get their orange juice from a bay which is up there, not subjected to the BP oil spill.

How long you going to be in town?

Brown: We're leaving tomorrow morning.

Marsalis: They got at Po-Boy festival at Oak Street Saturday.

Brown: I'm sorry I'm missing that. I'm sorry to miss that.

Marsalis: Yeah. Oak Street Po-Boy Festival, where all of these – there's Po-Boys all up and down the street. I might go this year. I've never been. But I might just go down there.

For the most part, New Orleans is a different kind of place, but not – because a lot of people still say, "How did the hurricane affect the musicians?" I say, not in a collective sense. There are some people who left, and some didn't come back. But the musicians in New Orleans always did come and go. Jelly Roll and them came and went. They didn't just stay here all the time. Pops [Louis Armstrong] didn't come back after 1949, because he had Jack Teagarden in the band and the laws wouldn't permit Teagarden to get on the bandstand with him. So Pops said, that's it. He never did come back after that.

Brown: Blackwell talks about he had to leave out of here, because he was married to Francis too. So that holdover of those Jim Crow laws, that – I just watched *Faubourg Tremé,* Lolis Elie's film about black New Orleans, realizing that they really clamped down after Plessy vs. Ferguson. It was almost completely oppressive here.

Marsalis: Clamped down after when?

Brown: Plessy vs. Ferguson. Separate but equal became institutionalized segregation.

Marsalis: Man, look. The clamp down came when we got off of them boats. Plessy vs. Ferguson. One of his descendents used to go to NOCCA. In fact, he's involved in trying to get a commemoration for Plessy somewhere in the city. The thing is, the oppressive aspect was all across the area, all the way from Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas. All along there. Some parts of Mississippi might have been worse than some parts of Alabama or some parts of Louisiana, but for the most part, the oppressive aspect was there, like the rise that they had in T-Town in Tulsa. The black people had all kinds of business there. They took them out.

There were a lot of other places, like Rosewood in Florida. My son Ellis, who did that book, he had a friend there, Pierre, who worked for a newspaper in Florida. When the

movie came out, the editor asked him to go and do a story on Rosewood, which was in Florida. So he was in touch with my son Ellis. In his investigation, he told my son – he said they had a whole bunch of Rosewoods. Not just one. But his editor said, "Look. We ain't interested in that. Just do Rosewood."

The research – we're still a long, long way. You know that museum, World War II museum? They got one picture of a brother in there, Dori Miller. The cat was in the navy.

Brown: They had him down working in the kitchen. He had to come up and shoot. Dori Miller. That's it. The whole World War II museum. That's criminal.

Marsalis: I don't know how much of that is the fault of Nick Mueller. Nick and I were on the faculty together at UNO. He was largely responsible, along with Stephen Ambrose for getting that going.

There's a level of responsibility for which has been turned over to the dominant culture. One thing that I know about Nick, who is the curator over there: if I had pictures and all kinds of stuff of brothers in the military, they could get in there. It wouldn't be no problem. But they're not going to go do the research.

Brown: Speaking about that and keeping the historical record straight, because obviously having just one black person represented as the African-American participation in World War II, that again, I think that's tragic. But I'm hoping, because you are a native New Orleanian and you know the history here of the music – I'm trying to teach the history of this music, and I have people saying, "Back when jazz was being formed, there were a lot of white people and black people mixing together, and that's how it came up." I said, I don't think so, because I don't think society would have allowed that. But perhaps you can provide your expertise in this historical matter.

Marsalis: It was a lot of mixing in the neighborhood, because when the immigrants came over here at the turn of the century, there were a lot of Italians, a lot of Irish, who came here. They were living next door, across the street, and all of that. But as the element of affluency came among them, they left, which is natural.

Brown: It happens in black communities too.

Marsalis: Precisely. There was something that Papa Jack Laine said, who was the bass drummer, in an interview. He didn't elaborate, but he said, "When we first came over, we used to play funerals and ceremonies." He said, "But eventually they just stopped doing it." We didn't stop, which is what kept a lot of this going, you see?

Somebody was asked about what they call the Mardi Gras Indians. Oh, my drummer, a young boy from Mississippi. He was talking about the Mardi Gras Indians. I said, "Man, back in the day, them dudes used to meet up and fight with hatchets and knives and all kinds of stuff. Spy Boy would go tell Yellow Pocahontas, "Look. You better not cross Canal Street." Well, you know what that means. That's how that was.

Brown: I was talking to Royce Osborn. He's doing a documentary on the Zulu. Do you have any insights or any feelings?

Marsalis: Zulu here?

Brown: Yeah. The King, Louis Armstrong, and that they had actually gone to the White House and presented Obama with a coconut.

Marsalis: The coconuts have become a prestigious thing. They used to throw them from the floats, but somebody got hurt. So they don't throw them anymore.

Brown: They're heavy, too.

Marsalis: Some of them have been gussied up, if you will, polished and all of that. The only thing that I ever heard was that Zulu, in the beginning, was sort of the answer to Rex. I don't know who started it. The thing about Zulu that I do remember was that in the 1940s and maybe even a little after that, they used to have mules for pulling floats, before the tractors came in. The Zulu parade didn't really go to Canal Street. The Zulu parade would pass Claiborne and go uptown, because there was a lot of bars which supported the membership. So if you were in Zulu, you had to stop at your bar and get a taste. So the Zulu parade was strung out for who knows how long. It was a everyman, working man thing with the Zulus. That's the kind of organization it was.

Now, believe it or not, they have white dudes painting their face black, on the floats, at Zulu – belong to the Zulu club. That's right. And believe me, there's not any kind of ridicule. They're serious about that. And now they have a situation where Zulu and Rex meet, and toast.

Brown: Talk a little bit about Rex. I don't think most people know about Rex.

Marsalis: Rex is a carryover from Europe. Rex is considered king of carnival. It's a society thing. As near as I can tell, Rex – people who were members and got to be king – Rex is like Anglo-Saxon.

Brown: Exclusively.

Marsalis: As near as I can remember hearing about. I'm sure a lot of that's changed. But it was a part of the society. There was a debutante sponsors, where they present the young ladies to the future millionaires. Yeah, basically.

Rex goes all the way back to late 19th century. You can see some of the early costumes at one of those – the Louisiana Museum or somewhere. They had a lot of them, as you can see from the earlier day.

I just read a thing in the paper today about the Pontalba building. You know where Jackson Square is?

Brown: Um-hmm.

Marsalis: See them building that go around it? They were built by a woman, Pontalba. She was born in New Orleans and went back – went to France and spent a lot of years there. When she came back here, she built those apartments. I'm trying to think. It's in the paper today.

It's easy to find out things historically now. All you got to do is google it.

Brown: Although I'm not going to trust what I read online that much. I always want to try to corroborate it.

Let me ask you . . .

Marsalis: Yeah, well, it's as reliable as the newspaper.

Brown: But I'm saying, I like to corroborate. I don't want to just go with one source. I want to get several sources.

Marsalis: I find that that's a very good beginning. Not to say that you should just do that.

Brown: Since we're talking about respect, I'm always reminded of Bud Powell when he was talking about bebop and how that really undermined or did not address the seriousness of intent that went into the music. I remember that statement, and I think about how Louis Armstrong is so valued and valorized here, and rightly so. He, I would feel, is one of the main ambassadors of this music, if not New Orleans in itself. But when you arrive at Louis Armstrong Airport, and you see that statue, and he's got bulging eyes, and it looks like a caricature – do you have any opinion about that?

Marsalis: The statue of where?

Brown: Louis Armstrong. When you come off, and you're getting ready to go down to baggage claim, there's a big – probably a 9- or 12-foot statue of Louis Armstrong. He's got the handkerchief, and his eyes are all bulging out. That's a caricature of him.

Marsalis: A statue at the airport.

Brown: Um-hmm. When you come into the arrival terminal – I came in on American Airlines. So I'm coming down. You have to go through all – then you have to come – you have to go around a corner, and I think you descend to go down to the baggage claim. Right there, before you go down the stairs, there's a – it's color. It's all color. It's about maybe 12-foot – it's a very large statue of Louis Armstrong, and it's a caricature.

Marsalis: Maybe that's the best that that cat could do. When you get somebody – there's a statue of Louis Armstrong at Congo Square, in the area . . .

Brown: Armstrong Park?

Marsalis: At Armstrong Park. The previous mayor gave a contract to some clown. They broke the foot. Just – well, that's another story. But all of the typical aspects – not aspects, but the typical characteristics of Louis Armstrong is usually found in all things, the trumpet and the handkerchief. In most cases, anybody who can actually do a sculpture of that magnitude, they got to be serious. It ain't – it's not something that you do as a lark. But I'm trying – for some reason, I don't remember that statue, as many times as I've been in and out of that airport. But I do know the one – Danny Barker was responsible for the one in Armstrong Park, because he started talking about it and was helping to raise funds and all of that.

Brown: I remember seeing it there. It seemed to be – it was a big bronze statue. It seemed to be respectful. He's standing there, holding his horn. He's upright. He looks dignified. This one does not in any way show him in a dignified fashion. Again, to refer back to what Bud Powell said, the seriousness of intent of this music.

Marsalis: The woman who did it, the one at Armstrong Park, was a renowned sculptor. She's about 100 now. I think she's still alive. What is her name? I can't think of anybody's name today. But she's a renowned artist. She did the statue in Armstrong Park.

Brown: You had the bust of Charlie Parker at his memorial in Kansas City.

Marsalis: Oh yeah. I got that from Kansas City. I was there doing a workshop.

Brown: So would you – you would probably agree that that seems like a respectful – you've seen it real life. It's massive. He's contemplative. He's not being portrayed in any kind of caricature or any way to be demeaning or disrespectful.

Marsalis: I don't think caricatures in and of themselves are necessarily disrespectful automatically. I guess in a lot of cases it depends on the intent, as to whether or not ridicule was the intent. There's some paintings of musicians from here which I think are horrible. I know the guy that did them. He was a student of a friend of mine. As far as I'm concerned, he didn't bother to get his technique together. So when I look at them, I say, oh God. But he got the commission.

Brown: I agree with you. Sometimes caricatures are not done with intent to be derogatory or derisive or any of that.

Marsalis: And then sometimes people do some not good sculpting.

Brown: Right, okay. But again, what – the bulging eyes. Handkerchief, that's all good. Trumpet. But . . .

Marsalis: It depends on the model that he used. Because there's a couple of photos with Pops that have his eyes really big and wide, and if they would use that as a model, then it's conceivable that it would come out like that.

Brown: Again, I just know it struck me – and I don't know what the intent of it – but to me it belied the seriousness of his contribution to this world culture.

Marsalis: To me the most important thing about any of that is that whatever that one statue is, people need to understand that Louis Armstrong blazed a trail in the music, and they need to be able to recognize *West End Blues.* I heard a lot of young trumpet players trying to play that opening phrase of *West End Blues,* and Wynton was one of them. Ain't the easiest thing to do. When he hit that high C and sustained it for about four measures, to me, that's what it is. I don't care about no statue. And that video that they took over there in Norway or wherever he was, he was doing *Dinah.*

There's a lot of things that's important. I was talking to some of the students – I mean, not the students, but some of the guys of lately that I was playing with, about the approach to starting those tunes. Guys count "1 – uh – 1-2-3-4." Well, they didn't do that. If they was on the bandstand and had finished one song, they would wait for the leader, who was going to make a decision about another song. Then the leader would go like [Marsalis stomps his foot twice quickly]. That's like, "Attention." And then the next thing is [he stomps it again]. And then they would take off. They didn't set – everybody was already aware of the tempo. Lil Hardin talks about that in her interview, when she

first started playing with Joe Oliver's band, because she went to Oberlin and studied. She said they'd stomp and take off.

Brown: "Stomp off, let's go."

All right. Do you have anything else you'd like to contribute to the historical record?

Marsalis: Nope.

Brown: Once again, as the patriarch of the first family of jazz . . .

Marsalis: Oh boy. Patriarch of the first family of jazz.

Brown: I'm sure that's how it's going to read on the NEA Jazz Masters Award, however. But we'll know you as Ellis Marsalis, the pianist, educator, and father.

Marsalis: If I ever make a will out, I'm going to put that in there: "Do not put that on my tombstone."

Brown: What do you want on your tombstone?

Marsalis: Nothing.

Brown: Nothing!

Marsalis: Zero.

Brown: Zero. And they don't bury people here, so . . .

Marsalis: Oh yeah, they do.

Brown: I mean, they don't bury them underground. They bury them, of course.

Marsalis: They got all of these vaults and stuff.

Brown: Mausoleums.

Marsalis: Yeah, we got a couple of those.

Brown: I cannot complete this interview without acknowledging and thanking with sincere gratitude Dolores, your wife. We had a chance to talk with her, because – when we first arrived, we had a chance to sit with her. Obviously there's a woman of staunch,

staunch fortitude. I think about a career of a musician and the largeness of this family, having to move, and when you're gone doing gigs and touring, she's got these five, six, or how many ever are at home at that time. She just seems to have been an immeasurable contributor to the success of this family as well. And I understand, from having talked to Jason and talked to Delfeayo before, and Wynton, that they have a great respect for their mother. They have a tremendous love for their mother. I think that that needs to be honored and acknowledged, because, just meeting her briefly, I understand, she's – whew – she's a very, very powerful woman and very strong in her conviction. She said, Branford and Wynton, "I put them out." So I figure, this is – Dolores is – and she said, "I got to be honest." I said, "Yes, you are definitely keeping it real." So, truly a blessing, I'm sure, for this family, but for the world to know that she is – I have utmost respect for her and of course for you too, but . . .

Marsalis: She doesn't even want to do any kind of biography or nothing, and it wouldn't really be that difficult for her, because a young lady who is – because she got all of these young women who are like daughters that she never had. One of them, she was talking to her the other night. She lives in Washington. She works in the Obama administration, not for him directly, but she's in the ethics area. She can write. If she really wanted to do it, there's a lot of help out here. So I don't know. She may decide to do it, and she might not. Right now, she's not necessarily – "I don't have time. I've got too much to do. I don't have time. I don't have time like you."

Brown: Do you have time to write your autobiography?

Marsalis: In a way, yeah. I started – I've already started. I got some help – at least I thought I did – from a guy who lives in New York. I got to contact him and find out where we are with all of it. I got a lot of stuff on the computer. I'm trying to establish a certain amount of discipline and a method of doing it, because I'm not like my son Ellis is. His discipline – he's working on an audio book now. I don't even know what that is. But anyway, he must know. The poem that you heard? He say it wasn't even finished. He was down here not long ago, working with Delfeayo, because the audio book had something to do with sound. I still don't really understand what a audio book is. But I don't have that discipline. I'm still looking for that. But who knows? By the end of this year I'm hoping. My situation right now that causes me a certain amount of difficulty: I'm shifting my focus. I'm going to get off this road thing. I don't think after next year I'm going to be going out on no road. And I'm also finding out ways in which to sell some of my music online, on the web page. I'm inching in that direction, because I have to get this guy that I know to fix it up. Let me see if it's [Marsalis reaches for (? a computer)] – where is it? I've only got one piece – I think this is it – that I'm satisfied with. This one. See, I don't know how to do that. Not really. He fixed that up for me. Eventually what I want to do, I'm going to get me an item number and send it in to the guy who works on the web site, and it'll be on my web site.

Brown: So you're going to be a – what do they call that? – cyberspace entrepreneur.

Marsalis: That's probably as close as I can get. And I got a lot of other stuff. I got things here that I've been writing – the music I'm talking about – over the years, exercises, because I have this concept in which these exercises will help not only to develop facility on a piano, but also to reinforce the sound of the chords that's used to play this music. But they're in a exercise format.

Brown: Like etudes?

Marsalis: Yeah, kind of. I'm going to have to get them all digitized, get this guy to do it, and then – because eventually I'm going to have to codify that whole thing, which is another thing, which is cool. I don't want to make it sound like I don't want to do it. It's just that my organization level is suspect right now.

Brown: Okay. If there's nothing else we want to add to the historical record, I just want to say, Mr. Ellis Marsalis, on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Award, I want to thank you very much for your time, thank you very much for your contribution to American musical culture, thank you for enhancing this music that we call our own.

Marsalis: This is for Smithsonian?

Brown: Smithsonian is conducting the interviews for the NEA Jazz Masters.

Marsalis: So this'll be in the Smithsonian.

Brown: Yes. Like I said, it'll be in there like with Duke and with Benny Carter and all them. They have the oral history program as part of the archives, the standing archives. So I want to say thank you.

Marsalis: All right.

Brown: Please keep doing what you're doing.

Marsalis: Well, as long as I'm above ground, I'll try.

(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)