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DELFEAYO MARSALIS
NEA Jazz Master (2011)

Interviewee: Delfeayo Marsalis (July 28, 1965 -)
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Brown: Ferdinand Delfeayo Marsalis. Good to see you again.

Marsalis: You too, brother.

Brown: It's been, when? – since you were working with Max and the So What brass quintet. So that was about 2000, 2001?

Marsalis: That was.

Brown: So that was the last time we spent some time together.

Marsalis: Had a couple of chalupas since then.

Brown: I knew you had to get that in there. First of all, we reconnected just the other night over – Tuesday night over at the Jazz Masters Award at Lincoln Center. So, what did you think? Did you have a good time?

Marsalis: I did, to be around the true legends and masters of jazz. It was inspiring and humbling, and they're cool too.

Brown: What do you think about receiving the award?

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Marsalis: I still feel I might be on the young side for that, but I think that my life has been, so far, dedicated to jazz and furthering the cause of jazz, and it's something that I hope to keep doing to my last days.

Brown: We'll go ahead and start the formal interview. Today is January 13 – man, this snow storm has really taken me out. I'm from California – today is January 13th, 2011.

Marsalis: South of the border.

Brown: He ain't going to let it go – 2013 – 2011. See, you got me tongue-tied now. We are in the Empire Hotel in New York City. This is in the aftermath of the NEA Jazz Masters Award Ceremony held on Tuesday night. We are conducting the Smithsonian National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Oral History Interview with Ferdinand Delfeayo Marsalis. If you could go ahead and state your full name – or restate your full name, since I've stated it, your date and place of birth.

Marsalis: Delfeayo Ferdinand Marsalis. You got to get the order right. July 28, 1965. What else?

Brown: Where you were born.

Marsalis: I was born in New Orleans.

Brown: Do you remember which hospital? Or, do you know which hospital?

Marsalis: Flint Goodridge. In fact then there was only one or two options, I believe.

Brown: Meaning what?

Marsalis: For folks of color. It would have been . . .

Brown: Really? In the '60s.

Marsalis: Oh yeah. It would have been . . .

Brown: Still segregated?

Marsalis: . . . Flint Goodridge or Charity Hospital.

Brown: So what you are saying is, there was still segregation.

Marsalis: Oh yeah. Of course.

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Brown: Maybe that's not known. That's not the official record for our country.

Marsalis: Oh, come on. Anybody that lived in the South knows that. I think that it was the difference between Branford and Wynton. They were the first generation that was not –where it wasn't forced busing. They had the choice to go to an integrated school. My parents made that choice for us, so that we would have to deal with integration early on. So we were fairly much prepared for whatever came after that. Branford and Wynton had it a little tougher than me. Even that five year difference, it made a difference in terms of how the students reacted.

Brown: How did they react to you?

Marsalis: It was, I guess, less contempt. I think – Wynton would tell a story. They gave him a stuffed monkey for Christmas. Like when it came time, you'd have to exchange presents. But for me it wasn't as obvious. The kids were pretty cool.

Brown: What about the teachers?

Marsalis: No, no problems from the teachers. At that point, I think everyone realized that we had to move in a forward direction. I was at that point a very good student. I was always – I was never absent, and I had straight A's at that point. So teachers were cool with me. Taking care of business.

Brown: We had interviewed your father earlier. So we'd been out to the house. So that was the house that you were born in? Is that correct? The one that they're currently in?

Marsalis: No. Again, when I was born at Flint Goodridge, we lived in Kenner.

Brown: In Kenner. What part?

Marsalis: So, I was born in New Orleans, but we lived – which part of Kenner? We were like a mile away from the airport. We were real close to the levee. It was an interesting childhood. The way my family is, it was really four of us, Branford, Wynton, Ellis, and myself. We had the majority of – we grew up together. Then, when I was five years old, Mboya was born. Mboya having autism – he's part of the family, but we interacted with him a little different. And then Jason came along, twelve years after. So it's almost like two separate memories of the childhood with the four of us, and then Mboya came along, and then Jason is a totally different thing.

Brown: What was it like, with the four of you, growing up?

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Marsalis: It was wild. A lot of noise. We were in pairs, so Branford and Wynton would always team up on me and Ellis. They were all – it was just typical kids. Any opportunity to beat up on us or do some kind of mean trick, they would do that. But Ellis and I got our revenge once. Somehow we put the trash can filled with water on the door, and we had it attached to a string, so that when they barged in on us, the water got right on them. Of course we had to pay for it, but it was worth it. But it was pretty wild.

My mother would try to get us involved in cultural things. She made sure that we were active in the intramurals, in the sports and the Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts. She would make health food drinks for us, which we liked. We even had a couple of family meetings where she'd read poetry of Langston Hughes about – but we weren't really that serious about it. We were like, why is Mom tripping? We want to go out and play.

We were in a small house, three bedrooms. Branford and Wynton were always together. Ellis and I were always together. Then my parents. A pretty small environment. We were very country.

Brown: What does that mean for people who might not understand the vernacular?

Marsalis: Country and city? Rural. It's more rural than it is, in the mindset. That's what we say somebody's country. It means not so much that they grew up on a farm, but that they would not be so much out of place if they were on a farm. So that's just – we say they're country. That was about it.

Brown: Getting interested in music – in your biography, you state that you used to lay underneath the piano, your father, while he was playing – lay underneath the piano while your father was playing. Did that ever inspire you to play the piano?

Marsalis: Not so much to play the piano, but I always remember hearing that sound. I remember hearing that sound that my dad had, and that sound influenced all of us, in terms of that's what we expect from a pianist, first and foremost to have that type of sound. But from a production standpoint of view, the closeness and the warmth of the sound, under the piano, it had an impact on me. When I produce my recordings, irrespective of the size of the ensemble, I try to capture that intimacy and that warmth.

Brown: According to your biography, it at first looked like you were going to be a rhythm section player. You were interested in the bass and drums. Let's talk about that.

Marsalis: I don't know about that.

Brown: That's not accurate?

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Marsalis: I was interested in the bass instruments. We took a trip to Houston. Maybe I was in fifth grade at this point. The bassist, he played electric bass. I remember Chris Severin, he showed me a couple of notes. I was interested. I said, oh man, this thing, uh-uh, because you had to press down to play it. I said I don't want to have anything to do with this.

The drums, I had a drum pad for a couple of weeks. My dad was like – he didn't really want drums in the house. By the time Jason came around, he was like, whatever. He was so old, he said it's fine at this point.

Brown: On the biography on your website, a quote from it: it says, "I gravitated towards the trombone, which was an extension of my personality." Why don't you explain what that means.

Marsalis: In the New Orleans jazz band – in fact, we're all perfectly suited. In the New Orleans jazz band, the role of the trumpet is to play the lead part. So the trumpet generally does not have regard for the other instruments. That's perfectly suited for Wynton's personality. He can play the lead. It's like the quarterback who's got to have a certain kind of mentality, personality, to do that. You look at the great trumpeters throughout history, Miles Davis or Louis Armstrong or Clifford Brown. That was their thing, that they're playing lead. They're playing the part.

The saxophonist's job is to make the trumpet sound good. You take Branford. He can make any musical situation better. So he is the perfect saxophonist, soprano, tenor. It doesn't matter what the situation. He really knows how to accompany in real time. So he and Wynton working together, that's the perfect combination.

The trombone player's job is to be a bridge between the rhythm section and the two top horns, and, as well, the trombone has to make the other horns sound good. So our job is to stay out of the way and tailgate. We have that slide. So we connect everything.

So you got the trumpet, which is playing the lead. The saxophone or clarinet can be above. That's the interesting thing about New Orleans music. You have the clarinet. It's actually – it plays higher than the trumpet, but it's playing accompaniment roles. And then the trombone's underneath. We can also play in the middle-upper register, but our main thing is to – we connect with the tuba or the bass. So you have to have a certain kind of personality to play trombone in the New Orleans jazz band.

Brown: How did you come about associating the playing of the trombone with your personality, insofar as you felt like you were a connector?

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Marsalis: Oh yeah, yeah. They'll tell you that. I – that's my vibe. It's really early on, keeping the family connected and having that kind of – I'm the middle child. I'm the fourth of six. So I can see what the older brothers are doing, sit back and check that out, and then check out the younger brothers too. It's interesting. Whereas I think when you're the younger brother, like Jason is, he's got a different thing he has to deal with. You have to deal with five older brothers. That's like, oh, my goodness. I got to pick on my two younger brothers and get it from the older three.

In my productions, I've always felt a responsibility to the older generation of musicians. I almost felt it was an obligation to assist and to carry on their legacy. So, to help them and, at the same time, carry their legacy forward. So yeah, it's in my blood.

Brown: Something of interest is that you referenced the roles – the traditional roles in the New Orleans jazz band. In talking with your father, in talking with Jason, and just stylistically listening to your brothers, the evolution of their styles – and I'll reference to your father first – is that there didn't seem to be a real interest in the traditional New Orleans style. Like your father, coming in during the modern jazz era, really either divorced himself or at that point was more focused on looking forward rather than looking back, as far as tradition. I would say the same thing when I look at Branford and Wynton when they first get on the scene. Then you hear their styles. There's a retrospective influence. But you reference the traditional. But that didn't seem to be something that was in the formative stages of either your father's or your brothers' musical development.

Marsalis: Right. The design of the New Orleans jazz band is unique. The role of the instruments has changed, going forward to modern jazz, and you find that – I primarily use that model, because the role of the instruments is so defined. But you get to the bebop era, and guys are all playing unison lines. So it's very difficult to keep the New Orleans style. We could do it, but it's very difficult to keep the New Orleans style with, say, bebop or modern music, because at that point the roles become less defined. Then it just becomes melody and harmony. So you have like, in Miles's quintet – with a few exceptions. Sometimes the tenor sax will have a counter-line. Of course John Coltrane – in his sextet – even in his sextet work, generally it's just harmonizations. Art Blakey's band – they harmonize the melody. Whereas New Orleans bands, you have three part counterpoint. You got contrapuntal lines going on at all times, and you have to know a lot about – you have to know a lot to do that.

Brown: Particularly since they are being improvised, made up on the spot, as opposed to being read.

Marsalis: Yeah, sometimes. In Louis Armstrong's case, those musicians – I think it was as combination of reading, improvising, and rehearsing all day. If you're practicing

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something – if you practice something for four hours a day – for example, if you’re practicing a set of music four or five hours a day for a week, there’s things that you’re going to repeat and things that you figure out. So maybe it’s not written out, but it’s not improvised either. Then there’s other sections that they allow improvisation. But the great thing, and the main reason you don’t hear guys play like that as effectively any more, is who knows what it is? The amount of rehearsal and what you have to know is so great. You listen at the Hot Five, the Hot Sevens, it’s like, you got to know some music to play like that.

Brown: You bring up those two bands. Those were studio bands. Those weren’t really working bands. They were put together to put those recordings together. So there might have been a different dynamic required in order to get that music produced.

Marsalis: Right. Those guys practiced all the time. In that generation, that’s all they did, was music. So they rehearsed. No-one really knows how much is rehearsed, how much is written out, and how much is – Jelly Roll Morton’s music, you can tell, is more composed, because he had a little different mentality about things.

Brown: Let’s return back to your development as an instrumentalist. Who were your teachers in trombone, and who got you started on trombone?

Marsalis: I had a number of local teachers, mostly with the symphony. Greg Miller was in – in fact, he’s in the Louisiana Philharmonic still, but he was in the New Orleans Symphony then. And a couple of different guys. The names escape me. But I went to the Eastern Music Festival. I had Gregory Cox. He was with the – I think the Vancouver Symphony. So the symphonic trombonists have always been important to me. That’s where I developed my tone, my sound, and my appreciation for the sound of the trombone.

Later on I studied with Slide Hampton for a little while, and Curtis Fuller.

Brown: Really? Let’s talk about studying with Slide Hampton and Curtis Fuller. That sounds . . .

Marsalis: Curtis – I don’t know if it’s fair to say I actually studied with him. Curtis really left me alone. He just said, just keep doing what you’re doing. He showed me a couple of things, but he pointed me more in the direction of learning off the record, taking the songs from – the solos from the recording and using the melodic material in that fashion.

Slide Hampton, yeah, probably the same thing. I think those guys may have heard something original or unique in my playing, and they didn’t really – now that I think back on it, they didn’t really give me much. But Slide, he showed me some harmonic things.

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He said maybe to work on a certain kind of harmony, substitute five, the flat five, the substitute chord progression, things like that. But in general they were just more inspiring, as far as encouraging me to keep working at it, to keep practicing.

Brown: Were you studying music in the public schools in New Orleans?

Marsalis: Yeah. I went to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, which shaped my overall philosophy about music, in that the teachers – we learned everything at the same time. Let me say this a different way. Cut. Cut it. Edit. Is this going to be edited? It's not going to be edited. Oh well. That'll be all right. You're not going to edit it. I see. Okay. It's cool. All right. Take two.

Studied at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. In our performance classes, we would all perform for each other. So you might hear something from a Puccini opera. Then you might hear a Beethoven piano concerto. Then you'd hear *I Can't Get Started*. Then you'd hear *Now's the Time*. It was such a wide range of music, it gave us an appreciation for the relationship between the different styles. That shapes – on all of my recordings, I try to cover a wide range of styles inside of the recording. So it's – have something from the swing, something that's just swinging, from the swing era, something that's more bebop influenced, that's more linear, and then something modern, which could basically mean minor tonality or Phrygian. We try to do something funky. I try to keep that range going on all my recordings.

Brown: Were you doing any pop music at that time?

Marsalis: I wasn't so much into pop. Branford and Wynton were fortunate, because they caught the tail end of the actual live bands. By the time I came up, the deejays were just starting to take over. But they caught the tail end of the really good funk pop bands. I used to go on their gigs. That was fun. I just wish I'd been a little older. Then I would have been able to play in a horn section, and they never could find a good trombone.

Brown: Played that Earth, Wind and Fire?

Marsalis: They played Earth, Wind and Fire. That was their claim to fame, is that they were the only group that could play the Earth, Wind and Fire horn charts.

Brown: *Getaway*.

Marsalis: That was a good time.

Brown: When did you start working professionally, and with whom?

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Marsalis: I started playing trombone like at sixth grade. So fairly late, I think I started playing. Professionally, I picked up a couple gigs around the city. The first real professional gig was with Ray Charles, 1985.

Brown: How did that come about?

Marsalis: They called the house, looking for a trombone player, and I answered the phone.

Brown: Right place, right time.

Marsalis: Yeah. Good thing my dad didn't answer the phone. He might have recommended this other guy. Yeah, I was at home for the summer from Berklee. My mother was telling me I needed to go get a job. I was laying around the house, and the phone rang, 11:30. "This is Solomon. I'm calling for Ray Charles. We need a horn." I said, "What do you need?" "Trombone." I said, "I play trombone." He said, "Come on down." We left for New York the next day. I made the gig that night and went to Europe two days after that.

Brown: No rehearsal? Did they send you the charts? How did it work?

Marsalis: No, I just came and made the hit. It was a learning experience. It was a very good learning experience, in Ray Charles's band.

Brown: In which ways?

Marsalis: The pay was not good, and I complained most of the time about that.

Brown: Let me see. You're 20 years old. You had your first professional gig.

Marsalis: The arrogance of youth. But I learned a lot from the people in the band. They stuck together, and the community, teamwork that was involved. That was my first time in being involved in something other than a sports team that had that many components, had that many people involved. I learned a lot from Ray about the way that he would deliver his music night after night. The one experience that taught me the most – the situations on the road were really kind of – they were not very good. It was jive. The pay was very low, and then we would share hotel rooms. If the road manager could get a free room out of a hotel, then we'd stay there. It might be 15 miles from the gig. So I would tell the guys in the band. I said, "Rather than pay this cab fare, we should just all chip in and buy him a room. It's going to work out better." But they – I guess they were saying, the principle of it was jive. So they wouldn't do that. Because I'm saying, we could stay right next to the venue, chip in \$5, as opposed to having to pay \$8 to get this cab both

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ways. At any event, there was discontent over silly things that were going on. So I decided, in order to rebel, that there was one song that we would always play, and it would end on one big chord. I had to play a D-natural. I just remember that one note that I would always hit. Every night it got a little louder and a little louder and a little longer. Finally we did [?] somewhere, and we hit that chord, and I just hung it over. Ray looks back, and he's like, "It's too loud, too loud, damn it, this right here." He played that D, and everybody looked at me. They knew.

The hip thing about it, though, is that he went into a blues. He started playing that one note, and then he changed it up into a blues. He played something really hip. But then the older guys in the band, they took me aside, and they said, whatever personal stuff we have going on with the situation, when you hit the bandstand, you only focus on the music. They said, if you can't – if you have to bring the personal thing into the music, then you might as well go home. It was the first time that I had thought about the professionalism that was required, because to me it was like, I'm young, the gig's jive, the pay's not happening, the situations aren't this and that, but it taught me a lot about the sacrifices that the older generation of musicians – because, when I look back at it, we were probably in a very luxurious situation compared to what the earlier bands and the earlier musicians had to endure. So it taught me a lot about the humility that was required to play the music and to bring something out of myself into the music. That was a great learning experience.

Brown: How long was your tenure with the band.

Marsalis: It was just a month. Two months? It was for the summer. I think it was two months.

Brown: Was it here nationally? Or did you go internationally?

Marsalis: We started. Hit New Orleans, New York. Then we went to Europe for probably a month, which was great. It was my first time in Europe.

Brown: The conditions had to be much different then, being in Europe. No?

Marsalis: It was mostly, like I said, the road management. They were always trying to keep the band at a certain kind of a place. It was – that part of it was difficult. They didn't feel that if they treated the band with a certain respect, that that would work in their best interests. So they kept everybody on edge all the time. We were – I remember one time we were in Europe. The main tenor player is a guy named Rudy Johnson. His passport just disappears. Just like – we're playing the gig. He comes back. His passport is gone. So he had to go to the American embassy. He had to get another passport. He went through all of that. Then of course his passport reappears. Just silly things. Why go through this?

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But that was what we consider the old school mentality of, we want you guys to know who's in control of the situation. It taught me to – you have to deal with whatever the situation is. Everything's not going to be roses all the time. So you have to just deal with it.

Brown: From talking to other musicians, Ray Charles is particularly hard on the drummer. You get your tempo from him rocking. Is that – is all that true?

Marsalis: Yeah, the guy on drums, he had a tough time. His name escapes me right now. But it was tough. I wish I could have played with him and had like Herlin Riley, one of the New Orleans – because he'd come from New Orleans. If he had had one of them New Orleans guys there, it'd have been another whole thing. That was just it. I think he came from that era where they didn't spend a lot on the band. They didn't – because whenever there were t.v. shows, they would hire a studio band. They would let the – whatever the studio orchestra was, Ray would play with them. So the working band never played on the t.v. shows or anything like that. I think it was just a question of – that was the management again. Their attitude was, just basically don't pay anything for these musicians, and they kept the majority of the flow.

Brown: Were the Raelettes in the band?

Marsalis: The Raelettes were in the band.

Brown: Were they treated differently?

Marsalis: I was not around the Raelettes so much. No, it was pretty much the same situation. They're in the same hotel with us. They may have had some perks, but not a lot.

Brown: We just interviewed Bobby Hutcherson. He talked about – his sister was one of the Raelettes. She said that Ray used to fly the plane. I don't know if . . .

Marsalis: Yeah. I don't know about that one. It might have been on autopilot. They might have gave him something and say, "Here. You're flying the plane, Ray."

We used to play chess. Ray used to love to play chess.

Brown: Play chess? He'd just feel the . . .

Marsalis: He'd just feel. He had a special board.

Brown: Was he good? You played with him?

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Marsalis: He was all right. Yeah. I never did have much game, though. It was just a couple of times.

But really expressive. When he hit the bandstand, it was full speed ahead every night. That's something that the older generation of musicians had. When you hit that bandstand, it's all about the music.

Brown: That's a great place to start as far as learning the ropes and paying dues, it sounds.

Marsalis: That's when I first met Slide Hampton and Johnny Griffin.

Brown: He was in the band? Oh, just touring.

Marsalis: No. We were in Europe, and I met all these guys. It was interesting. It's really interesting for us, because you grow up and you have these recordings, or your dad has recordings, and you see all these names. You never think about these individuals as real people. Then you meet them. Wow, it's a trip. You say, oh, okay. That's where I developed, like I say, the attitude or the philosophy that we have to preserve what they have done, because we're in a better position. [?] on the production. Whenever I had the opportunity to produce an older musician, I really would be careful and try to spend as much time as necessary to capture that sound, so they would know that I was serious about my craft.

Brown: So you knew, before you got to Berklee College of Music, that you wanted to be a producer? You did get your degree in trombone studies as well as record production. Is that correct?

Marsalis: Right. I was interested in production. I was always good at it. Branford was heavy into technology. I learned a lot from Branford. He taught me how to create a feedback loop on an old reel-to-reel machine. You plug the microphone in, and you take the output and plug it into the input. So you have two inputs. You have the microphone and the line. Turn the volume up, and it feeds back. Sounds like – my dad had an old Tascam. It had the blue lights, always intriguing.

Branford, I got my philosophy about production quality from him, reel-to-reel. He would transfer recordings to reel-to-reel, but he would balance himself, introducing. I think we still have some of those. So the music would come up. The music would fade in. They'd start playing, and then you'd hear, "J. J. Johnson and Stan Getz, *Live at the Opera House*." He'd read all the liner notes, "featuring" so-and-so and blah blah blah, "recorded" such-and-such a date. Then he'd fade it down. Then the music would come in,

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and he would start playing – the music would play. I'd listen to it, and I would think, he should have used a different tune, because he starts playing the first tune, then he fades it out, and then the first tune plays again. Just the way my mind was thinking about the production quality of it.

But he was always really interested in gadgets. He still is to this day. So I think he had a lot to do with – Branford and I weren't close at all. I was five years younger. So he never really wanted to have anything to do with me. He was like, eh. He's 15. It's like, take your ten-year-old brother. "I don't think so." Whereas Wynton, I had – I spent more time with Wynton. Just that one year made a difference. It's the difference between he's a senior in high school, I'm in eighth grade. He's a senior in high school, I'm in seventh grade. I don't have a chance with Branford.

I was always interested in recording, and that was a way that I could participate. With Jason, he started to participate by playing drums. Are you the youngest?

Brown: In my family?

Marsalis: Yeah. Are you the only?

Brown: The middle.

Marsalis: You're the oldest?

Brown: Middle.

Marsalis: You're in the middle. Okay. Because drummers, a lot of time they're the youngest. That's how they . . .

Brown: . . . get a lot of attention.

Marsalis: That's the way that they can fit in. It's like, if you're five, six years old, you can start beating on something. Elvin was the youngest. Tootie Heath is the youngest. Max [Roach], [Art] Blakey – I'm pretty sure they're the youngest. So that's how Jason came along. But for me it was hanging out with my brothers, doing the recording. Wynton would charge me to make his audition tapes sound like Maurice André records.

Brown: How did you do that?

Marsalis: Clearly I couldn't, but I tried my best. We had – I had a Radio Shack – a Realistic microphone. It's probably \$19.99. Then we had the tape recorder that was probably \$39.99. At some point I upgraded to a mixer.

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Brown: You're using cassette by this time, right?

Marsalis: It's cassette.

Brown: So you're not using the reel-to-reel.

Marsalis: Oh no, no.

Brown: And you're trying to get high fidelity.

Marsalis: But when I think about it, it's like, everything was a game to me. But, at the same time, I would listen to these recordings, not knowing about a recording console, not knowing about high-end microphones, not knowing about reverb, not knowing about concert halls or churches. I didn't know anything at all, other than the fact that their record sounded better than what I was doing. So I would start experimenting with distances. We'd do it in the living room. It just didn't sound right. So we moved to the bathroom. Then it was reverberant, but it was too small. It was too loud. It's too live sounding. So then we'd keep the microphone in the bathroom, and Wynton would stand in the hall. He'd play from the hall. That didn't work. Then we went outside. That didn't sound right outside. We had the extension chord running through the window and a tape deck and all of this.

I never figured it out while Branford and Wynton were in the house, but at some point while I was in high school I saw the 100 great jazz records. There was a picture of *Kind of Blue* session by Don Hunstein. It showed that they were in this big hall. It was a studio, but it was a converted church. About the time Wynton had done a couple of recordings, and he was always complaining about the sound. "Why don't these things sound right?" In fact, when he – his audition tape for CBS – he did a demo for CBS. They went to the studio. The studio used compression. They had the real small sound. I recorded – as he and my dad were preparing, I recorded with my stereo mic. He was like, "Man, this thing you did sounds better than what they did." They had that polish on it. They had that studio thing. Mine sounded rougher, but it was more ambient, it was more acoustic, and it was better balanced.

So I see this picture in the book. I told Branford – I think it was Branford – I said, "I saw this picture, and it looks like they recorded in a big room. It looks like – what kind of rooms are you recording in?" He said, "It's a small room." So we started to do research and went to Sony – CBS Records at that point. They allowed me to look through all their pictures. I found – they sent me about 50 or 60 pictures. Many of them showed the microphone setup and the size of the room. It gave me an idea about that.

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Branford found RCA – he discovered RCA studios. That was the biggest room in New York at the time. That’s where a lot of the recordings began.

Brown: This exploration is going on while you’re at Berklee or before you got to Berklee?

Marsalis: Oh no. I was still in high school.

Brown: Okay. Let’s talk about what happened when you got to Berklee. What did you learn about sound production, record production? Or did you learn much?

Marsalis: I had become not so good a student by that point. Early on, I was a straight-A student, but by the time I got to Berklee, I had an idea what I wanted to do. Berklee was not really the – Berklee’s not a very regimented – no, no. Let me say it a different way. Berklee treats you as an adult. They don’t treat you like a student, like, “You have to do this.” They’re like, whatever you want, we’re here. I think I could have probably benefitted more from a more structured environment, but that was similar to how my high school was. They just allowed you to – whatever you were going to do. I say that because most of my time was spent devising ways to get into the studio, whereas I think I could have probably taken advantage more of the school. I just was like, “I want to get to the studio. How can I get to the studio?” So we – they changed a lot of their rules because of me and a guy named Patrick Smith. They had to change up a lot of rules, because that was our main focus. You had to sign in to get studio time. So we would just make up names. It would just be like – we’d just make up guys’ names. They’d come in the studio, and we’d have the studio from like 7 to 11. It was only an hour block. The teacher would be like, “What are you guys doing in here?” We would be like, “Well, Ataji didn’t show up.”

Brown: “Sasha didn’t . . .”

Marsalis: “Musasha didn’t show up.” It was kind of jive. There was a number of Japanese students coming in. So we would just – who knew? Finally they caught wind of it, and they were like – I’m sure they knew a lot earlier than they cracked down. They just said, well, whatever. But at a certain point they cracked down on us.

Brown: You must have done something right, because you ended up getting your degree from them, right?

Marsalis: Yeah, yeah. It was – I loved school. I loved being in school and the educational environment. I loved it. It gave you another kind of energy, being around the students. I learned a lot at Berklee. Arif Mardin came. He did a clinic. That was influential. I was always trying to figure out – in fact we used on one of Branford’s

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recordings a technique that Arif had done where – on a Chaka Kahn record, they – it’s hard to explain, but you have two different songs going on at the same time for a length of time, and then it comes together at a certain point. So, on one of Branford’s songs, *Wolverine*, he goes into an avant-garde, nebulous section. While he’s playing that, it’s in one channel. On the other channel, we have the band playing, and they’re just swinging. It’s real cacophony. But that was something that I thought of after hearing Arif Mardin talk about some of what they were doing.

Brown: Anything else from Arif Mardin? Because he’s obviously a very important figure in this business.

Marsalis: Yeah, the way that he would use delayed effects on the vocal and reverb. It’s been so many years. I had the tapes – from that standpoint of view. From the creative standpoint, as I’m composing music, the way that they would arrive at the climax of a song, different approaches that they would take in that respect.

Other than that, the Beatles and George Martin were very influential on my production style, in the way that they would change from song to song. You might have the drums on the left. Then the drums might be in the middle. They might have the vocal over here. The Beatles really experimented. They probably did the most with production early on.

Parliament and the Funkadelic, really, really good sound. Earth, Wind and Fire. Just the sound quality is actually better than the Beatles. It’s a decade later. The production was really clean. Of course that’s mostly electric – well, I shouldn’t say it’s mostly electric instruments, because that was mostly acoustic. They had a couple of the electric instruments, but the way that they recorded it – they recorded most of their band live, Funkadelic and Earth, Wind and Fire. Really, really good quality. I think that the Beatles, they recorded live also, but they may have overdubbed a little more than – even though they were a decade or so earlier.

At any rate, my production vibe has always been to do what you have to do, whatever it takes.

Brown: I’m going to read a quote from the recent NEA publication, about the Jazz Masters. They have you here: “Younger brother Delfeayo has proven himself a well-regarded jazz producer working with various family members throughout the years. His insistence upon recording ‘without usage of the dreaded Bass Direct’ for Branford in the 1980s was a key element to the change in jazz recording techniques over the past 20 years.” Talk about that.

Marsalis: Yeah, it’s funny. You know when you’re young and you just don’t care? You just – whatever. The bass has always been – the crucial – how should I say this? The

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challenge of recording acoustic jazz is always the volume of the bass juxtaposed to the volume of the drums. That's it. If you can somehow figure that out, the rest is easy. What we realized early on was that the bass did not sound natural in Wynton's early recordings.

Brown: That's Robert Hurst, correct?

Marsalis: No, no, no.

Brown: Oh, you're talking about back in New Orleans.

Marsalis: Ron Carter. No, he did his first CD with Ron Carter, and then I think Clarence Seay was on a song. At some point Ray Drummond played on the second recording. And Phil Bowler. He had a number of bassists. There was the concern of the lack of an acoustic sound, but also that that bass – it was something. The bass sounded – it was an electric signal, so that they could make it sound present, very present, but it didn't fit the sound spectrum of the rest of the band. It's like you had the rest of the band, and then you just had this bass sound. That's what we were trying to figure out. I said, look at all of these pictures. They just have a microphone on these guys. Back in the '80s, that was unheard of. "You're going to put a mic on this guy?" "Yeah, why not?"

When I did my first record with my dad, *Syndrome*, I think we used – maybe we used a little pickup. We may have actually used a mic. The bassist was playing more with a pickup. So he had that kind of sound.

At any rate, to cut to the quick. When Branford played with Sting, he did an article in *Down Beat* magazine. He commented in the magazine that we were trying to develop a microphone or some way to get more of an acoustic sound from the bass. There was a guy from Massachusetts who responded to Branford's article by saying that the Bass Direct is here to stay, and Branford needs to just deal with it. This guy took offense to it. So as a joke on the next recording – as a joke aimed directly at this one guy – who knows who he was? – we put, "This record is made without usage of the dreaded Bass Direct." It was really just – it started out as a joke. Okay, we'll show this guy. Then it caught on. Folks took it a lot more seriously than I thought. It's just something that we say, every record, "Yeah, why not just keep this?" without using the dreaded Bass Direct. So it took on a life of its own. It really was just a joke, though. But we always were trying to figure out how to record. I think that *Royal Garden Blues* might be the first recording where we used very minimal – no Bass Direct on Charnett Moffett or on Ira Coleman on the ballads, and then limited Bass Direct – even though we didn't mention it then. But we did that record. Then the article came out. Then the guy made his comment. The next record was *Renaissance*. That was the first time we used that. But that set things in motion, where guys started to be more conscious, and bass players, they got that machismo. Then they start saying, "Man, I don't need direct bass. Hold on."

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When we did *Trio Jeepy*, which was with Milt Hinton, which was again – it was my idea, that I would like to get the younger and the older musicians involved. I kept telling – when Branford was on the road with Sting, he would call me. “Man, this is like constant recess. I’m dying out here. It’s like, ugh.” So I sent him some Ben Webster recordings. I started hanging out with Milt Hinton. I said, “Check out this guy, Ben Webster,” which I’m sure he’d heard of Ben, but he didn’t really know him. He was like, “Man!” He’d never really checked Ben Webster out. So he said that’s all he did for three months, four months on the road, was listen to Ben Webster. I said, “You should do a record with this guy Milt Hinton. Dad knows him, and he’s cool. He can play. He’s got a big ol’ sound.” So 1987, ’88, he said, “I’m going to do a record with Milt Hinton and Tain” [Jeff “Tain” Watts]. That was the record that changed everything, because Hinton, his – that was the first time you really could hear what the bass could sound like. Man, that sound that he had – when that first note comes in, it’s like, oh this is bass for real. It’s one thing to say, okay, we’re not using dreaded Bass Direct, but it’s another thing to say, not only are we not using dreaded Bass Direct, but listen to how this bass sounds. So I think that was the single record that made – that really changed everything, because the makers of the Bass Direct pickup – the bassists started to demand that the pickup sound better. Before, nobody would have cared. As long as you had an electric signal. So if you listen to the quality of the sound in the early to mid-’80s, and then by 1990, ’91, it’s across the board. Everybody’s records are different. I think that what we were trying to do had a big impact on – just joking around, but it had an impact on the perception of the band and the way that the instruments were recorded.

Brown: Any further developments since then, as far as recording technique with the bass? Or live situations?

Marsalis: No, it’s really more about the musicians understanding what they sound like, what the group sounds like. I think in a rock-and-roll situation, it’s almost loud, louder, loudest, and you just let the sound man deal with it. I think in an acoustic situation, it’s just like playing in an orchestra, dealing with the orchestra. You have to know what the balance is. So I think it’s less of a development of the technology and more of the musicians and how they perceive, how the bassist perceives his role. You still have some guys that like to keep that amp and they like to crank it up, and the bassist – the bass sometimes has to be loudest. That’s not really the role of the bass. It’s not so that you hear every single note so clearly at the same volume as the horn. The bass is more of a supportive instrument. Obviously you want to hear most of what’s being played, but the bass is just the foundation. It’s that – a lot of times now – the other thing that the amplifier allows you to do is to get a lot more treble out of the sound, so that it can compete with the horns. Guys who are interested in that – eh? There’s not much you can do in a live situation. But now I think the groups are more conscious of their balance. That’s what makes the difference.

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Brown: I know when I work with my bassist, he goes both. He uses the Direct and he uses the mic, particularly for arco. Could you talk about your preferences for basses: placement, and do you mic the bass itself? Or do you mic the amp? Or both? You can talk a bit more about your techniques there.

Marsalis: I wouldn't mic the amp, but whatever. Whatever you need to do to make it work. I just did a recording with a young man who relies on the amp. I've tried to convince him to unplug or at least turn down. When you hear him live, it's got energy. It's like, man, this cat can play. We did the recording, and he decided that he wasn't going to use the amp. You can't even hear what he's playing. He doesn't have the sound developed. So the amp allows you to – it's a false sense of security. I told him. I said, "Until you develop your sound, always plug in." So if a guy needs to plug in – you know what I mean?

In fact, I just did another gig, and we had a replacement. A professional guy came in. He had one of the stick basses, the electric. I was like – he said, "Nobody told me to bring the acoustic." I said – it's like, "people who don't even know me, know about the dreaded Bass Direct. It would never occur to me to have to tell you, bring an acoustic bass if you're playing with me." He made the gig. It didn't sound bad. I'm saying that to say – I called my dad at that particular instance. That's what I always love. My dad, he thinks so clearly. I said, "I've been working with students for a week, and I've got these students to unplug. Now this guy comes in, and he's plugged in, and the students are looking at me like, 'What's going on here?'" My dad was like, "I'd just let him play. He's a professional." "Okay." So I let him play. We didn't talk about it much with the kids.

The point is not that no-one should plug in. That's not the point. But the point of it is that the students should feel compelled to develop their tone to the fullest possibility. I'm not actually opposed – in fact, I tried to start using Bass Direct in the recording that I wanted to do. The engineer did not hook it up correctly. But the point is not that we should not use technology. We certainly should use technology. But I think that many bass players, I find they hide behind the Direct, and they don't develop their sound. So if you can figure out how to – the main idea is to get as full a sound as possible. If you have that sound developed, and then you plug in – and you don't use the amplifier like a loudspeaker. You have to use it in a way that supports the band, because, ultimately, the bassist supports the band. Drummers also. I find that the greatest drummers are very supportive individuals. That's why my brother Jason is – because he's the youngest, so [Marsalis makes a slap] we beat it into him [laughs].

Brown: You're outnumbered in this room by drummers. He's a drummer. I'm a drummer. We're going to talk about your experience working with some of the most

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significant and influential drummers of this music. But I want to – since you brought up education, I want to – part of this oral history interview is to try to clear up the historical record, to make sure, like you said, that if there are any errors in your biography – here I’m reading from the *Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. It says, “After graduating in the spring of 1989, he performed around New Orleans and at some point he read English at the University of New Orleans.” I presume that meant “teach.”

Marsalis: No, no, no. I studied.

Brown: But it says, “at some point he read English at the University of New Orleans.” So let’s clarify that.

Marsalis: I went back and enrolled in classes, because I was interested in – I wanted to write things that are more in an operatic vein. So I figured I wanted to fine-tune my English, my understanding of the language and the writing. So I went back and studied on the masters level for three semesters.

Brown: So you weren’t interested in getting a masters in English at that point. You just wanted – personal interest.

Marsalis: Right. I guess at some point I maybe should have – I wouldn’t have minded getting a masters. But I went out on the road. Put out my first CD, and then I went out on the road. Then I was like, wait a minute. I never finished these classes. Ah well, yeah.

Brown: Let’s return to your performing career. According to the record – it says you worked with Fats Domino?

Marsalis: I did.

Brown: What was that?

Marsalis: In ’88. I was still at Berklee when I played with Fats. It was great. He generally didn’t use trombone. Again, learned a lot from him and Ray about playing the same material, but as though it’s the first time.

Brown: Then the next person they mention is Abdullah Ibrahim, working in his group.

Marsalis: Yeah, it was ’88 also, I think. That was interesting. Abdullah had a – he has a really introspective style. He likes the lush, dark harmonies and tonalities, really similar to much of what I write, now that I think back on it. Another great experience.

Brown: How long was that tenure?

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Marsalis: Three or four months, it seems like. We went to Europe, and then we played in New York a number of times. He again had a diverse cast of musicians. So that was – the lead alto player was more – he had that pop influence in his sound, the brighter edged sound. But he played some blues. Then myself. The bari sax player was more of a bebop guy. Craig Handy was there, playing more modern, linear. So it was a good combination of guys.

Brown: For those who might not be familiar with Abdullah Ibrahim – Dollar Brand from South Africa. Do you feel that his harmonic conception might have been influenced by his native home? Or do you think his . . . ?

Marsalis: Maybe more rhythmic than harmonic, but I would imagine, yeah, sure. They use a lot of triadic music, but voiced a certain way – second inversion or first inversion. But I would say more rhythmic influence than – clearly, yeah, he was influenced harmonically, but I noticed the rhythmic influence more so.

Brown: Then next on the list is Art Blakey. So when we get to Art Blakey, here you are. You’ve already said – you had already “studied” or had lessons or had been influenced by Curtis Fuller, and here you are, taking – well, not taking his place, but filling that chair, generations removed, in Art Blakey’s band. This is where your brothers get introduced to the world too.

Marsalis: Right. Chronologically, I studied with Curtis after I played with Blakey. But I think Branford and Wynton were more a part of the Blakey band and for a longer period of time. I did a number of gigs with them. It was interesting. But it was – he was moving one band out. You know what I mean? So my coming in was more of a way for him to get the old band out. He just brought some guys in. I spent some time with him. I didn’t fit in as well as I did once I started playing with Elvin, but I learned a great deal from Blakey, just the way the band was. They were very close. He played with so much power. The one thing he and Elvin and Max all had was they dictated, early on, how you were going to solo.

Brown: Oh! Talk about that.

Marsalis: If you weren’t – that was early on in my development as an improviser – but if you weren’t experienced, then yeah, they would not allow you to just get up there and play chorus after chorus. They let you know this is okay. They wouldn’t tell you anything, but the way that they played. When I look back, Elvin, early on, we played a lot of slow tempos. We played a lot of – and then, as we became more familiar, more comfortable with the material, the tempo gradually increased. It’s not something that he ever said, but these guys knew music. They knew what was best for me or for each

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individual, and that was their concern. That's something that I didn't realize until later – I didn't think about at the time. But as I listen back to recordings, I say, oh, this is – he knew exactly what was going on.

For Blakey it was – he'd start you off slow. If he thought that you only should play two choruses, well, it was going to be two choruses. So by the beginning of that second chorus, he's going to be up there. The volume was up there, and then by the end of the second chorus, he's going to hit that cymbal. If you didn't take the hint – that's just what it is.

Max and Elvin – by the time I played with Max, and Elvin especially – I developed most with Elvin – by the time I played with Max, my improvising style was more advanced than when I started with Blakey.

Brown: Who was the musical director for Blakey's band while you were there?

Marsalis: Kenny Garrett. Kenny Garrett was there.

Brown: Did he talk to you? Or did he give you any guidance?

Marsalis: He didn't really talk much, no, no.

Brown: Really?

Marsalis: They didn't really . . .

Brown: But you're all about the same age – generation.

Marsalis: It was a strange – Kenny was at the tail end of the other band. The situation was not really that hip, actually. Like I said, the way that I came into that particular band was – it wasn't as natural – you know what I mean? – as when I played with Elvin. But playing with Elvin, I sat in at a gig with Elvin, and he was like – he called me up, said, "Come join the band." I said, "Whoa, okay."

Brown: That was a very long tenure. We're going to take that up. We have to change tape here, but of course, Elvin, six or seven years with Elvin, that's an accomplishment in itself. So we'll change the tape and we'll pick it up right there.

Marsalis: All right. "Back after these words from . . ."

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Brown: We were talking about Elvin – Elvin and Keiko Jones. That had to be an experience of a lifetime, working with Elvin. You said you sat in with Elvin. Where as that? And who invited you to sit in?

Marsalis: I had a great time with Elvin, but I sacrificed a fair amount, looking back, to have joined his band. I recorded my first CD in 1990. That was primarily because the executive director, or the A & R person, Gary Gersh, from Geffen Records, he heard my concert at the Jazz and Heritage Festival, and he wanted to sign me to Geffen Records, which was – they were a pop label. Because everything was handled through GRP, I ended up signing with RCA Novus. So I put the CD out, and I had a band on the road. I had produced Marcus Roberts's first record. Elvin was on that. So Elvin knew me as a producer. We were playing London. We were playing Ronnie Scott's.

Ronnie Scott's, you'd play, if I'm not mistaken, Tuesday through Sunday. No, it was Monday through Saturday, and you had Sunday off. That's what it was. So we had a gig that brought me into London on Saturday, which was their last – Elvin's last night at the club, and I had a day off. So I walked down to the club. I said, "Hey, Elvin." He said, "What are you doing over here?" I said, "We're playing the club next week." He said, "What?" I said, "Yeah, I play trombone." He said, "Well, where's it at?" I said, "It's at the hotel. I just got in." "What good is it doing there?" Okay. I get the idea. So I went back to the hotel and got the horn and sat in. We played *Green Chimneys*, Monk, which I didn't know, and of course Kent Jordan told me the wrong changes. What can you do? So I played on that.

There was a record date or something coming up. I think that's how it started. I think they had a record session and they wanted a trombone. They called me. They said, "We want you to play on the record. Not long after that, Elvin was – actually, it's ironic now that I think about it – it was similar to the Blakey situation, but it looked different, in that he was changing his band over. So he asked me to join the band.

When I think about it, at that particular time, I didn't have a lot of gigs, but I was – just me and J. J. [Johnson] at the time were the only trombone players that had groups that were performing. Slide [Hampton] at the time was playing with Dizzy's All Stars. Steve Turré had – he was with the All Stars also. This was toward the tail end of Ray Anderson's playing. So there was not actually trombone players with gigs. But I chose to join Elvin's band, and I stayed for a while. So it was on the one hand, as I said, a big sacrifice to leave my band and to stop doing that, but at the other point, I learned just so much. Elvin – when you hear *Minions Dominion*, the rapport that Elvin and I had was just – it was happening, to me.

Brown: As you mentioned earlier, Blakey didn't say much, but he would play much. What was the relationship?

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Marsalis: Elvin's the same way. But Elvin – I had more of a personal connection with Elvin, for whatever reason. Blakey's band, he had so many guys. It was just a different – Blakey was on his way out, whereas I think Elvin – Blakey was up there. I think he passed on three, four years after that period when I played with him. But Elvin – I think the main connection with Elvin was my temperament and my personality. He knew that things would never get so raggy with me. I just wouldn't allow for it, whereas some musicians will come in, and they'll play a lot, but they're not so much interested in the band dynamic or what's going on, as long as they state their piece. I think he saw and helped me to cultivate the leadership qualities. Like I say, I've always had that – I'm cool about things. Just try to be helpful to the other musicians who might come in. I learned a lot from Elvin.

Brown: Who was the musical director? Or did you – was that an alternating role in that band?

Marsalis: We didn't have one at first. It was just a quintet. It was me and Greg Tardy. So I guess it was me at that point. Then at some point they designated me as music director. But to me the main thing is just making sure that the music is happening. That's the main concern.

Brown: Again, according to the bio, you were with Elvin from 1993 to 1998. Was that pretty much exclusive? Were you able to do other work as well? Because you already had your band working at this point. I know in 1992 – because I'm from San Francisco – you brought the band out to open up Kimball's.

Marsalis: Right. That's right. We sure did.

Brown: That was your group that did that. You had Brian Blade, I think.

Marsalis: Brian Blade was there. Brian Blade. Early on I had Josh Redman, who I fired, which he's happy I did that. And then Mark Turner.

Brown: Why'd you fire him?

Marsalis: Josh is a good player, but I always felt that it was a little safe for me, at that point. Me playing more inside – I think my style I would consider more of what I'd say a conservative style, and I look for the tenor saxophonist to really be aggressive and to take it out. That's what my preference is. At that time I needed somebody that – he sounded good. It's not that he didn't sound good, but it was a little safe for my liking, for what I needed, and it worked out in his favor, for sure.

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Brown: Who did you get to replace him?

Marsalis: Mark Turner. I brought Mark Turner in for a little while. Mark, again, was a good player. He didn't really want to play what we were playing. I think he had – his vision was somewhere else. But we had a good time for that length of time. Then, after that, I started to play with Elvin. We played – I played pretty much from '93 to '97.

Brown: Okay. We'll correct that record.

Marsalis: Yeah, from '93, about '97. Then I came back in 2000, maybe. Yeah, I think I came back in 2000. Elvin, he went through a lot of different things. He had a knee operation on his leg, an operation for the circulation. But he was out there on the road. He was very serious. He always – he gave 100% all the time.

Brown: His wife Keiko was the manager, right?

Marsalis: Right.

Brown: How was that, working with her? Because she seems no nonsense.

Marsalis: Right, yeah. She's a lot like my mom in that respect. We had disagreements about certain things. We had disagreements about several things. But she took care of business. She took care of Elvin. That was the main thing. That was the main concern.

Brown: She'd set the drums up. Tune the drums.

Marsalis: Set the drums up. He didn't do anything but . . .

Brown: Pay the band.

Marsalis: He didn't do anything except play drums and read books. She took care of everything. Paid all the bills. It was important. It was important for Elvin. It kept his mind free of all the nonsense.

Brown: What books was Elvin reading?

Marsalis: I forget. He liked mystery novels. No, he liked – even more strange than that – sailing, books about the sea. Yeah, that's right. He had all these books, novels about seafarers and all of this – he'd read whatever. Not only that, but that was, I think, what he really liked, the sea, boats and ships.

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Brown: After you graduated from Berklee, up until '97, all this time from '89 to '97, you're still based in New Orleans. Is that correct?

Marsalis: Yes. I stayed in New Orleans. I moved back, and I stayed there. We had a gig at a place called the [Crescent City] Brewhouse in 1990 to 1991. It was a nine month gig. We played every weekend. It was the only one of its kind. They had modern jazz two nights a week.

Brown: Where was it located?

Marsalis: It's right downtown in the French Quarter. It's on Decatur Street, right across from Jackson Brewery

Brown: It's still there?

Marsalis: It's still there, but we – the management, they said that they wanted to have a jazz establishment, but they didn't. They just wanted music to be background for their patrons. They gave us a space. We did our own advertising. We had some good gigs up in there. Now they just have a couple of guys playing under the staircase, things like that.

Brown: Let me return to the bio, just to keep the chronology straight. You moved to New York, it says here, in September of '97.

Marsalis: Well, I moved to – I stayed with Branford. I didn't really move to New York. I moved up to stay with Branford. He was in New Rochelle. I was trying to change things up. So I moved up to New York, but I didn't really do much. If – I wish I had moved to Manhattan. But by me being in New Rochelle and Branford, it's just – you got to – one hour to get to the city. I didn't do much there. I hung out with Branford more. That was cool.

Brown: It says that you then started touring with Max Roach's So What brass quintet. I didn't see you until 2000 with that group. So that must have been an extended tenure with him.

Marsalis: It seemed like it was between '98 to 2000.

Brown: That's what I believe too. Again, we're trying to correct the historical record.

Marsalis: Right. We didn't have so many gigs. We did a number of things.

Brown: While you were relocating – after you relocated here in the New York area, were you more involved with production at this point? Or you're still the dual-pronged – I'm

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going to perform, I was a bandleader, and then I'm working with these high profile other bandleaders. What's your career trajectory or aspirations at this point?

Marsalis: There was some production work, mostly for my family at that point. I'd have to look at the discography to know exactly. '98, I think we did – I remember that was the year Kenny Kirkland passed, in November. I know we did *Requiem* earlier that year with Branford. Then later that year I think we did a couple of records: Wynton, *Marciac Suite*, *Big Train*, and it seemed like there was one other one. It was one of those things. I was gigging off and on. When I was in New York, the New York area had very few gigs. Very few gigs, when I was staying with Branford.

Brown: Why was that? You already had a name. You had records out under your name. You were appearing in the polls. You got this critical acclaim.

Marsalis: Trombone is a difficult – it's a task. And like I said, the problem with being in New Rochelle was that I was not in the city enough to – sure, I could have picked up some gigs maybe with Mingus Dynasty or some of those type of gigs – big band gigs or whatnot. But it's always been – it's difficult with trombone to lead your own gigs.

Brown: You don't want to work in a big band situation?

Marsalis: No, it's not that I didn't. I just – I wasn't around it, and I didn't seek it out. It wasn't something that was in the forefront of my mind. It's something that I could have excelled at doing, for sure, but again, being in New Rochelle, it's just different. If I'd have been in Manhattan, I could have just, whatever, take a cab or take the train. But you're in New Rochelle, it takes you 40, 50 minutes just to get here. So you have to have something in mind. It's not like I would just take the train and come. "Let me go see what's happening" and hang out. I spent a couple of months with him. It wasn't – maybe three months.

Brown: And then you found a place down here?

Marsalis: No, no. I went back home. All right. Enough of this.

Brown: Let's talk about your career as a bandleader, and your own records. *Pontius Pilate*. Let's talk about those.

Marsalis: *Pontius Pilate's Decision* was a very important recording for me, based on a lot of the stories that I heard, growing up as a Catholic child. Every Sunday we'd hear these stories in church. They shaped my ideology and my philosophy about things that are important. I had the opportunity to record. So I figured I would use my band and the

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bands that were the most influential on me, my brother Branford's and my brother Wynton's.

I find that I excel when I have larger projects, greater than – because the quintet, I can do it, but it's better for me to have larger ensembles, more people, more programmatic music. It gives me a greater objective.

It's still amazing I pulled that recording off, because, like I said, it features my band, and then we had Wynton's band. Then, the one tune, we have everybody, all three bands. The guys converge. That was important, a very important recording. I think it's almost a good introduction to modern jazz. People who might not listen to jazz, they hear that, they say, "Man, this is – wow." So a very important recording.

Brown: If I could just interject: *Pontius Pilate's Decision*. You're growing up Catholic. Is any of that sensibility reflected in the music? Or is that just a – is the title something that is important to you? Could you give us a little more background.

Marsalis: Yeah. Pontius Pilate's – there was a lot of – Pontius Pilate's decision, he really did not make a decision. He basically said, yeah

Brown: Y'all got it.

Marsalis: This is what you all want. So it's very energetic, burnout. It's got that turmoil of what's going on. You got all these people involved. They're trying to make a decision. Of course the crowd ends up for all intents and purposes making the wrong decision.

Brown: We want Barabbas.

Marsalis: That was it. So then, of course, *Pontius Pilate's Decision*, *Barabbas* was supposed to come right after that. But we put Adam and Eve – that was second. I wanted to create songs that captured the emotion or the passion around the different titles. *Barabbas*. Then we had *Nicodemus*, *The Weary Ways of Mary Magdalene* – that's everybody's favorite – *Simon's Journey*. Once I heard the music – it was like when Duke [Ellington] put together *Such Sweet Thunder*.

Brown: Which we're going to come to.

Marsalis: He heard the music. He said, this could be this. This sounds like this. As opposed to – okay, some songs, he said, "I'm going to write a song for this," and then wrote the song. A lot of times you hear a song and you say, maybe you intended it to be one thing, but it's better served as something else. So, that was it.

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Brown: Novus, your next one.

Marsalis: Hmm?

Brown: No? Novus?

Marsalis: RCA Novus was the

Brown: Excuse me.

Marsalis: Yeah, RCA Novus was the – the funny thing about – I was a long time between recordings. What happened was, CBS offered me the same contract as RCA Novus, with a signing bonus, a nice signing bonus, but I felt that CBS had a tendency to have artists on their roster that they didn't support very much. So my thinking was, by going to RCA Novus, I'd have a better chance of receiving support than – if I went to CBS, at the time they had, of course, Branford and Wynton, my dad, Donald [Harrison] and Terence [Blanchard]. They had a lot of guys. So I said, you know what? I'm going to sign with Novus. I passed up the signing bonus. My attorney thought I was crazy. But I signed with Novus, and we put out *Pontius Pilate's Decision*. It ended up using all of my brothers. So Novus was like, wow, we got the Marsalis family after all.

Came time to make my second record. That was going to be entitled *The Princes of Darkness*. It's a lot of mood tunes. I was going to use Branford's band. That was right as he went on *The Tonight Show*. So the situation was not right, for a number of reasons. He and the guys just weren't in the frame of mind to record the music. So when I told the folks at RCA, I said, "I was going to use Branford, but they – it's not happening." "Come on. How hard can this music be?" I said, "You have to – it's hard to explain, but it's not – you have to be involved in the music to play it." Then the word came down, if your family's not involved, then we're less interested in putting this out. It's going to be harder for us to put

Then I made what I consider now not to be the right decision, which was to get out of the contract, because I said, "You didn't sign my family. You signed me." They were like, "Well, that's just – welcome to show business." But part of the stipulation of me getting out of the contract was that I couldn't record for a major label for five or six years, which I really should have reconsidered at the time, but I was so stubborn and so pigheaded, that I was like, the nerve of you, to sign me. Now you're like, you want my – I could have signed to Sony. I could have signed a contract with CBS if I'd had known it would be this.

So I got out of the contract, not even thinking of what five or six years of not recording actually meant. I guess 10 years – a certain number of years after that – okay, yeah. It

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would be six years after that I made *Musashi* with King Records, right? 1990, 1991? Right. Five or six years after that, I was approached by King Records. They said, why aren't you recording? I said, this is the situation. They said okay, and I went to Japan, recorded with Japanese musicians.

Miyamoto Musashi is a person that Elvin's wife Keiko would always talk about. Elvin would talk about *The Book of Five Rings*. I spent a substantial amount of time in Japan with Elvin. I just figured, for the next record I'd pay tribute to Musashi. So that's how that came up.

Brown: Nihongo ga wakarimasu.

Marsalis: There you go. [Marsalis replies.] The only redemption of – it's a very small redemption – of RCA is that four years ago I saw Steve Backer, who was the executive producer. He saw me at a conference. He says, "Delfeayo." Then he says, "I'm so glad I saw you." He said, "I just wanted to tell you that of all the records we put out on RCA Novus in that period of time, that *Pontius Pilate* is the one that still stands up." Then he was like, "I wish things had been different." We looked at each other. It was like – because it was a funny situation. I'm telling him, "You guys are messing over me. Are you kidding me? I'm putting out these records." They're like, "Come on. What are you talking about? We're doing what we can." I would have that kind of conversation with them. I think it took that length of time for him to look back and say, "Damn, you know what? You were right all along, and we dropped the ball." I said, "That's how it goes."

Brown: Vindication. It's sweet.

Marsalis: I don't know. I'd have taken it the other way, but – it was difficult. It's been difficult for the critics. They had to put up with Wynton reluctantly. What can you do? Then Branford came along, and everybody kind of liked him because he played with Sting and they thought that he was cool. Then they find out he's actually not cool. It seemed like, okay, we'll put up with him. Then I come along, and they're like, oh no. Hell no. So I think it was difficult. It would have been difficult in any event for the critics to just check it out and accept it, what I was trying to do, on those terms. That's just what that is.

Brown: I definitely want to save enough time to talk about the *Such Sweet Thunder* project. But I want to talk – because your discography as a producer is over 100 titles. That's a significant body of work, and I'm sure that that would be one of the things that people will recognize about your achievement in your career. Is there anything else you want to talk about? Production, or any projects that you felt are most representative of your role as producer?

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Marsalis: Yeah, I think, again, *Trio Jeepy* is the seminal recording, because we had Milt Hinton and because that was the one that pointed the direction. Then you start noticing bass players start slapping, trying to play more acoustically. I think it was a combination of what we all were trying to accomplish. I was trying to establish the acoustic sound. Milt Hinton's from that older generation. He loves playing with the younger musicians, which he considered to be the best recording of his bass, the best – the most accurate representation.

Branford was at a point where he had played with Sting. That's when he got his chops together, because there was nothing to do out there but practice, on the road. So he was establishing his tenor saxophone playing. I think, yeah, there's no soprano sax? Yeah, actually he was supposed to record one song on soprano, and he didn't bring the soprano. The piece, *Peace*, Ornette Coleman's song, was supposed to be a demo version. No, he just rehearsed it, and he was going to record it on soprano the day after. Somehow we didn't. I just edited that together to make that work. At any rate . . .

Jeff "Tain" Watts, who was known for playing this wild and this modern stuff and playing loud all the time, that really established Tain as a major force on the drums, not only being able to play the way that he played, but to play standards, and with taste. That was important.

Bloomington, which was of course, again, Branford's trio, is very important because of the sound, to have a live recording that sound like that. That was direct to two-track. My dad's record, *Ellis Marsalis Trio*, is, again, a direct to two-track recording. The sound is really, really good. We did that in one date. So that, *Bloomington*. I guess most of my best stuff we've done in a couple of days, one or two days.

For Wynton, probably *Congo Square*. It required a lot of instruments. To balance that was very difficult, and I also played on that. That was difficult, to play and produce simultaneously. The first recording for Wynton, *Standard Time*, volume 3, maybe. Is that – I think that was it. One of them. I think that was the first time that he felt that his trumpet in jazz was actually produced. The sound that we had he thought was really an accurate reproduction of how he sounded.

Such Sweet Thunder is the finest production, across the board, because it – the sound quality, the orchestration, the liner notes – I like to put records together to have a package. I don't like it to just be, okay, this is what cats are playing. I like it to be playing, liner notes, pictures, the whole thing. This is that kind of recording where you get it. It's like, okay, this is not just a recording. This is a package. This is something. The folks, they're getting their money's worth.

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Brown: We're going to return to that. I don't want to end this interview without talking about Max and your tenure with Max. That's where I met you, working with him at the Blue Note back in those days. He had a week run at that time.

Marsalis: Yeah. My best story about Max is we were playing, a quintet without a piano, playing tuba, two trumpets, french horn, and me, and Max, which is a difficult – it was difficult to keep that sound going. We played a gig, I think, at the Regatta Bar in Boston. It was one of the first gigs. We finished with the first set. Max called everybody together. He said, "What did you all think? How did it sound?" Of course me, still being rather youthful, I said – I think it was a 75-minute set – I said, "I thought we were really strong for the first 45 minutes, 50 minutes, but we got to maintain. That last 30 minutes was a little tougher. We got to figure out how to maintain the intensity of it." Max was like, okay, cool. So we go out for the second set. He's like, "*Donna Lee*. Marsalis. You got it." [Marsalis slaps out an extremely fast tempo.] We're like [he sings a line of notes blurred together]. So then, after that set . . .

Brown: The old Bird trick.

Marsalis: After that set, "What did you all think?" "Great. Perfect." That was the end of my opinion about what was going on. But Max could play those tempos, and he – it was a different setup, with tuba, not having a bass and not having the piano. So you really had to be in tune with – one thing I learned definitely from Max and Elvin was the importance of each instrumentalist having strong rhythm. That was the main thing. The main thing that I know I have in playing situations is strong rhythm, a strong understanding of where the rhythm is, because with Elvin's complexity, and with Max, the way that they play: if your rhythm is weak, it prevents them from doing what they want to do. A lot of guys nowadays would like to play with these play-along records. They're not as – the records going to be there the same every time. So when they get in a situation that's different, it's a little trickier. "What's going on here?" That's what I found from playing with Max and Elvin.

Brown: You've been an educator. You already confessed, or revealed, that you weren't a good student once you got through high school, but you are obviously now getting back to the next generation coming up, and educating adults as well. What do you feel is important in your role as an educator, particularly in this music, jazz? And your father being a recognized educator as well.

Marsalis: We grew up with older people in our lives: my great uncle, who I used to hang out with. I was 8, and he was 86 or 87. I learned a lot from he and his wife, my Aunt Marguerite.

Brown: Is this Wellman Braud?

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Marsalis: No.

Brown: Who is your great uncle?

Marsalis: No, that's Alphonse Lambert. Wellman Braud is another uncle. He might be the great great uncle. Wellman Braud, he played bass with Duke Ellington.

Brown: *Hot and Bothered*. I don't know if he's on that one. That one brought the bass to the forefront too.

Marsalis: I don't know if he's on that one. But I know that Wellman Braud did play.

We always have had a respect for the older generation, not in a way that we feel that we should do what they did, recreate their existence, but that we have to respect it and move it forward. I think it's similar to what we see in the movies with the Italians who are from the old country. Their thing is, there's a code that you have to abide by, and you do your own thing inside of that, as long as you keep the code going. That's how I feel with the music. I've always felt especially compelled, when working with the older musicians, to preserve what they have done.

Milt Hinton – when I knew I had the chance to record Milt Hinton, I thought about that endlessly for two or three months. What mics was I going to use? How are we going to place it? I've always felt – when I recorded Herbie [Hancock] or any musician that I had an opportunity to record that's of the older generation, I've felt more of a responsibility to – because they grew up in a different time, and I wanted to let them know, we can take care of business too. That was another message, playing with Elvin, playing with – and knowing Clark Terry.

At any rate, all that's important to me. Moving forward, I think the most important thing is, the greatest jazz has been played in the past generations. We want to make sure that the students or that the young people know that it exists and that it can be cool to know that it exists. It can be cool to know what's happening today and also know that there was something that happened before.

I think that by preserving and maintaining that – but also by moving forward and doing our own thing. For me personally, I don't agree with – some guys have repertory bands, and they want to recreate Ellington's music as it was originally played. That's fine. I'm not interested in it, because there's no way for me to play it any better than what Ellington did. For me the idea is to take that music, but do something meaningful. Not just to take it and say, okay, I'm going to change it up just for the sake of changing it, but to be both reverent and irreverent at the same time.

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Brown: Interesting choice of words, irreverent. Your brother Branford recently created quite a controversy in his evaluation of students. I'm sure you probably caught wind of that. What's your opinion about this new generation of students coming up? What's important for them to know, other than the tradition, the humanity in the music? What else? What do you feel is vital for this generation to know, to inculcate, to impart to them, so that they will maintain the code?

Marsalis: I wrote a song when I was studying in Louisville, the University of Louisville. It's called *Don't Be Afraid of the Blues*, especially the slow ones. I think the main thing is to focus less – I think, being in a technological age, many of the students think similar to technology, which is, you press a button, something happens. I think the most important element is to not be afraid of nuance and of bringing something personal and humane to the music.

I just heard North Texas [State University], their number one band. They were nominated for a Grammy. These guys, you hear it, and they play impeccable. It's immaculate. It's the kind of situation where it's like I'd say, "Man, I'd really like to hear you guys play a slow blues. Just play something where you have to give a lot of yourself." Because it's actually easy to play things that are fast and precise without giving a lot of yourself. You have to have spent a certain amount of time to develop the proficiency on the instrument. That's true. But when you hear Clark Terry or when you hear Ben Webster or [Thelonious] Monk, those guys gave so much of themselves. Elvin Jones. That's what I learned, is how much of yourself can you give to the music? So it would – my lesson for the younger students would just be to embrace that older sound, to understand what it is, the best they can, and not to be afraid to give of themselves.

We're going – our entire society is going away from it. We'd rather just be on the cellphone. It's like, it doesn't matter what you're doing. It's all about me. Okay. I have – this is – I'm more important than you. I just saw that on t.v. I'll steal that. That's what people feel with their phone. It's like, it doesn't matter what you're doing. This is me. It's all about me. I think that they should also know that it's okay to embrace other people, other societies, other cultures. Just know that it exists and embrace what it is. You don't have to agree with it, but I think that that's an important element.

Brown: When we look at your most recent project, *Sweet Thunder*, how is all this manifest in this? This is the culmination of where you are as a musician, as an artist, as a human being, at this stage. I know you're already going – you're already thinking beyond this, but this is what you've offered to the public as far as, this is Delfeayo Marsalis. What is – how is all this manifest in that? How did this project come? I know you've talked about it, but let me hear it from your own words. We all know your reverence for Duke. *Such Sweet Thunder* is a masterpiece. Given all that, what did Delfeayo do with it?

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Marsalis: *Such Sweet Thunder* is a masterpiece, but I think Duke – it was very cleverly done. Duke was – I’m sure he observed the Shakespeare plays at the Stratford Festival. I think he was – he thought to himself, how can I make an impact, but quickly, because he didn’t have a lot of time to compose the music. I think he also may have thought that it would be very different to have an entire suite of music that were character portraits. So most of the music is not developed. It’s almost as though he’d say, what was Othello like? Okay, Othello was a great leader, but there was a mystery around it. So he called it *Sonnet in Search of a Moor*. So it could be “a Moor,” which Othello was, or “amour” – he was searching for love. Okay. What was Caesar like? Caesar was a military man. So he had a military beat. He wrote the sonnets. He used the design, but I think he was thinking more of, how can I just put out portraits. I’m sure he was thinking, fifty years or so from now, someone’s going to come along and develop this material for me. So I don’t have to do it. So that’s pretty much what we did.

Brown: You use the word sonnet, and he used the word deliberately. We know a sonnet is poetry. It’s condensed. It’s a very, very – it’s like a laser.

Marsalis: Right. A sonnet is a poetic form.

Brown: Right.

Marsalis: 14 lines written in iambic pentameter. What we do with the sonnets, for example – there’s another technical term. I think it’s the volta, which is the break between the first eight lines and the next six. It’s called the volta. So you have the first eight lines set you up. The last six lines, they tell the tale. So, *Sonnet for Hank Cinq* – right there, at that point, we put a solo section in. Since iambic pentameter is ten syllables – and the sonnets are ten notes. So he kept the form. Ten notes. Fourteen lines. So after the first eight sets of ten notes, we put the solo section in it. But what I did was, *Hank Cinq* is a blues, right? It’s kind of a blues. We play a ten-bar blues. So, iambic pentameter. Ten notes. Okay. Ten-bar blues.

The bridge to *Hank Cinq*, we play that, and we alternate. But we put it in minor. So now you have the ten-bar blues at a medium tempo juxtaposed to a fast 16-bar minor section. So it’s all about, to me, the contrast of it. I’m sure if Duke heard it, he’d be like, “Ah, clever.” That’s what Clark Terry was saying. We’re reverent, in the sense that we maintain the important elements, but irreverent, in the sense that a lot has happened in the 50 years since Duke wrote that, and we’re putting all of that information in there.

Brown: You can’t forget Billy Strayhorn’s influence and . . .

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Marsalis: Oh yeah, Strayhorn. He wrote three of the songs outright. As far as I know, it's – Duke wrote most of this suite though. Strayhorn I think wrote a lot of the others, the majority of the music, but – Strayhorn wrote three songs for sure and also the shout chorus on *Such Sweet Thunder*. He inserted that. But I think Duke, he wanted to put his own stamp. So Duke wrote the majority of the material himself.

Strayhorn, to me, was more about – Strayhorn was more of a classical composer in design, in that he liked things to be completed from front to finish. Duke was like, eh, let's just throw this together. Let's see what we come up with. He could write complete. I don't want to give the wrong idea, but a lot of his idea was to keep the improvisation, keep it loose. That's why they worked together so well.

Such Sweet Thunder, there's a tune called *Half the Fun*. You have a shout chorus in it. I added eight bars to the shout chorus. Which you may say, okay, it's just eight bars, but it's got that Duke flavor. So when you hear it, it's not like you hear it and think, oh, these eight bars were inserted. It sounds like something Duke or Strayhorn may have come up with. So that's what I mean when I say reverent and irreverent. Somebody that really knows it will say, "Wait a minute. This isn't on the original." But it's not like you hear it and say, "What does this have to do with anything?" That was important to me. All of my years of working with kids in musical theater, of working as a producer, of playing – all these things culminate in *Sweet Thunder*. All right?

Brown: We're getting . . .

Marsalis: 5:29.

Brown: Right on the money. Anything else you want to say as closing? Anything? This is the historical record. We've got it for as long as – in perpetuity.

Marsalis: I don't know. No. I'm so doggone tired.

Brown: What are you thinking about next? What's your next project?

Marsalis: I don't know, actually. I'm trying to figure that one out. We're staging it as a theatrical production. So this is – I see a much bigger work for *Sweet Thunder* that would include more acting and more dancing, more like a Broadway musical, because the music lends itself to it, but that will then relegate the music to being accompaniment for the activities. So I want to do it now with it more performance based, the music, that is, and then put on another show and hopefully let – somebody else can do it. But I want to design that show.

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Brown: What are you going to do for a libretto or for lyrics? Or have you considered that?

Marsalis: No, it won't be a libretto and lyrics. It will still be music. But we'll have the text. Like the new play, we have a guy that's acting. It's the – the catch of it is, I'm Duke Ellington, he's Billy Strayhorn, but when he comes out, he thinks he's William Shakespeare. It's like, William Strayhorn, William Shakespeare, hmmm. Right? Their names are one letter off, in terms of the number of letters. So he comes out, and he's Shakespeare. So he's got this thing about him, and I'm like, "What are you doing?"

We do the entire show with this guy. So he's – as we talk about Macbeth and the three witches, he gives them a little bit of – a portrayal of the play that inspired the music. It's very different. We got the set design and everything. In fact, this is the set here. [Marsalis retrieves an image on his phone.] But we're going to really do it. That's the set there. That's "two households, both alike in dignity."

Brown: Great.

Marsalis: That's the Harlem brownstone and the Elizabethan structure. It goes in keeping with my philosophy that everything's related. We're all related.

Brown: Who else are you working with on this production? It's multi-media now. Who else are the key players?

Marsalis: Yeah, a director in New Orleans, John Grimsley. The libretto – not the libretto, but the book was compiled by Charles E. Gerber and myself and John Grimsley. Kenneth Brown, Jr., is going to be acting. On the live show it'll be Winard Harper and Jason [Marsalis] alternating – my little brother – Dezron Douglas on bass, Mark Gross on saxophone. Don Byron is playing, and two of Branford's former students, Lynn Grissett on trumpet and Shaena Ryan on bari sax. David Bryant on piano. Is that everybody? I think that's everybody. And myself, of course. So that's it.

I look forward to – I've got some things in mind that we maybe could do with the Jazz Masters, that I'd like to bring them to the schools. It's something that I just came up with, where we could maybe bring the Masters to a school like Berklee and have the younger musicians – the younger professional musicians accompany them and play the older recordings and talk to the young – just have a dialogue about the environment. What was going on when they played on these recordings? So that the younger students, they have an understanding. At least they are exposed, rather than just saying, okay, go listen at *Kind of Blue*. Let's see what you come up with. But after you talk to Jimmy Cobb and have him listening to it, and he's thinking, "You know what? We were in there and the guy ordered pizza at this point." You're bringing the humanity to the record, not just, this

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is something that we can't actually achieve. It's just something that, it's like in a museum. But these were guys that actually lived. This was an important part of their lives, and this is the information that they left for us.

That's it.

Brown: Sounds wonderful. All right. Delfeayo [Brown pronounces it as del-FAY-oh] Marsalis.

Marsalis: Delfeayo [Marsalis corrects him, pronouncing it as DEL-fee-oh].

Brown: Delfeayo [DEL-fee-oh]. [laughter]
(transcribed and edited by Barry Kernfeld)

For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or archivescenter@si.edu

