

August 1997

Vol. 16 No. 8

Other Voices

I am a 30-year-old white male. I have always had a great interest in music of all types. In my late teens I started to try out jazz. I purchased a few albums to sample. Two of them were Wynton Marsalis albums. They just didn't do anything for me. I liked them, but they didn't encourage me to buy any more. I assumed that this was a good sampling of jazz, since the media that I was exposed to at the time was pushing Wynton as the future of jazz. I went back to my blues, rock, folk, albums and didn't try jazz again for a while.

At the age of 26, I purchased Ron Carter's *Etudes*. Wow! That album has made a major impact on me. I could feel something when I listened to it, and still do. I have since become a Ron Carter freak, buying anything he is associated with and making many trips to New York City to see the man who introduced me to jazz. Through his music I have been exposed to many different artists and have followed those artists through the tree of jazz. Wynton didn't do this for me.

I loved your book *Cats of Any Color*. It has encouraged me to dive even deeper into my desire for the music.

Stephen Crawford, Burlington, Vermont

Dishonored Honors

.... such questionable honors as the Pulitzer Prize.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz in *All About Eve*, 1950

When I was writing a biography of Lerner and Loewe, I heard of an encounter between Alan Jay Lerner and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Lerner, one of the most accomplished theater lyricists, had begun to feel left behind by history. Lloyd Webber was now the hottest thing in musical theater. One or the other initiated a contact to see if they might collaborate.

Whether or not Lerner and Lloyd Webber wrote some experimental songs together, I do not know. But one day, reportedly, Lloyd Webber said to Lerner something to this effect: Alan, I feel you have become a friend. You're an older man. Can you tell me why people seem so quickly to take a dislike to me?

"Well," Lerner said, "maybe it's to save time."

Bud Widney, for many years Alan's associate and assistant, told me the story was true: Alan had recounted it on returning from lunch with Lloyd Webber. However, Lerner was not above embellishing a story, and since he was the only source of this one — it's hardly likely that Lloyd Webber would have recounted the incident — I didn't use it. But the story circulated in the profession, repeated with such glee that from it one can deduce the esteem in which Lloyd Webber is not held. His ego is so famous that I asked a certain prominent British musician if the legends about it were true. "Oh yes," I was told. "He believes he is the Twentieth Century Mozart."

The pianist Harold Danko has drawn up a facetious rider to his contract, which has sped on fax machines and by mail to musicians everywhere. Danko lists a group of tunes he will not play unless he is paid extra, beginning with *Feelings* at \$786.79 and proceeding through *Lara's Theme* from *Dr. Zhivago*, *More, Tie a Yellow Ribbon*, *New York New York*, *Hello Dolly*, and, third highest on his contempt list, a *Noel Coward Medley*, at \$1,298.89. The runner-up is the *Barry Manilow Medley*.

But Danko's most withering scorn goes to Andrew Lloyd Webber, "hereinafter referred to as 'the already rich-enough, minimally-talented composer(?)'." The rider says that Danko "does not perform or condone the performance of any work by Mr. Andrew Lloyd Webber" and it is "in the best interests of all humankind to stop the dissemination of inept efforts of said already-rich-enough, minimally-talented composer(?)" and he reserves the right to "publicly lambaste and humiliate any requester (hereinafter referred to as the 'no-ears, bad-taste dork') of such material."

The following joke circulates in the profession. Two prisoners in adjacent cells are about to face the electric chair. The warden tells them they have a right to a last request. One of them says, "Yes. Before I go, can you play me the complete score of *Phantom of the Opera*?"

"Right away," says the warden. And to the other prisoner: "Do you have a request?"

"Yes. Take me first, please."

In September, 1995, the *Hartford Courant* carried a story by one of its writers, Steve Metcalf, on the Lloyd Webber phenomenon.

"Lloyd Webber," he wrote, "is the most successful composer of musical theater of our time, maybe ever. His shows — *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Evita*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and others — have earned him millions, some say billions, of dollars.

"Yet the place that his music occupies in our collective heart seems weirdly negligible. He seems to be a rich and famous composer whose music is not really liked very much."

Well, not by musicians. But certainly by somebody. *Phantom of the Opera* has been running in Toronto alone for seven years.

Trying to fathom why Lloyd Webber's music should be so popular — and failing to recognize that popular taste has been steadily debased by rock music — Metcalf wrote:

"There is a vaguely recycled quality to many of Lloyd Webber's tunes. Lloyd Webber has, possibly unconsciously, and well within the permissible guidelines of the law, lifted musical ideas from others.

"Within the music theater world, this issue has become a kind of dark standing joke. On one of the public forums in the Internet, devoted to musical-theater issues, several popular files are reserved exclusively for the sport of tracing Lloyd Webber tunes to their suspected source of, uh, inspiration.

"Example: *Music of the Night* from *Phantom of the Opera* is

accused of being partially lifted from not one but two earlier songs. The opening few bars seem to recall *Come to Me, Bend to Me* from Lerner and Loewe's *Brigadoon*, while a subsequent phrase bears a powerful resemblance to an aria from Puccini's *The Girl of the Golden West*."

New York Times theater critic Margo Jefferson wrote: "Mr. Lloyd Webber is a composer of lurid, melodramatic surfaces. His music has never shown itself capable of emotional depth or wit." She called the music of *Sunset Boulevard* "abysmal."

It won a Tony.

The Tony is thus among many "honors" that have debased their own currency by meretricious appointment.

But Lloyd Webber has his defenders. Writer William Tynan in the Los Angeles magazine *Live!* suggested that his derogation was the result of the "jealousy of some of the theater community and critics" But one hears Lloyd Webber's music disparaged by some of the most successful and informed people in the business. Good musicians routinely deplore Lloyd Webber's music, if not as sardonically as Harold Danko. And if jealousy were the inspiration of this contempt, why isn't it applied to, say, Stephen Sondheim, or Michel Legrand, or Antonio Carlos Jobim? There are fundamental standards that are universally recognized in the musical world, and Lloyd Webber doesn't meet them.

What intrigued me was the vanity of Tynan's projection. Instead of wondering why so many evolved and cultivated persons loathe Lloyd Webber's music and trying thereby to raise the level of his own taste, he takes it as a given that his own uninformed preferences are the measure of all art, an assumption, alas, by no means uncommon in critics. He obviously lacks the musical background to know why his description of Lloyd Webber's ballads as "limpid and meltingly beautiful" is ludicrous.

Steve Allen wrote to Tynan, saying, "Some years ago I thought that perhaps I was alone in my negative opinion of Mr. Webber judged only as a composer. But when I solicited the views of a good many of my peers in the music business, I found not just a few allies but large numbers of them. Henry Mancini, a man with a remarkable gift for melody, once said to me that he didn't think Webber was a naturally melodic composer and added 'and when he does give us a pretty phrase, it's apt to be from Puccini.'

"I am naturally assuming that you are familiar with the fact that *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina* is strikingly similar to a Latino pop ballad of the 1940s called *Yours*

"And then there's the clever standard *Music of the Night*, which simply uses the main opening theme of a popular song of the 1920s called *School Days*

"Another reason for Webber's enormous success is the context in which it has been presented, the post-1950 watershed date after which the true Golden Age of American popular composition plunged into a cultural toilet from which it is unlikely ever to escape Against that background, Webber's output is a blessed relief.

"But compared to what we were given by Gershwin, Berlin, Porter, Kern, Romberg, Victor Herbert, Harold Arlen, Harry Warren, Jimmy Van Heusen and other true masters of melody, the great bulk of Webber's work is not even second rate."

Discussing the 1970s, Clive Davis of *The Times of London* recently wrote, "Given the quadruple blight of rock 'supergroups,' disco, punk, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, it was hardly the brightest era for popular music"

All of this, however, did not preclude Lloyd Webber's receipt of one of the highest "honors" in England. He was knighted some time ago; so was his lyricist Tim Rice, the chief characteristic of whose work is a trudging and unimaginative mediocrity.

I am not one of the admirers of the British royal family. I have long thought they should be retired to their country estates, required to pay taxes, and requested to maintain a decorous silence on public issues. The Queen has at last outdone herself in silliness. Hansard, the British equivalent of the Congressional Record, noted this past February 26 that she had elevated Lloyd Webber further. He is now Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber (note the added hyphen) of Sydmon-ton, a baron for life. He was presented to the House of Lords in his robes.

It was not to be the last of the queen's follies.

Some years ago she awarded the OBE, the Order of the British Empire, or what's left of it, collectively to the Beatles. This so incensed war heroes who had received it that some of them sent their medals back. Now she has knighted Paul McCartney, writer of mediocre songs and major contributor to the decline of popular music into what Steve Allen so aptly calls a cultural toilet. And, be it noted, since so many of the songs of Lennon and McCartney were seen as drenched with narcotics symbology, they can be perceived as contributing to the drug epidemic that is dismantling American society. A very few of their tunes were good, among them *Norwegian Wood* and *The Fool on the Hill*. *Eleanor Rigby* is something of a masterpiece. But most of their stuff was the epitome of banality.

Knighthoods may come less easily in the future as the new prime minister, Tony Blair, moves Britain away from what the *Christian Science Monitor* terms its "antediluvian honors system."

"In the early 1900s," the paper said, "knighthoods and peerages were bought and sold, but that has been illegal since 1925. Political patronage on a large scale still exists, however.

"When Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, she lost no time in rewarding political friends with knighthoods and other distinctions. According to *The (London) Times*, in the more than 12 years Baroness Thatcher was prime minister, she awarded knighthoods to 144 industrialists, two thirds of whom had given funds to the ruling Conservative Party."

In the present House of Commons, 20 of 164 Conservative MPs have knighthoods, one of 46 Liberal Democrats has the rank, and only one Labour has it out of 419 MPs.

What then, is the honor, all about?

Money. McCartney, Lloyd Webber, and Rice brought a lot of it to England. For the Queen to knight them dishonored an already cheapened honor, and Lloyd Webber's latest elevation only brings into focus why certain Britons want the monarchy and all the trappings of aristocracy abolished.

Such follies are not exclusive to Britain. The most egregious and, to any compassionate person, embarrassing, example of the coronation of mediocrity is the peculiar odyssey of David Helfgott.

Helfgott, as you are surely aware unless you have spent the last year on vacation in a lead mine, is the Australian pianist whose career has been exploited in the movie *Shine*. His recording of the Rachmaninoff *Third Piano Concerto*, released in January, reached the top of the *Billboard* classical chart in weeks. By the time Helfgott played a concert at Avery Fisher Hall in March (sold out within days of its announcement) it had sold 200,000 copies.

Helfgott was born in Melbourne and in 1966 left to train at the Royal College of Music in London. He returned to Australia and suffered what we are told rather indeterminately was a "break-down", which kept him in an institution for some years. The movie affects that his mental problems are the consequence not of whatever chemical aberration produces schizophrenia but of ruthless domination by his cruel father, which is more histrionic. The movie dramatically has him breaking down in the middle of a performance of the Rachmaninoff Third; in fact, in London, he won the Dannreuther award for his performance of it.

In the movie, his doctors won't let him play the piano. Released finally from hospital, he plays (of all things) Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee* — hardly the most pianistic piece ever written — in a wine cellar, becoming a local celebrity. He meets Gillian Murray, they fall in love and marry, and after he sleeps with her he is at last able to play a concert again. Thus the film is an interesting parable on the therapeutic value of getting laid.

Much of the myth of David Helfgott derives from a memoir about him by his wife, who manages his career and runs his life apparently with less cruelty but a far more efficacious dominance than his father ever did.

Shine was a big hit in the United States which, as Terry Teachout recently wrote, is "fundamentally an optimistic country whose moviegoers like nothing better than watching affable heroes overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, have great sex, and live happily ever afterward."

My first exposure to Helfgott's playing came during the TV broadcast of this year's Academy Award extravaganza. I do not normally watch this annual orgy of Hollywood self-congratulation, having some idea of how the awards are manipulated. But the TV set was running on mindless as I went about some task or other, and, after much ado about the seven award nominations for *Shine*, the show's handlers brought out the real David Helfgott, who bounded to the piano and attacked it. With a hunched posture beyond the merely eccentric, he stabbed at the keys spastically, tone terrible, his touch brittle, his time erratic. The performance

made me squirm, muttering about the unprincipled avarice of those who would so exploit this pathetic man.

Reviewing the Avery Fisher concert for the *New York Daily News*, Terry Teachout wrote:

"He has been, and gives every indication of still being, profoundly mentally ill. He grunts, mutters, sings, and talks to himself. He seems not fully aware of where he is (a handler came onstage, presumably to make sure Helfgott understood it was time to leave). And while he is undeniably capable of playing the music . . . at least in the limited sense of pushing down the right keys in the right order, the results suggested a weird cross between a gifted but uninhibited child and a player piano that has been badly regulated.

"Two centuries ago, nice people went to asylums on Sunday and gawked at the inmates . . . Today, we let the inmates out of the asylums and encourage them to live 'normal' lives. Some preach strange religions on street corners; others give concerts at Avery Fisher Hall, and nice people pay \$50 a head to watch them, and call it progress."

Gerry Mulligan once said to me that he resented "fusion" because it gave new young listeners a false impression of what jazz is. This surely will be the effect on classical music of Helfgott's national tour. Countless persons will have seen their first such concert and will either have their perceptions permanently impeded or leave wondering what's all the fuss about "classical" music.

But that isn't the end of it. It will be the surprise of the year if the Helfgott of the Rach Three, as it is called in classical-music circles, isn't nominated for a Grammy Award, for the nominations are heavily based on sales and publicity. The Grammy Awards have been dishonored so many times by now that they are hardly worth discussing, but it is a good bet that Helfgott will lead them to a new nadir this year.

Another honor that has come under criticism is the MacArthur Foundation "genius awards." The foundation's definition of genius seems a little unclear, but a good many of these awards are odd. One factor seems to be a strong bias to the politically "correct."

These awards are extraordinarily valuable. As columnist John Leo noted in the June 26, 1995, issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, there isn't anyone in the intellectual and artistic world who wouldn't love to get one: a no-strings-attached outright gift of between \$250,000 and \$350,000.

And, of course, public approbation as a genius.

One of these geniuses is Susan McClary of UCLA, described in the award announcement as "a musicologist who explores the relationship between human experiences and music and relates the creation of musical works to their social context." McClary has discovered that classical music is full of phallic themes, "assaultive pelvic pounding" as well as "the necessary purging or containment of the female," and patriarchal violence. She says that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony expresses "the throttling, murderous rage of a

rapist incapable of attaining release.”

On the other hand, radical lesbian poet Adrienne Rich, a 1994 genius award winner, describes Beethoven in one poem as “A man in terror of impotence / or infertility, not knowing the difference.”

Asked by John Leo about the MacArthur awards for avant-garde drama, Donald Lyon, theater critic of the *Wall Street Journal*, described two of them as “unusually tawdry awards for self-publicizing radicals rather than achievers of any kind. There are many avant-garde people working today who deserve it more.”

Citing more instances of strange recipients, Leo wrote that the MacArthur Awards, founded in 1981 “to reward high achievement and high promise, are not what they once were. The science awards still seem to be given out fairly, but other selections pretty clearly have much more to do with politics or potential. A lot of the award winners are either ideologues like McClary or low-luster laborers in the traditional vineyards of the left

“The MacArthur Foundation is free to finance political activists and gender ideologues who believe in symphonic rape. It’s their money. But it’s a shame that a program set up to honor achievement and excellence among creative people of all political persuasions has deteriorated so quickly into narrow partisanship. Lay the money on your political cronies, but let’s have no more prattle about ‘geniuses’.”

One of the MacArthur “geniuses” is Stanley Crouch, described in the March 10, 1997, issue of *New York* magazine as “the jazz critic and political pugilist.”

The magazine’s *Intelligencer* section reported that Crouch “has just enrolled in an introductory music class at the New School. *Music Theory and Reading* is designed ‘for persons with little or no background,’ according to ‘the school’s catalogue.’”

The magazine noted that Crouch, whose *60 Minutes* “political commentary with Molly Ivins and P.J. O’Rourke debuted to great fanfare only to be axed within weeks, also consults for Jazz at Lincoln Center.” It quoted Crouch as saying he signed up for the course “to wage a more thorough war against certain areas of my own ignorance,” and, it added, “he has typical grandiose plans for his latest endeavor.”

He said he and Wynton Marsalis are going to write an opera together in a few years, “so I want to be as prepared as possible, musically, to deal with him.”

The ambition to write an opera, surely a European form, seems odd in a man who fulminated in an essay titled *Sketches of Pain* against the effete influences of European music on Miles Davis in his collaborations with Gil Evans. He wrote in the February 12, 1990, issue of the *New Republic*, trashing the Miles Davis-Gil Evans albums *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain*, that they “reveal that Davis could be taken in by pastel versions of European colors (they are given what value they have in these sessions by the Afro-American dimensions that were never far from Davis’s embouchure, breath, fingering)”

I think it’s fair to say that Crouch *needs* to take an elementary

music course, if only to define for us Afro-American “breathing” and trumpet fingering. Miles studied trumpet at Juilliard and, unlike Bix Beiderbecke, used classical fingering.

The statements over the years by both Crouch and Wynton Marsalis apparently don’t even try to conceal a bias against white musicians; and certainly with the two of them in power at Lincoln Center, a retrospective on Gil — or Benny Goodman — are unlikely, although last year there was a token nod to Gerry Mulligan.

Their bias is documented in my book *Cats of Any Color*, and in the *Jazzletter* issues from which the essay was drawn. When the book came out, it was, as one could have predicted, subject to selective reporting in some newspapers. It was hinted that it was racist, although most of it deals with white racism toward blacks and only the last essay examines anti-white racism in jazz. Far from expressing my opinions, I merely did my reporter’s job, citing the historical distortions presented by such writers as Herb Boyd.

Ironically, two or three of the reviewers in deploring it complained that I did not state my opinion of Marsalis as a musician. But I wasn’t evaluating his music, I was documenting his policies. To discuss his music would have confused the issue.

But now I will discuss him as a musician.

I think he sounds like a very good conservatory trumpet player with more of Europe than of black America in his work. I have never heard him play one thing that could be called original, or even creative.

Yet Marsalis, whose career has been propelled by publicity lavishly financed by Columbia Records, has managed to accrue powerful sycophants, including Peter Watrous of *The New York Times* and Howard Reich of *The Chicago Tribune*. Watrous seems to be owned and operated by Marsalis, Crouch, and the Lincoln Center publicity organization, and Reich (whom I once considered a promising writer, as I considered Marsalis during his Art Blakey sojourn a promising trumpet player) has virtually abandoned any pretense of journalistic disinterest. Despite the unstinting support of Watrous and Tom Piazza in *The New York Times*, Reich, Don Heckman of *The Los Angeles Times*, and Richard Harrington of *The Washington Post* — surely a broad representation of a critical establishment in jazz, if there is such a thing — Stanley Crouch in liner notes to *Blood on the Fields* said without so much as a blush that Marsalis “had been locked in pitched battle with the critical establishment”

When Marsalis was with Blakey, one could hear all his derivations: a few bars of Miles Davis here, some Clark Terry there, and so forth. The problem is that, unlike the truly great jazzmen (all of whom had their sources of inspiration), Marsalis has never assimilated his influences. They are still obvious, like bones showing through the skin of a famished animal.

Keith Jarrett, in an interview with *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, said: “Wynton imitates other people’s styles too well.

You can't learn to imitate everyone else without a real deficit. I've never heard anything Wynton played sound like it meant anything at all. Wynton has no voice and no presence. His music sounds like a talented high-school trumpet player to me. He plays things really, really, really badly that you cannot screw up unless you are a bad player. I've felt embarrassed listening to him, and I'm white. Behind his humble speech, there is an incredible arrogance. And for a great black player who talks about the blues — I've never heard Wynton play the blues convincingly, and I challenge him to a blues standoff any time. He's jazzy the same way someone who drives a BMW is sporty."

In *Musician* magazine, Jarrett, in an essay entitled *The Virtual Jazz Age*, cited a huge list of great players prevalent in the early 1960s and continued:

"The incredible breadth of musical styles represented by these names means that jazz was what it was supposed to be: a melting pot of truly original voices. Of course, in an age of insane fascination with technical achievement (never mind to what goal), elevating a mere technician to godhead is, finally, possible, and, hey, why not? But don't call it genius

"When I heard these (1960s) players, I was influenced most by their individuality, not their virtuosity or even their competence. They each showed me something of the potential that jazz is, and they hadn't sold out. (By contrast, today's Young Lions can stand in for each other because they've chosen the rules and they're doing the same basic imitations.)

"Now we're told it's a new jazz age by the same blind media industries who, along with a bunch of opportunistic critics, lackeys, panderers, cronies, and hangers-on, bought the Young Lions in the first place. It's easy to handle them because they're ultra-conservative and not risk-takers and easy to track. But jazz is about risking everything to your personal music and accepting the consequences. Otherwise you don't get to sing your song. The young and old players in the '60s were singing their own songs. But today we have the Lions' Club, and the media seem to have no room or interest in anything else, even though real jazz is always alive somewhere

"There's an old Bulgarian proverb: 'If you wish to drown, don't torture yourselves with shallow water.'

"Jazz is about ecstasy, and ecstasy depends on connectedness, and connectedness depends on heart, and this heart is a gift, and this gift can be used wisely or foolishly, too soon or too late. All of our great jazz musicians did not question how much to use and to what purpose. Technically competent and virtuoso players of today (genius or otherwise) beware. These waters run deep

"Let's hope there will be young players who see this (hostile takeover of jazz) as a new set of prison bars, meant only to be flown through. If you are ready to fly, don't put on a suit and join a club. Talk to the Birds."

Composer George Russell, one of the original and brilliant figures of jazz composition, wrote a letter praising Jarrett's

comments on this and other topics. He wrote:

"(It) is a grand, real-life appraisal of an art form brought to its knees by the current negative forces dominating jazz, vis-a-vis the jazz politic, the recording and broadcasting media, public relations and the press, especially *The New York Times* in its generous allotment of space to Peter Watrous, whose continuing, convoluted views in support of retro-jazz as the 'pure jazz' leaves an impression of a movement having found a propagandist, apologist, and serial henchman, with or without its consent. The exploitation of the retro-jazz movement has had the effect of blanketing what was once an innovative art form with a soggy, mildewed towel

"Keith Jarrett wrote the definitive reply to the present decadent jazz mess which a great many of us of all colors and creeds have quietly deplored. For much too long we've composed replies in our hearts, then reasoned them into oblivion with well-meaning restraint.

"*The Virtual Jazz Age* is nothing less than a manifesto that speaks to and for all of us who believe in the thought expressed to me by a reporter from *Tass* during an interview in France in the '70s. 'In Russia we believe that where there is jazz, freedom is not far behind.' The current retro-jazz movement would put that freedom on hold for at least as long as Communism resisted Perestroika.

"The very mean-spirited stuff coming out of Lincoln Center is denigrating to the very heart and soul of the jazz tradition which has innovation as its strongest aspect. It is the ongoing variety of innovators and innovations in jazz which secure its most profound offering to the musician — the freedom to accept the challenge to enrich its already eloquent language in one's own essential way."

Russell concluded, "When one trifles with a serious art, one attacks the integrity of forces on a level infinitely higher and more powerful than the conglomerates attempting to control it.

"Cheers to Keith Jarrett and *Musician* magazine."

Despite Stanley Crouch's attempt to put such a spin on it, the reservations about Marsalis as musician and administrator have come not from the critical establishment, which in large part has been obsequiously supportive, but largely from musicians, many of them black, and one of whom discusses Marsalis's new work later in this issue. As for Peter Watrous, anyone who hopes to see the *Times* jettison him doesn't know how newspaper editors think. The more the public hates a critic, in their view, the better he is for the newspaper and its circulation. Look how long the *Times* tolerated the destructive theater criticism of Frank Rich. One of the worst, and most vicious, classical music critics in American history was Claudia Cassidy. She was hated by musicians, and she did great damage, but *The Chicago Tribune* was apparently pleased with the furor she constantly stirred, deeming it good for the newspaper, no matter that it was not good for music. Howard Reich is likely to continue entrenched at that paper, though he is, as one musician put it, "an egregious flunky to Lincoln Center."

But not quite all the critics are being taken in by Marsalis. And

not all the good critics are on the major metropolitan newspapers. Bala Iyer, who writes for *The Columbus Dispatch*, is arresting for his knowledge of jazz history, and a fresh cultural perspective on the subject. He and Marsalis are the same age. Since you have probably never heard of him, I should tell you about him.

"I was born in Coimbatore, a small town in South India, in 1961," he said. "The novelist B.K.Narayan lived nearby. I attended the University of Delhi for a B.A. in economics. I came to the United States to study for a PhD in English literature. I wound up at Purdue University in Indiana, but left soon afterwards for Ohio State University in Columbus. Here my academic ambitions, such as they were, expired, and here I have stayed."

"My parents live in New Delhi. I have a sister who is a microbiologist at the University of Chicago. I listened to my first jazz records at a friend's house in India: Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt. The most advanced young people I knew listened to jazz."

"Jazz does not pass easily through the filter of Indian life. I cannot bear Indian music of any kind, neither Indian classical music nor the jungly twaddle you hear in Indian movies. My parents were interested in South Indian classical music. My mother is said to have had a talent for singing when she was a young woman. My maternal grandmother is said to have started many distinguished South Indian musicians on their way. But this is family lore and I cannot vouch for it."

"I dislike rock-and-roll music intensely. Not only the music but its ethos."

Of *Joe Cool's Blues*, by Wynton and Ellis Marsalis, Bala wrote, "Wynton Marsalis has always been a serious and ambitious musician; or pompous and sanctimonious, depending on your point of view. He is not known for his wit or the lightness of his touch. This compact disc, a musical celebration of the *Peanuts* comic strip, is a pleasing departure from the grinding solemnity of his most recent work . . . The liner notes are by Stanley Crouch, who does his customary violence to the English language."

Of *They Came to Swing: Jazz at Lincoln Center* (Columbia), he wrote, "The young Wynton Marsalis was an exhaustive soloist, addicted to overstatement and reluctant to edit. These qualities are now most apparent in his compositions — such as *Back to Basics* — which can seem endless."

Of *Citi Movement* (Columbia) Iyer wrote: "This is another instance of the New Solemnity in jazz; presiding over it here is the patriarchal figure of the movement. Stanley Crouch's liner notes, unintelligible and seething with self-importance, provide comic relief."

And of *In This House* (Columbia), he wrote, "Like its predecessor, this Wynton Marsalis album requires two CDs. It is a 'jazz suite' divided into three sections and intended to represent a religious ceremony. Churchgoers are likely to be bewildered by it."

"Long stretches of this excruciatingly boring album are filled with the sounds of barnyard strife. Relief in the form of Wycliffe

Gordon's trombone solo or Eric Reed's elegant rumbling at the piano is rare and momentary. Jazz does break through the murk, as in *Local Announcements* . . .

"The liner notes reveal Stanley Crouch locked in mortal combat with the English language. No metaphor is safe from his mangle. He is relentlessly hyperbolic. Thus, Marsalis is 'perhaps the richest single musical talent of the last half century' and his band 'one of the greatest ensembles in the history of jazz.' You will look in vain for proof on this CD."

Marsalis is artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Crouch is his adviser. It is said among New York musicians that Marsalis plays Charlie McCarthy to Crouch's Edgar Bergen. To what extent this is true is hard to determine. But this much is certain. Marsalis is entrusted with assigning commissions to composers. He has thus far shown a proclivity to assign them to his cronies, or to himself, and Lincoln Center's administrators see no conflict of interests in this, or, if they do are too intimidated to object. Cronyism of course is endemic to all commissioning and grant programs, including those in the sciences.

Marsalis's own compositions are uniformly awful. I saw him and his group perform one of them at the White House in that cluttered jazz concert presented early in the Clinton administration. Marsalis had the misfortune to play immediately ahead of Clark Terry and the late Red Rodney, both gigantic jazz players and far his superiors, and then by the dazzling Jon Faddis. All three of them showed him up.

The worst moment came when he announced that his group would now play a "tone poem" he had composed. That a small jazz group hardly has the instrumentation for a tone poem (another European form) went unnoticed by *The Washington Post's* jazz critic, who next day used the term in an obediently praiseful review. The "tone poem" was essentially the first three notes of *Three Blind Mice*.

But it is *Blood on the Fields*, premiered at Lincoln Center in 1994, that has aroused the special ire of musicians. Someone somehow obtained a page of Marsalis' original score before it went to the copyist. It was notable, first of all, for its infantile script. Some musicians have speculated that it is an attempt to imitate the kind of sketch scores that Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn sent to their copyists. But the copyists, be it noted in their case, had been trained in their orchestrational methods and techniques. Like Harold Danko's contract rider, this bit of Marsalis score went whizzing out on fax machines and by mail, and musicians everywhere laughed at it.

The laughter became choked when, recently, this interminable piece (it lasts three hours) won the Pulitzer Prize.

One of the judges on the Pulitzer committee was Howard Reich of *The Chicago Tribune*, Marsalis' long-time apologist. When the furor in New York over charges of racism in Marsalis' Lincoln Center first broke, Reich wrote a piece defending Lincoln Center, quoting Rob Gibson, executive producer and director of Jazz at

Lincoln Center, denying it. But Reich did not present the evidence — powerful and extensive evidence indeed — that Crouch and Marsalis not only had excluded white artists but older black composers, such as George Russell, as well.

For Reich to be appointed to the Pulitzer music committee and then to participate in giving an award for a piece most musicians (and a lot of audience) find unendurably dull, “smells”, as one musician put it, “like a setup.”

And then, to compound the flagrancy, Reich wrote a piece, under a huge headline and with a photo of Marsalis filling about a third of the above-the-fold space on the front of the *Backstage* section of the April 15, 1997, *Tribune*, praised his own participation in the selection. Finally, a Pulitzer for Jazz, the headline proclaimed, followed by a subhead saying Marsalis gains respect for an American idiom, as if countless musicians hadn't already achieved this goal except among the most willfully insular of academics. Jazz has been taught in full, formal, degree courses in innumerable American universities. It is estimated that there are between 15,000 to 20,000 jazz bands in the high schools, colleges, and universities of America. Gunther Schuller was president of the New England Conservatory from 1967 — thirty years ago — to 1977, and while he was there constantly championed and advanced the cause of jazz. Geri Allen has taught there. John McNeil teaches there now; so do George Russell and others. But Marsalis was the first to gain respect for jazz, as the headline suggests?

Reich writes of Marsalis' “brilliantly conceived orchestral writing,” which seems to establish that he had never seen the page of that “score” circulated among musicians.

Newspapers across the country noted that this was the first time the award had been given for jazz. The real news was that the Pulitzer organization had been so late in recognizing America's greatest single contribution to the arts, when major classical musicians — and critics, such as the late R.D. Darrell — were recognizing the significance of jazz as far back as the 1920s. In statements published in the August 1924 issue of *Etude*, Felix Borowski, president of the Chicago Musical College and music critic for Chicago newspapers, said, “I find in this form of music something peculiarly American, our restlessness, for instance,” while composer John Alden Carpenter, who had studied with Elgar, wrote, “I am convinced that our contemporary popular music (please note that I avoid labelling it ‘jazz’) is by far the most spontaneous, the most personal, the most important musical expression that America has achieved.” John Philip Sousa was among those who praised the new music.

And two years prior to that, in 1922, composer and musicographer Carl Engel, later editor of *The Musical Quarterly*, in an article in *The Atlantic* took a remarkably accurate measure of the value of jazz. Later the music was extensively praised by the British composer and conductor Constant Lambert, and in the 1950s and '60s by the American critic and musicologist Henry Pleasants. In my own experience as a classical music critic, I never encountered

condescension toward jazz in any significant musical figure of that world, and the British critic Max Harrison said he never did either.

And so the idea that Wynton Marsalis has single-handedly, and for the first time, achieved “respectability” in jazz is, and I must grope for a word, balderdash.

The Pulitzer prizes have always been politicized. Swanberg's book, *Citizen Hearst*, a highly-acclaimed book, was nominated for a Pulitzer. But the Pulitzer people, according to reports at the time, turned it down in fear of offending the Hearst family. Nothing has changed. The Pulitzer Board last year passed up the brilliantly effective crusading journalist Dorothy Rabinowitz.

Insofar as music is concerned, a pall has hung over the Pulitzer awards since 1965. That year the music committee decided that no composition worthy of the award had been submitted. Instead, they elected to give Duke Ellington a special award for “the vitality and originality of his total production,” a sort of lifetime achievement award. But their superiors disagreed and denied Ellington the award, which caused two members of the committee, Robert Eyer and Winthrop Sargent (who had written one of the earliest important books on jazz) to resign.

Thus the award to Marsalis smacks of belated amends, like an Academy Awards statuette given to an actor or actress because earlier work deserved but didn't get it. But in this instance, it isn't that Marsalis' own work deserved it: the work of others did.

Blood on the Fields had its premiere performance at Lincoln Center on April 1, 1994, and has now been released by Columbia Records in a three-CD package. It features jazz orchestra and voices, including those of Jon Hendricks and Cassandra Wilson. It uses, among other things, elements of Ellington and Mingus and Kurt Weill. The Weill imitation is particularly grating, because Marsalis lacks a sense of humor, and thus the biting irony of the Weill-Bertolt Brecht works is lacking. Sir Thomas Beecham said, “Mediocre composers borrow. Great composers steal.”

Nothing illustrates his point better than the works of Wynton Marsalis. And Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber.

Blood on the Fields: A Review by John Heard

One of the most respected bassists in jazz — “a watershed bass player,” Oscar Peterson has called him — John Heard was playing alto and baritone saxophones professionally in his teens, then switched to bass, working with Tommy Turrentine and Booker Ervin. He worked with Al Jarreau in San Francisco from 1966, when he was 28, until 1968, then with Wes Montgomery, Sonny Rollins, Randy Weston, Ahmad Jamal, Count Basie, Louie Bellson, Oscar Peterson (for more than three years), Jon Hendricks, and Joe Williams. He is also a painter and sculptor. Some years ago, while touring Nigeria with Pearl Bailey and Louie Bellson, he made it a point to meet one of the master ebony carvers in Benin.

A friend told the white-haired carver that they had a visitor from America. The old man looked at John and said in Ibo, "Welcome home."

Wynton Marsalis has listened to Mingus and Ellington. But not enough. There is more music in *Fables of Faubus*, *Better Get It in Your Soul*, *Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting*, or any other track of Mingus's music, than in this entire three-hour "oratorio."

I tried to listen to this twice. I tried. I really tried. I was only able to get through it in its entirety once.

Aside from its musical shortcomings, it minimizes slavery in America, trivializes the real history. *Black and Blue*, which Fats Waller and Andy Razaf wrote for *Hot Chocolates* in 1929, makes a far more powerful statement of racial pain in 32 bars than does this entire long composition.

The only thing resembling any kind of originality is the use in part of it of the New Orleans band sound. A musician friend listening to it at my house commented on how derivative it all is. But he put it a little more strongly than that.

The playing is no better than the writing, and the recorded sound, considering what this project must have cost, isn't very good. The music didn't turn me on at all. I heard nothing in there that laid in my mind; and there is nothing original or personal in Marsalis's playing. And it doesn't swing. He is now 35 years old. Clifford Brown was dead at 25, Booker Little at 23, Lee Morgan at 33, Charlie Parker at 34. They were all playing original and personal things when they were very young, and their stuff is timeless. Nothing Marsalis does is timeless.

For Stanley Crouch to compare Marsalis in the liner notes to Ellington, and to suggest that he surpasses what was being written in the 1950s, is just nonsense. He says that the piece is "in a category beyond all other jazz composition." That's ludicrous.

What I don't understand is how these people in New York got behind Marsalis and Crouch. But then perhaps I do. Marsalis is saying what the New York East Side establishment wants to hear coming out of a black man. It's all right to write about slavery, but make it like a soap opera.

Blood on the Fields begins with a black man and a black woman being brought over on a slave ship that smells like a grease pit, a toilet, beyond anything we can imagine, with the people lying in chains in the tiers above — stacked up to save space — pissing and defecating on those lying below, and the crew raping their women. And this is turned into a love story. That's the establishment. Sure, write about slavery. But don't offend us.

We always hear about the Holocaust in Europe. How many books, plays, movies, television dramas, and documentaries about it have we seen? And, by comparison, how many about the horror of slavery in America? It would be interesting to know how many people died on those slave ships and were thrown over the sides. Millions?

And what do we hear about what was done to the American

Indians? Smallpox alone killed off entire cultures, complete civilizations. Look what was done to the Aztecs. The Indians owned the land, and so they got rid of them — and then erased all the evidence.

The character of Jesse in *Blood on the Fields* comes across as a wimp. This reinforces the idea that those who survived the slave ships were weaklings. I doubt that very seriously. No weak slave ever got to this shore. That's why we've got jazz, and words like banjo. That's why the athletes are performing the way they do: only the strong got here.

In the notes to this work, Crouch says, "Eventually Jesse goes to see Juba, a wise man posing as a fool. And Juba tells him that he needs to do three things. He has to love this new land, he has to learn to sing with soul, and he has to learn who he will be when free"

You've got to love a land that took you away from your wife and family, where your ass gets kicked every day? Salt on the wounds. No medical care. No rest. No payment. You work till you die.

Don't forget, there were two kinds of slave. One was the kind that, unfortunately, all civilizations have: the kind who turn against their own to make their lot easier; and the ones who are truly struggling to make things better. The former are the house niggers; the latter are the rest of us.

White people don't want to hear the term. They want to believe that all blacks turned in other blacks, cried when the massuh caught a cold, worried about the massuh's daughter, and the black women just loved to feed their kids.

As an expression of black American history, there is only one word for *Blood on the Fields*. It's bullshit. It romanticizes slavery. It minimizes the degree of it.

You have to Uncle Tom to play up to that New York society. And that's what this is all about. That's why Marsalis got the Pulitzer Prize. Since it's the new fashion to ask, "Shall we apologize for slavery?" this is the Pulitzer establishment's way of doing it.

There is no dance in this music. If you listen to Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige*, with Mahalia Jackson singing *Come Sunday*, you hear the difference. Crouch's notes talk about Marsalis drawing on "the vitality of the Negro spirituals and the blues." I don't hear it in his music. And the one thing you notice in black church music is the sound of dancing in it. It's not in this piece.

A lot of black jazz musicians hate what is going on at Lincoln Center. They will say it to me privately but not publicly. They're afraid. This is the first time in jazz history that someone has held leadership not through talent but through intimidation.

I get bent out of shape about these guys. It's time something was done about it. They've been getting away with this for a long, long time.

— John Heard

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