

Sometimes, in music as in life, there is nothing more daring than simplicity, especially when sophistication is along for the ride—in the musical instance an artist proceeds through a stripping away of bravura, mannerism, known tricks and accustomed technical resource towards finding the real music and playing its essential substance straight, at which point his chops might well bloom again, but with a new scent of meaning—and I'd argue that no musician of his generation is more sophisticated than Branford Marsalis, and that no one else's band has such chops to burn in sacrifice to higher ends.

On this album he has something particular in mind: "If you acquire a lot of technique when you're young it's like having a lot of money in your pocket. Too many musicians don't develop past that point, for a number of reasons—one of them the way jazz is taught in this culture—but that misses the whole point of music, which is the expression of emotion. That's what this album is about. In particular it's about the expression of melancholy."

But have no fear: this album savors neither of the monotone nor the monochrome, and although its palette is relatively subdued—there are, for example, none of this band's trademark burnout tunes—it offers expressive variety in springtime plenty. And clearly it's true: there are a lot of players out there, young and no longer so young, who think that once the mass of necessary technique becomes second nature jazz has been accomplished. While this album is hardly intended as a dose of salts or an ascetic purgation of the realm, it does help remind us what the music's really about.

As for the hierarchical position of style and technique, no one has said it better, or more frequently, than Proust. Here is one of his more casual formulations: "Style is not a prettification as some people think, it is not even a matter of technique, it is—like color with painters—a quality of vision, the revelation of the private universe that each one of us can see and others cannot see. The pleasure an artist affords us is to introduce us to one universe the more."

What Proust says of style implies the position of technique, which finds its proper use as an instrument of expressive vision, in subordinating itself to a creativity which, if it is the real thing, exists on a higher, prior level of which emotion, especially when it is elevated to a suprapersonal level we can rightly call spiritual and even universal, is an essential component always. The essential self from which what Proust calls style flows, although few have taken him at his word, has its being outside of time, and its ipseity is in fact, here comes the word, eternal.

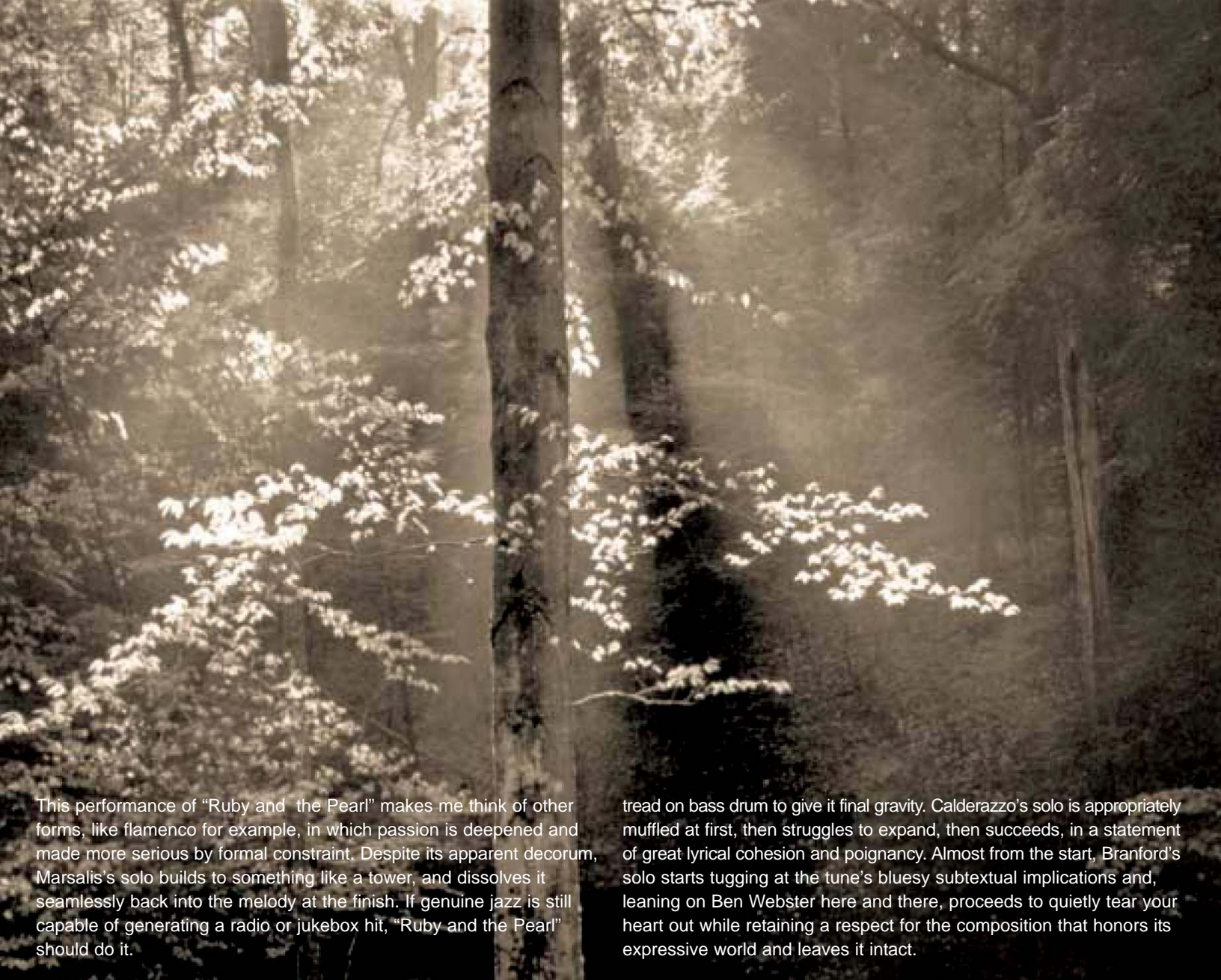
You want examples? The world is full of them, and we've got a few right here.

"Ruby and the Pearl," by Livingstone and Evans, which Marsalis encountered in a performance by Nat King Cole, is an inspired revival of a wonderful tune. It is not only one of this album's gems but one of the most expressively luxuriant performances of Marsalis's career. Its gorgeous melody is that of a suave, soigné bolero, as sexy a saloon dance as I've ever heard, and Joey Calderazzo's Cuban brothel piano on the bridge is deeply in step with the mood. Jeff Watts, a titanic drummer best known for taking his instrument by storm, shows here how mighty he can sound in restraint while shading an explicit rhythm-note his killer cowbell on the out chorus. Calderazzo's solo respects the interplay of form and passion, the moment's inspiration and the call of form, the request of climax. Melodically it is lovely, harmonically it is comprehensive in its knowledge of the byways, and expressively it is on the dancefloor and on the money, and earns the ardor of its valediction at the end.

## e t e r n a l

Branford's sensuous, insinuating solo is a stunner, and its nods to Sidney Bechet, the fons et origo of soprano saxophone playing in jazz, are of extreme courtliness and subtlety. Unusually for Marsalis, he divides the solo into four-bar sentences: four bars, pause, next four, and so on. As the solo develops, his pauses for breath give you pause to think, so that your duet with the solo proceeds through the stages of his contemplation, suggestions of passion reflected in repose, a music in which feeling, intellection and sensibility refine each other, in mixed light and shade, to their mutual benefit, and, of course, to yours.

When I mentioned the unusual formality of the solo to Marsalis he said that his solo respected the tune and was in service to it: the tune was not a basis for an ego-trip of ingenuity and chops. Clearly this respect is one of the keynotes to this album's aesthetic and, one could even say, its ethics.



This performance of “Ruby and the Pearl” makes me think of other forms, like flamenco for example, in which passion is deepened and made more serious by formal constraint. Despite its apparent decorum, Marsalis’s solo builds to something like a tower, and dissolves it seamlessly back into the melody at the finish. If genuine jazz is still capable of generating a radio or jukebox hit, “Ruby and the Pearl” should do it.

Tain’s tune “Reika’s Loss” is a languid lyric in limping triple meter, which in the improvisations yields to a melancholia reminiscent of some of Miles Davis’s cloistral, chilled removes. Marsalis and Calderazzo drape artfully piecemealed solos over the tune’s bone structure, and the rhythm section’s always evolving counterpoint is empathetically ideal.

“Gloomy Sunday” is of course the legendary “suicide song” written by the Hungarians Rezso Seress (music) and Laszlo Javor (lyrics), and banned across the world at various times and in various languages for inspiring alleged epidemics of self-destruction. Best known in the English-speaking world in Billie Holiday’s ravishing reading, while the original is audible on the radio at an apt moment in Schindler’s List, the song’s performance here opens with an impassioned, doomstruck recitative, and a soulful statement of the melody amplified by the rolling thunder of Tain’s malletwork, that heighten the tune’s customary double dose of mittel-European dolor to operatic dimensions and provide one of Branford’s few obvious audible nods to his hero Gustav Mahler.

Once the solos get going, Revis and Watts’ closely stitched accompaniment makes the rhythm very much a *marcia funebre*-Revis playing simply on the beat, suppressing *sostenuto*, Watts choking his brushwork and, if my ears do not deceive me, “ghosting” the funereal

tread on bass drum to give it final gravity. Calderazzo’s solo is appropriately muffled at first, then struggles to expand, then succeeds, in a statement of great lyrical cohesion and poignancy. Almost from the start, Branford’s solo starts tugging at the tune’s bluesy subtextual implications and, leaning on Ben Webster here and there, proceeds to quietly tear your heart out while retaining a respect for the composition that honors its expressive world and leaves it intact.

By the way, you can listen without fear: it’s the lyrics, not the melody, that make people take the jump, and Seress wrote the tune in 1933 but didn’t top himself until 1968, so you’ve got plenty of time.

Calderazzo’s “The Lonely Swan” is an elegant glider on the water, a *nouveau-bossa* buoyed up here and there by a savvy, catchy bassline. Marsalis, as he usually does on soprano, delineates an expressive world by successive actions of intimate choice, his taste refining itself as he goes, selecting the components that will express and embody it most beautifully. The composer’s short solo aims right for the heart and finds it, aided by a Watts who can make, for instance, a string of quarter-note rimshots say any number of things if the music asks for it, as Calderazzo’s solo does, at one memorable point.

The head of Nat King Cole’s “Dinner for One (Please, James)” would read as lugubrious loser’s comedy-real sentiment and a simultaneous parody of its counterfeit, though it keeps its head up-even if you didn’t know the title. Humor on tenor saxophone always implicitly nods to Sonny Rollins, and although the performance is pure Branford Marsalis, there are subtle halftone bows to Ben Webster even though the breathiness is more refined than once was Branford’s wont, and the sensibility more his own. His solo is subdivided into four bar breaths, like “Ruby,” although their endings flutter suggestively at the barlines.

Calderazzo's outing is one of his best on the album.

Notice the stark difference between the smoothness of Tain's brushwork here and the heavy heartbeats of "Gloomy Sunday."

Inattentive listeners will sail right past the gleams of Eric Revis' brief "Muldoon," a duet for Calderazzo and Marsalis, but it is one of the album's most finely faceted gems: a duet, a vignette, a contemplative, gracefully oblique intermission before the majestic drama of the title tune. My advice: pay attention, listen more than once, and receive your due reward.

The album's eponymous capstone contains the date's most daring and expansive music. Most of "Eternal" goes by in a holy hush. It is about, if it is "about" anything, facts of life that are barely speakable in this world's terms: nuances of soul for which words fall short, the self's last edge where even music fails to speak the meaning. Anyhow that's how the music strikes me, delicate at the margins of being, where the light refines itself at the brink of the celestial.

After an initial melody statement-somewhat Coltraneish, but played quietly, not as an apocalypse: inward music, worth moving inward to find-the band rides in on an E-flat chord, as it will for most of the tune's duration, but eventually the full theme emerges. The tune's recurrent three-note motto is not, Branford told me, a setting of the title, but it might as well be. At the end of the chorus, the E-flat chord hits the fanning modulations that will make possible the tune's extraordinary amplitude of expression at its climax, and then the delicate, toy-piano restraint of Calderazzo's solo winds the mainspring for the revelations to come.

The most obvious thing about the leader's solo is that most of it is played as quietly as a tenor saxophone can manage: a suggestion of infinite delicacy and gentleness, a regard for discovered beauty that includes a caution, a certain do-not-disturb that is an elevated form of tact, and no false notes or rhetorical gestures to violate the spirit of the tryst. Much of "Eternal" goes by like a mystery in this near whisper, then in a characteristic move, comes the epiphany, when the piece blossoms open on a stunning and unexpected scale, with Tain finally getting to act like a group of conflicting weather systems, and the lyrical intensity of the moment is almost shocking. We know that Branford can play faster than this is if he wants to, and wrap the whole thing top to bottom in arpeggiated sheets of sound, so we also know that's not the point. "Eternal"'s climax is a burst of sheer earned and achieved emotion, a promise kept, too truly felt to be cheapened by rhetoric, too pure for its perfume to be adulterated by the magnesium and sulphur reek that is mere pyrotechnics' aftertaste.

It is impossible to get through an evocation of this music's light and shade without employing a word almost always misused in print-Love-but I think I'd end up using it even if Branford hadn't told me that the tune is a tribute to his wife Nicole and everything she signifies in his life. It is also where his art climbs to its fullest, highest potential, beyond consideration of the necessary ladderings of technique, and where the soul expands with it, to rise from time's constriction and subjective limit to actually touch upon our mutual first and last, in the Eternal.

-Rafi Zabor  
author of *The Bear Comes Home*

