



S5E5: Transcript Music, Listening & Human Flourishing with Wynton Marsalis

Tavia Gilbert:

Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm producer Tavia Gilbert. Every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the science behind innovative tools that help human beings flourish.

This season, we're exploring all aspects of human flourishing, from education to happiness to the arts, and in today's episode, we delve into how humans flourish through music and listening. Our guest is the internationally acclaimed musician, composer, and bandleader Wynton Marsalis. At the age of 60, after a long, successful career, Marsalis identifies not only as a solo artist and a group leader, but as an educator and a leading advocate of American culture. Though he has traveled the world, making music with some of the most celebrated performers on the planet, there is one group of artists whose budding genius – and pure pleasure in music-making – delights him most and gives him perhaps his greatest feeling of flourishing, as a man and a musician. Here's Wynton Marsalis:

Wynton Marsalis:

So when you hear a group of kids playing, they just, (MUSIC SOUNDS), the way they look and oh, man, I love that. I love that feeling so much. Just to play with them, sometimes I'll go in a trumpet section, of course, they wouldn't have any idea of who I was. They think wow, this guy is here, playing with us. Like, sometimes little kids, maybe third grade, they look at me and go, man, you're pretty good, how long have you been playing? I'd say, "Oh, 45 years," and they, you know, to an eight-year-old, 45 years, they think, "Are you in the Bible?" You know, yeah, just to listen to

them play in to just hear them, the kind of space they play in, you know?

And to be honest with you, when I was really on the road all the time, there's not anything I wouldn't do to hear a good elementary school band. You know, I wrote a very complex piece and at the end of it I gave out band instructions, "Played like an elementary school band." We could never do it. We could never do it.

Tavia Gilbert: When Marsalis sat down with Richard Sergay recently to discuss his own artistic evolution, education was at the heart of their conversation. It was from his famous jazz musician father, Ellis, and from other older musicians that Wynton Marsalis first received his own education — not only in music, but in the powerful act of listening.

Wynton Marsalis: Listening can unlock the key to understanding. I remember when I was young, I played in a parade with older musicians, man, I was 9 or 10, I couldn't play. I was just playing, and my father said to me, "You should always play in relation to what you know." So, if you don't know anything, don't play that much. If you know a lot, play more.

Now I was in high school, I was playing modern jazz. I didn't really respect traditional music. This was the '70s, man, we had our afros. We didn't think that much about older music, think everybody was just Uncle Tom. I'm playing up and down the trumpet, had nothing to do with the song, so one of the older musicians said, "Hey son, can you stop playing up and down your horn and play the music we're playing?" So I took exception to him telling me that. I said, "Man, I'm playing modern music, man, what you all are playing, that's old, that's not—" He said, "Listening don't get old, son." So that was interesting, where he went and said, "Listening don't get old, son." He said, "If listening is too much for you, settle on being quiet." [Laughs]

So, it's a humility in listening. It's a humility and genuflection. Music teaches you how to listen harder than you play. Because most of the time your experience is listening. That's why I always loved to play with great musicians. Because I'm gonna be spending a lot of time listening.

Yeah, I love listening. There's just so much honesty, and, other thing about when you're playing music, when you're doing the best you can do,

there's a spiritual thing that's in it. And you can't play down and have the same feeling.

Listening is very important, it's a genuflection. And it's the way to understand, because listening has to come before understanding. And then when you can digest your understanding, and you can always hear deeper and deeper into things. I love to listen to silence.

Tavia Gilbert: As Marsalis matured in his craft as a musician, listening continued to provide a path to maturing as a man and as a citizen.

Wynton Marsalis: I would listen to the recordings of people who could play and man, I wonder if we could really actually play like these people are playing, with that kind of depth of expression and virtuosity, insight, play blues, be able to clear harmonic progressions, play inside of a rhythm that nobody really played in and develop my sound.

And also to negotiate the relationship between entertainment and enrichment. I was never against entertainment but I wanted to be a musician who could enrich people with their sound, and I wondered if that was possible, because that wasn't, I didn't see that being rewarded.

Enrichment is something that brings you into a more productive relationship with your humanity. And it doesn't mean everybody has to want that. Our culture, obviously we don't. So that's clear. But those who are interested in delivering that have to deliver that, even though there's no indication, or very little indication that there's any type of real interest in that.

Tavia Gilbert: Marsalis's inner spirit has always led him to offer audiences more than mere entertainment, and his value system and mission have remained strong, despite external challenges.

Wynton Marsalis: For me, it's been a struggle to see the minstrel show come back via hip hop and the use of the N- word and all this stuff in the public space. So, yeah, it's a challenge for society as I get older, to see the struggles my students have, and just to see your whole culture go in a direction that you definitely did not ever endorse.

And to be able to accept as a part of your maturity and your growth, that just because you think something should go a certain way doesn't mean it goes that way. And to be not embittered, or not to be angry, because

the timeframe references or where you are in the cycle is not where you would like it to be. It's been a part of my maturity. And as I've grown older, through my 50s, I've been more and more able to accept that.

Tavia Gilbert:

Marsalis was inspired by his father's own unwavering value system. Ellis Marsalis was the patriarch of a family that included six sons, four of whom grew into their own musical careers. But before Wynton's extraordinary career matured, he first had to grow into an appreciation for his father's commitment to offer his music to the world, even when playing for at times very humble audiences. Embracing his father's example has since connected Wynton to a global community of artists young and old, experienced and just emerging.

Wynton Marsalis:

I saw my father once play in the club with no people, one person. It's two o'clock in the morning, I was maybe 11 or 12, in a club called Lu and Charlie's. And he could lock the club. So I said, man, let's go, man. You know, one, this guy's drunk, let's just lock the club up. Most people would be kind of embarrassed, you know, or something.

My father looked at me and he said, "Man, why don't you go sit your ass down and listen to some music for a change?" So I went and sat down. Man, between 2:00 in the morning and 2:30 on Rampart Street in an empty club, I listened to my father, who I'd heard play, you know, in my house, and I just looked around the club, and I thought, what makes a guy do this? Play that well for nobody? And I saw him do it.

So then I think about all the mothers I've met after gigs, all the kids I've taught. It's thousands upon thousands, man. All the bands I went into. Every time I put my hand on a kid or hugged somebody or told them, "Man, you sound great. How did you learn how to play that?" All the people who've cooked meals for me and for my band. All the bandstands we've been on.

We opened up a restaurant in Eastern Europe one night, the guy had closed his restaurant and we went in at 11:30 at night and we started playing, he opened it and said, man, this is unbelievable.

You know, yeah. It's all, it's all one moment, you know, it's all, it all has the spirit in it.

Tavia Gilbert: The spiritual component of his artistry – what he calls the Spirit, or the Great All – has become of primary importance in Marsalis's life, and is also what connects him to global networks of music makers and music lovers.

Wynton Marsalis: The Spirit is the Great All. And before there's anything, there's a thing that exists of all possibilities. And those possibilities always exist, because the Great All is endless possibilities. And we all are embodied with a connection to the great, to that, to that great – it's a I AM, it is always present. That is always, and it is not in a cycle. [Laughs] It's not in a cycle.

The Great All is so great that we can't comprehend it. But if we are still enough, if we are still enough, then we can begin to touch it. It's a depth, it goes deep inside and it's way outside. It's all the opposites, reconciled. And it seems like what I'm saying is complex, but it's very simple.

Tavia Gilbert: For Marsalis, the Great All – or endless possibility for advancement of the human soul – is inextricably linked with human flourishing.

Wynton Marsalis: For human beings to flourish, it means that you have healthy cycles. A healthy cycle can, it has some disappointment in it, it's like a balanced meal, not dessert – that's a part of it. And you have expectations, productivity, disappointment, failure, success. So when you flourish, you're able to negotiate the range of experiences that come with a cycle. And when you're flourishing, it means you're always stepping toward maturity. And maturity is always the ability to go through all the steps necessary to achieve what it is that you know something to be that would like to achieve.

Tavia Gilbert: What is Marsalis's definition of human flourishing?

Wynton Marsalis: I think it's when different parts of the human being are nourished, over time, and those parts that can grow begin to grow, and continue to grow. It's a balance, and it's a feeling of being inside of an ecosystem that is relatively healthy.

Tavia Gilbert: Marsalis says flourishing doesn't only come from being part of a healthy ecosystem, but from the fulfillment of one's purpose in life.

- Wynton Marsalis:** We all come on earth with different missions. And having an environment that enables you to fulfill whatever that mission may be.
- Tavia Gilbert:** And, Marsalis says, the incomprehensible Great All, Spirit, will always be embodied in an artist's mission to flourish in their unique self-expression.
- Wynton Marsalis:** The Spirit is the thing that, that cannot be defined, but it's very real. It's like what is in Louis Armstrong's sound is what is in the comprehension of Shakespeare, why he can put together terms that are the opposite in such a creative way. To be or not to be, that is the question. It's two opposite things. You take your great poets like, like William Butler Yeats, it's always these opposite. And great musicians, well, the musician is speaking in all of those spaces at one time.
- And the Great All is endless creativity, endless imagination. If you put every person on earth together, and you could put that into one person. [Laughs] Whoo, that will be the greatest and most terrible person ever! And it's about riding the wave, the electric wave of opposites and the Spirit is that thing that gives life its quality and everyone understands the Spirit. Everyone.
- Tavia Gilbert:** Artists, poets, and musicians express the complexity of their souls not only for their own joy, meaning, and purpose, but as an offering to an audience, prompting Richard to clarify:
- Richard Sergay:** So community and flourishing are really important together?
- Wynton Marsalis:** Man, there's absolutely no question about that. That's the spirit, it's hard if you have to manifest the spirit by yourself, you're not enough.
- Tavia Gilbert:** The fulfillment of Marsalis's own mission – taking his music all over the world and learning from communities of musicians – has allowed him to flourish. His musical mission has enriched his life, both materially and spiritually, but he has no illusions about which means of enrichment is the most sustainable and which offers the greatest pleasure.
- Wynton Marsalis:** Sometimes I go to people's homes who are really wealthy, and they're not around anything. And I think, man, I hope nothing ever happens to you because you're not going to make it down. [Laughs] Whereas somebody will have nothing, and they'll be surrounded by neighbors and people they know. Just generally, I think of the happier people and the people I've

seen, they've been, they've been with people. They've been around people and they have a community of people, an ecosystem that's balanced.

Tavia Gilbert: It's through the balanced ecosystem of music-making that Marsalis has explored most deeply the universal experience of being human. And such depths are available for any listener to explore: the universality of human experience is inherent in music itself.

Wynton Marsalis: Music can be understood universally because it's so internal, and you figure the deeper you get inside of a human being, the more we're the same. And when you get to Spirit, it is the same. So I could look at your face, and externally, I know who you are. If I were looking at your skeleton, I'd have a harder time. Now if I looked at your liver, or your spleen, or your intestines, I have no chance of knowing that. If I look at blood vessels, man, then I start to get down to the molecular level, and then the atomic level. And then the Spirit is all one.

It's just so multifaceted that we think whatever our take on it is individual, but it's not. So music is so internal, it's atomic. It's thoughts and aspirations and dreams and hopes and memories, it's all the things that are inside of us that we don't know we're sharing until we have a collective kind of expression of a desire or dream. So what I've learned traveling the world with different people, is that things mean different things to different people. And many times, the deepest meaning is beyond your understanding. So you listen, and learn as much as you can. Because each thing that you learn that you don't understand the meaning of, enhances and enriches your understanding of yourself.

Tavia Gilbert: No matter the language, the culture, the geography, the history, music allows us to develop flourishing relationships with others across borders, time, and space.

Wynton Marsalis: When I was in Poland, I was in Krakow, and there's a thing that they did they play, (MAKES MUSICAL SOUNDS) Years ago, I can still remember the fanfare that some musicians taught me and said this was a trumpet player was on the tower in Krakow, and he played the fanfare to say, so people will come and attack us, and when you play this fanfare, you go, (MAKES MUSICAL SOUNDS) and you cut it off quickly, because that's when the Trumpeter got shot in the neck by an arrow. So that means that when you play that fanfare, that music is connected to something.

Or when I played with a great musician Feya Faku, in South Africa, we were in his home. And I was, I had never really heard African musicians really swing in 4-4 like a certain way. And he put a record out from like 1968 or '69. He said, "Man, listen to this record, man, they were swinging like John Coltrane or something." I said, "Wow, man, I didn't know that." And he started to talk about, you know, the relationship with the swing rhythm and who these musicians were, what they were trying to do with their music and how they speak it.

I could go on and on around the world, the great musicians and people I've played with. And it's always education. They're always, teaching, and the thing that I've learned is, you don't know what things mean. So, you know, learn because you're—learning is so much fun. And when there's music, it's a lot of fun.

Tavia Gilbert: The power of music to help people and communities flourish, whether in New Orleans, Krakow, or South Africa, offers Marsalis a sense of peace and an unshakeable hope for the future of humanity.

Wynton Marsalis: If you think about the mythology we have, the general mythology just — and once again it's a generalization in the world — it's that the world is going to be destroyed by a nuclear bomb, and that AI is going to take over and Big Brother is going to know everything that you're doing. And you better have some nature skills, because you're not going to be able to get food, we're going to destroy the ocean, there's not going to be any water. And people are going to have hellacious war, and the economies are going to collapse. And we're just going to go so deep into some hedonism, that it seems like all is lost, and the future is not human. The future is only in robotics and in technology.

I see the opposite future. And it's easy to walk past all the things that you see every day, without understanding how miraculous what you're seeing is and how fantastically creative human beings are, and how it's exponential when we come together. And I don't see a future where greed takes over everything. It is now, it's been our trajectory, and maybe we do have to have some type of cataclysmic event to chastise us and to force us to come together.

But I just, I'm a believer in consciousness. And when I look at the long timeline of human advancement, that doesn't mean bad things will not happen, it means I don't think that's where this equation is going to. I see many innovations in music, and art, and all of them involve more and more people being involved with things in a deeper, more communal expression, and things that are less about individual achievement and more about collective achievement.

Tavia Gilbert:

What Marsalis has learned through music is to see and acknowledge the paradoxical in human life — that two opposites can exist side by side, and we humans find ways to accept the tension between them through listening, through learning, and through "playing our instrument" — whatever that means for us. There is so much to learn in the tensions we've experienced this season between the arts and science, faith and reason, happiness and suffering. Thanks for joining us on our journey to explore these tensions, and all the incredible ways humans flourish.

In two weeks, we'll be back with another extraordinary American leader in the arts, dancer Judith Jamison, to talk about the way humans flourish through performing arts. Here's a preview:

Judith Jamison:

What makes me flourish [Laughs] is being around dancers, just being around them, you know, and working with them and feeling that energy coming off of them. We're all there, and we're all after the same, sublimeness. And that, when that happens to you, it's — I can't even explain it — it's like your feet are not on the ground. They're above the ground.

Tavia Gilbert:

Stay tuned for the full interview. In the meantime, if you liked today's Story of Impact, we'd be grateful if you'd help us reach new audiences by taking a moment to follow the podcast, and by rating and reviewing us. Join us on social media at Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, and visit us at storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox and Tavia Gilbert, with associate producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

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