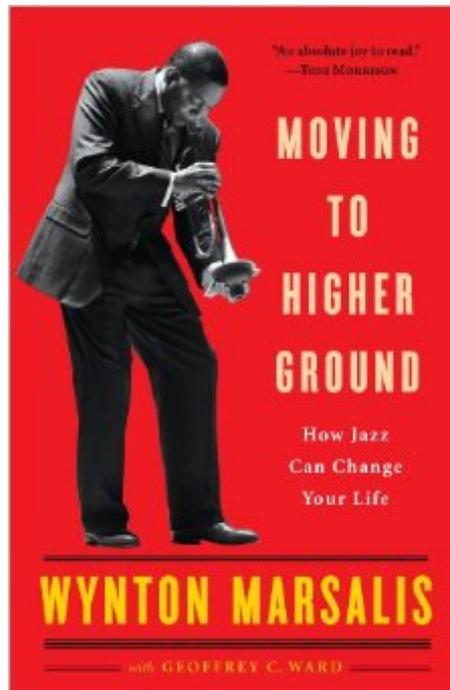


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# Moving To Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life



## Synopsis

In this beautiful book, Pulitzer Prize-winning musician and composer Wynton Marsalis draws upon lessons he's learned from a lifetime in jazz—lessons that can help us all move to higher ground. With wit and candor he demystifies the music that is the birthright of every American and demonstrates how a real understanding of the central idea of jazz—the unique balance between self-expression and sacrifice for the common good exemplified on the bandstand—can enrich every aspect of our lives, from the bedroom to the boardroom, from the schoolroom to City Hall. Along the way, Marsalis helps us understand the life-changing message of the blues, reveals secrets about playing—and listening—and passes on wisdom he has gleaned from working with three generations of great musicians. Illuminating and inspiring, *Moving to Higher Ground* is a master class on jazz and life, conducted by a brilliant American artist.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a well written and profound book on how jazz really can teach you lessons you bring to life. Everyone knows that listening to music elevates us as humans. But why? Jazz music has developed a reputation for either being esoteric and inaccessible, or cool background to the scene. In this book, Wynton Marsalis breaks down actual lessons that come from either the structure of the music, the interplay between the musicians, the expression of the individual and the arc of the musical lives of some of the greatest jazz musicians we know (Monk, Ellington, Trane, John Lewis to name a few). Threading in his own experiences as a child in New Orleans, and as a young

musician who played with and talked with so many that have come before, Marsalis illustrates how jazz teaches us how to be creative, express ourselves, deal with others, achieve our own potential, and so much more. This book offers up lessons on the music itself that gave me a greater appreciation and desire to listen more, but more importantly, it considers how to craft a life based on the teachings of this truly American music.

This 181 p. book is an interesting combination of autobiography, jazz history, and self help (sort of). As the subtitle makes clear, Marsalis believes that understanding jazz and jazz musicians may help us lead happier and more creative lives. On a scale of 1 (terrible) to 5 (terrific), I'd give this book a rating of 3.5 (although on this site I had to give a whole number, so I went with three stars). While the autobiographical and jazz history aspects are interesting, insightful, and enjoyable, Marsalis fails to convincingly connect the lessons of jazz--for example, for a group to really swing there must be careful listening and cooperation--to the challenges we all face. He raises interesting and potentially useful connections between jazz and life, but he is not able to close the loop in a compelling fashion. As Marsalis has demonstrated over and over, he is not at all reluctant to share his opinions. While I agree with some of his claims (e.g., the history of jazz reveals much about the history of race relations; jazz is America's greatest artistic contribution to the world), I disagree with others (e.g., Miles Davis was one of the greatest sell outs in all of jazz). Still, Marsalis raises a number of critical issues about American life in general and jazz in particular. Serious musicians will be bored with the definitions and explanations he gives for swing, the blues, riffs, and the like. Non-musicians, on the other hand, will probably find this information to be very accessible. On the whole, I found this to be a book worth reading. I learned some things about Marsalis that I hadn't known before, and I found the historical references to be very interesting.

Wynton followed Billy Taylor as jazz' most eloquent apologist (in the "classical" meaning of the term: "apologia," "vindication," "explanation") and seemed to possess all of the vernacular eloquence and charisma along with talent to back up every word required to make a difference. Taylor, for all of his eloquence, graciousness, and brilliant musicianship (though underrated when I see that some of his best recordings have never been reissued) was easily perceived as too genteel, too distant, too much one of "them" to connect with a younger generation tuned in exclusively to the electronic/bass-thumping formulaic commercial instrumental music of the '70s, and for a while in the '80s and '90s it seemed that Marsalis did spark a comeback for "mainstream" jazz, i.e. the best acoustic music from Louis Armstrong's Hot 5s and 7s to Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." Suddenly,

new artists were constantly being discovered and produced by major labels (Sony/Blue Note), jazz was considered sufficiently "hip" by merchandisers to be used as a subtext in advertisements for everything from cars to clothing, and the mounting stream of interest culminated, at the beginning of the millennium, with Ken Burns' epic history about America's indigenous art form. Unfortunately, things have deteriorated since then. Most recorded jazz is self-produced on independent labels, the clubs (at least outside of NYC) are constantly closing their doors, the jobs for local musicians--society dances, weddings, company parties--have simply vanished. The explanation? The role of technology is so obvious that musicians no longer complain about disc jockeys getting all the work: replacing it is a sense of resignation to the inevitable; the population that remembers the songs of the Great American Songbook keeps dwindling, meaning that the majority of "hit" songs are unplayable out of a fakebook: only the original recording with all of the studio effects will suffice; finally, after Burns' most welcome achievement many musicians insisted on shooting themselves in the foot--e.g. those Kenton fans who couldn't forgive Wynton or Burns for their hero's marginal role in the film. (No matter that the film was in agreement with most jazz history texts and with "received wisdom" about the history and development of jazz; many who considered themselves jazz fans had never read those books. So the film's point of view was considered idealogical and peculiar to Wynton/Burns.) All of which explains the need for a book such as this. And Wynton does an outstanding job, waxing as creatively with his prose as his trumpet solos. He tries his very best to meet younger people on their own level and to actually talk to them where they may be, conceding some of the unfortunate but widely held stereotypical images of jazz in many young people's minds. But as the title suggests, he's not about to stroke, applaud, join them at the next funk-fest or mosh pit. Perhaps the title is unfortunate, suggesting arrogance, a self-righteous attitude, etc. A jazz magazine like "Downbeat" is quick to jump all over Mr. Marsalis the moment he dares to suggest that some forms of music--e.g. the late funk-punk-fusion sounds embraced by Miles Davis--is inferior or represents a regression--even from Davis' own best work. (How "dare" he impugn anyone's musical taste let alone make qualitative judgments about music?) Followed to its logical extreme, such an attitude calls into serious question the purpose of having a publication about jazz or even the value of the life-experiences that eventually produce a "taste" for something or of learning and knowledge per se. But for reasons that need not be explored here, it's far easier to sell "Shakespeare," even proclaiming him more vital to a young person's development than Harry Potter books, than it is to make anything close to a similar argument about jazz. The book is an extended meditation not merely about jazz but family relationships, growing up, the whole point of art in human experience. It starts with an experience this writer was fortunate to have--meeting

Danny Barker in the streets of New Orleans (though he was far more pessimistic when I encountered him one night in the early '70s), and it ends with an affirmation of the creative impulse that all of us possess, reminding young people that they already have the desire to create the feeling of community, to inspire and help others, to teach--just as did Louis Armstrong, Beethoven, Henri Matisse, and Duke Ellington--right up to their dying breaths. No doubt Marsalis' book would have wider appeal had he retitled it and gone with a few different assumptions. Do young people want to change? Do they want to move to higher ground? Since the '60s, hasn't most music aimed at young people been "countercultural"--practically by definition? Adults may need to acknowledge that young people may know better than anyone that much of their music is regressive if not primeval, objectionable if not obscene, violent if not hostile, deafeningly loud and without aesthetic merit. That's the point! So forget about telling them what they already know--and are all too happy that someone with a different agenda (especially a "higher" one) doesn't get. My advice to Wynton would be to accept the countercultural premise of young people's popular tastes from the start, and then to show (gradually) how virtually all great, enduring, meaningful art is, at its core, countercultural and subversive (I'm sometimes suspicious that universities have never read the textbooks that comprise the canons taught in the classroom--from Eliot and Conrad back through Swift, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Dante, even Homer. If you read them closely, most of these texts advocate radical change, even the annihilation of status quo institutions, most of which are born of human vanity and folly). If you "really" want to embrace your difference and make its impact felt, check out these artists and their work, and that goes for tuning in to Pops, Bird, Monk, Mingus, and Trane as well. But don't take them on because they're "good" for you, or might make you a better person, or any of that boring didactic tripe that sanctimonious types keep throwing at you. Marsalis ends with a marvelous quote from Ellington: "The people are my people." Whereas so many of the intelligentsia, from conservative to post-modern types, speak of two cultures--"our" exclusive, enlightened culture vs. "the" culture (i.e. the inescapable, largely media-created atmosphere that the common people live, eat and breathe--Ellington, unlike Marsalis, insists on a single, unified culture, on a community of human beings who are far more alike than they're different from one another. (Marsalis apparently doesn't pick up on the self-contradictory, counter-productive nature of his own argument, which is unfortunate: not only would he have authored a book that's admirable and commendable (which this is) but one that would have a better chance of being read by the audience it's intended for (Young person's viewpoint: If it's not on the reading list for the final exam, you can forget about it.) Getting young people to read a book is in itself no small challenge--in fact, no less difficult than getting them to listen to the music that Marsalis and this writer have learned to love. But

"learning" is the key. By now most teachers have noticed that "exposure" alone is usually unproductive, and even if there should be love at first sight, that's rarely the basis for a lasting relationship.

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