

Wynton Marsalis Bring Joy Through Jazz to Davidson

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On Sunday September 8, musician and educator Wynton Marsalis jazzed up The Duke Family Performance Hall with a conversation on culture and civic life. Marsalis currently serves as the Managing and Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Director of Jazz Studies at The Juilliard School in New York City, and President of the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation. Joined by members of the Davidson community, Marsalis gave a speech followed by a conversation with President Hicks and a live performance with members of the Jazz Ensemble. Marsalis's father was jazz pianist and music educator Ellis Marsalis Jr., and he encouraged him to pursue his own musical interests. When speaking of his father, he joked that there were many gigs that felt empty, but he eventually learned the value of passion within an art. "In order to 'play' you have to play—you have to be there, be present," Marsalis said.



Wynton Marsalis
Photo from Marsalis' Instagram

After many accomplishments in his youth, including playing with the New Orleans Symphony Brass Quintet and the New Orleans Community Concert Band, Marsalis continued studying classical music at The Juilliard School in New York City. From then, Marsalis's achievements only grew, and he went on to achieve a plethora of accomplishments including being the first and only person to receive grammys for jazz and classical music in the same year in 1993. "The inheritance of jazz

has provided me with innumerable enlightening experiences," Marsalis said.

Marsalis understands the value of music and education and has held hundreds of master classes and open sound checks for students across the world and has served as a mentor for many jazz musicians. However, Marsalis emphasized that we as a nation need a call to action when it comes to teaching jazz in schools. Marsalis stated that not a single state requires students to learn about jazz in school. "We clearly need a revolution in vision. [...] We need a revolution in thought and feeling," Marsalis stated.



Wynton Marsalis Performs at Davidson
Photo from Claire Kelly '25

Marsalis also touched on the disconnect that the United States has amongst itself. Marsalis opened up his discussion by talking about the ways in which people are lost. "There are three ways to be lost: the first is 'I don't know where I am,' the second is 'I don't know where I'm going,' the third is I don't know where I am or where I'm going," Marsalis stated. But then, he emphasized that there is a fourth way. "I don't know where I am or where I'm going, but I'm getting where I want to go because I feel I am going in the right direction."

Later in his talk, Marsalis emphasized that while we should always listen to ourselves and follow our guts, there is still more we as a society can do. "Our feelings are not enough for us to be found," Marsalis emphasized. "We need to replace exploitation with investment."

Marsalis concluded by emphasizing how we can unite together, if only we take the best parts of ourselves. "We need the best of who we are instead of the worst of who we have been,"

Marsalis declared.

Following his speech, President Doug Hicks and Marsalis sat down for a larger conversation about how music can overlap with the power that future generations hold. Marsalis called on young people to channel their talents and abilities and put it to good use. "Take your lives, your impact, your power, seriously," Marsalis said.

President Hicks echoed Marsalis's words. "Mr. Marsalis lights up when he meets our student musicians, and he was equally passionate to talk about the importance of citizens to listen to one another," President Hicks stated over email. "Listening attentively is a virtue both in jazz and in democracy."

Marsalis then put his words to action by playing with three members of the Jazz Ensemble, Elliott Frankel '25, Lincoln Hayes '27?, and Sam Cifani '27?.

Frankel described how he and his fellow band members got to witness Marsalis's educational spirit in action. According to Frankel, Marsalis went off script during the performance, but afterwards he took the time to sit down with them afterwards to walk through what occurred. "He [Marsalis] messed up the bridge, and then we, we talked about it afterwards, and that's something that stood out to me, was that he, really wanted to get it right, and so we just sat and talked about the bridge of the song in the green room for like 10 minutes," Frankel said. His agent [...] was trying to get him to go, and he was focusing on the bridge and trying to get the right note."

"He is the big deal [in jazz]," Frankel said when describing Marsalis's legacy. Yet, he also emphasized how Marsalis's modesty played louder than his trumpet. "Be humble and be gracious, and [...] be present," Frankel said when describing what he believed to be Marsalis's message.

Marsalis brought musical liveliness to campus during his conversation, and President Hicks emphasized how Marsalis's words can relate to the Davidson community. "Davidson is a special place because we genuinely care for one another—and we seek to shape a public good in which all of us can thrive," President Hicks said. "The trust, respect and acceptance we show each other makes our community truly distinctive. Those are qualities that the world needs more of, and Davidson can help to shape."

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Anna Deavere-Smith Discusses the Nuances of Justice

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At 6:30 p.m. on the first Thursday of September, Davidson college welcomed playwright and actress Anna Deavere-Smith to campus for a presentation and conversation. Known for being the pioneer of verbatim theater, a form of documentary theater that uses the words of real people, Deavere Smith has won the MacArthur Genius Award and is a Pulitzer and Tony award nominee. Her work tackles social justice issues that face America, such as the school-to-prison pipeline in her 2015 play Notes from the Field and police brutality in her 1993 play Twilight: Los Angeles.

Sharon Green, a Davidson theater professor who introduced Smith before the talk, describes the importance of the playwright's work: "One of the unique aspects of Anna Deavere Smith ... is that she seeks out understanding and differences of opinion intentionally." Green goes on to say that "what [Deavere] Smith does that I think is kind of magical is she channels ... different people's points of view and perspectives through her body and through her voice." Davidson students witnessed this phenomenon firsthand when Deavere Smith performed various monologues from Notes from the Field in the Duke Family Performance Hall.

In these monologues, Deavere Smith moved between portraying an inner-city elementary

school teacher, the House Representative John Lewis, and a child psychologist. For each new character, Deavere Smith seemed to transform into an entirely new person without altering her appearance in the slightest. Her body language, accent, and dialect would all drastically morph as she switched from character to character.



Anna Deavere Smith
Photo from Deavere Smith's Website

Kathleen Degnan '27 had never seen a one-woman play before attending Deavere Smith's performance: "My friend talked about her one-person plays that she does and I thought that was really interesting because I'd never heard of anything like that before ... I just wanted to go and see what it was about." After watching Deavere Smith on stage, Degnan was "blown away ... She played so many characters back to back. It was crazy ... She's clearly a great actor."

By portraying such a diverse array of characters, Deavere Smith was able to convey the nuances experienced by those affected by the school-to-prison pipeline. Her portrayal of an elementary school teacher displayed educa-

tors' frustration with a lack of resources and support in public schools. "They just need so much. And you're just one person," Deavere Smith pleads as her character. "I felt hopeless."

Sharon Green mentions how performances such as this feel timely. "I actually think bringing her to campus in the heat of an election year ... I can't recall a time, in my lifetime, where I felt like people with different points of view have felt so divided," Green stated. Through her work, Deavere Smith aims to bridge the gap between different experiences.

Her performance of John Lewis made a call to the audience to sing "Amazing Grace." After getting out of character, Deavere Smith explained that "hope is not optimism. It's knowing that things look bad, but going for it anyway."



Anna Deavere Smith Performs
Photo from Deavere Smith's Instagram

In the talk following her performance, Deavere Smith discussed the interview process that makes up her plays. "I want people to break the natural rhythm of how they speak ... That's how I can tell I'm breaking through

to someone." She said. She also thinks about the "sonic experience," which is what she describes as what a person sounds like when she interviews them. She mentions how one man she interviewed loudly yelled in the middle of their conversation. "That was the moment I knew I'd have to include him in the project," Deavere Smith recalled.

At one point, Deavere Smith was asked about her portrayal of people of different racial backgrounds. When asked if she "gets a pass," she replied: "I don't think I should get a pass at all." Her performances bring up questions of where the lines are when it comes to acting and race, especially in cases where the actor, like Deavere Smith, is a minority. Today, Deavere Smith concedes that she "respects the moment of heightened sensitivity" and believes that "it's up to a community to decide what they need or want from a performance. Sometimes it's appropriate and sometimes it's not. It depends on the community you build."

Julia Richards '27 enjoyed the different perspectives that Deavere Smith's play offered, stating "she's like a database of all these insane stories." Richards was also impressed at how different every performance, and the history behind it, was. "It's interesting how she seeks out many different kinds of voices."

Deavere Smith centered her talk around the importance of community. And what does she believe it takes to build a good, respectful community? "Listening. It's all about listening."

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