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BRANFORD MARSALIS • METAMORPHOSEN BIOGRAPHY

Time flies when you are making great music, as Branford Marsalis will be the first to attest. "I had no idea that two years had passed since we made our last album," says the celebrated saxophonist, composer, producer and leader of the Branford Marsalis Quartet. The realization prompted a simple charge to Quartet members Joey Calderazzo, Eric Revis and Jeff "Tain" Watts. "At the end of our European tour this summer, I just told the guys, 'We're going into the studio next month.'" The results of that visit to Durham, North Carolina's Hayti Heritage Center, **Metamorphosen**, is another milestone from an ensemble that continues to set the pace regarding jazz creativity. Marsalis Music will release the latest statement by its founder in March 2009.

Marsalis chose the title, which is German for "metamorphoses," to emphasize the evolution of both his venerable ensemble (now in its second decade with identical personnel) and each individual member. "We've all been practicing," he emphasizes, "and you can hear it in the development of the music and in our sound. The more that each of us practices, the more our individual sounds become centered. Now, while we are all in the same room, it sounds as if each of the instruments were isolated. That's what practice will do for you."

Engineer Rob Hunter agrees that the Quartet's sound is "just as intense as before, but different. What comes out is very clean, and I attribute that to how well the guys are playing."

Another key element is the ever-widening scope of the band's repertoire. "We try to do everything," Marsalis explains. "We run the gamut, and are prepared to play anything at any time, including songs we don't know. The guys have to be listening to all kinds of music, but these are incredible musicians who are really good at playing in a variety of styles."

Each member of the Quartet confirms the importance of this approach. "My other sideman experiences let me get better at the stuff I was already good at, but the other stuff never got addressed," says pianist Calderazzo. "In this band, I've had to deal with everything. It's been like getting a gig with Betty Carter or Art Blakey at an older age. I have more options, and I've gotten better." The proof is in Calderazzo's inspired playing throughout, and in his two beautiful compositions, "The Blossom of Parting" and "The Last Goodbye."

For bassist Revis, personal and ensemble growth are inseparable. "Branford and the band have allowed me to realize my own voice. As you become more comfortable, personal barriers start breaking down. I've always tried to grow, but now I do it with a purpose -and we're all like that. You can develop a lot more at home, and this is home." Revis' growth is most obvious in his three contributions to the program: the loping "Sphere" ("a specific idea that, once developed, sounded Monkish"), cryptic "Abe Vigoda" and unaccompanied bass feature "And Then, He was Gone," written to mark his son's maturity and "leaving the nest."

Drummer Watts, who has been playing with Marsalis since they were classmates at Berklee College, speaks of how "The band is trying to turn the corner. We can already come from five or six formats strongly; but from this recording on I feel like there will be even more personal avenues. The band is not changing through a consolidated effort, because that probably wouldn't work. It's more about individuals picking up their game, and each of us picking up on that. Everyone is also bringing in more music, which also flips a switch. While this is definitely Branford's group, I feel like it's my group, too, and I welcome every opportunity to make a statement with it." This time out, Watts contributes "The Return of the Jitney Man" ("It's about my father, who did a lot of construction work but also drove a jitney when the holidays approached, and trying to get closer to his work ethic.") and "Samo ©," a phrase intended for a larger work that took on a life of its own and is dedicated to the late visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Completing the program is the Quartet's take on Thelonious Monk's "Rhythm-a-ning" and Marsalis' own "Jabberwocky," a treacherous 19-bar form that features his first recording on alto saxophone in over two decades. "I realized that I was the only person who didn't have a song to bring to the session," he recalls. "Then I went on a holiday with my family and began to hear 'Jabberwocky' in my head. All I had with me was an alto saxophone, and I



thought that I'd transcribe it for soprano or tenor when I got home. But it didn't sound as good on either of those horns, so for that track I'm back on alto."

"The band is the theme," Marsalis offers in summing up *Metamorphosen*. "We just picked songs that are good, and you can't play the stuff we're playing unless you're in a working band. We stay together because we all want to be here. A lot of people prefer to play it safe, touring in 'super bands,' being responsible only for themselves. When you have a band, you get defined in comparison to other great bands. And that's why I play jazz. I want to be defined by a body of work.

"My father likes to call recordings 'documents,'" Marsalis concludes, "and I know what he means. They document how good you are, or how good you aren't." *Metamorphosen* documents one of the preeminent ensembles in contemporary music, getting even better.

MARSALIS MUSIC is the creation of Branford Marsalis, one of the most celebrated jazz musicians of the past quarter century. Based upon his extensive experience as a saxophonist, composer and bandleader, Marsalis recognized the need to form a label that allows a diverse array of musicians to document their best effort. Launched in 2002, Marsalis Music has focused primarily on jazz, with a roster featuring such promising new artists as Miguel Zenón and Claudia Acuña as well as Marsalis himself and such established stylists as Joey Calderazzo and Harry Connick, Jr. The label receives distribution support Universal Music Group, and also sponsors Marsalis Jams through its non-profit arm, Music Education Initiatives, Inc. Marsalis Jams has presented ensembles in performance/jam session settings on college and high school campuses around the country, featuring such leading musicians as Sean Jones, David Sánchez, Miguel Zenón and the late James Williams.

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