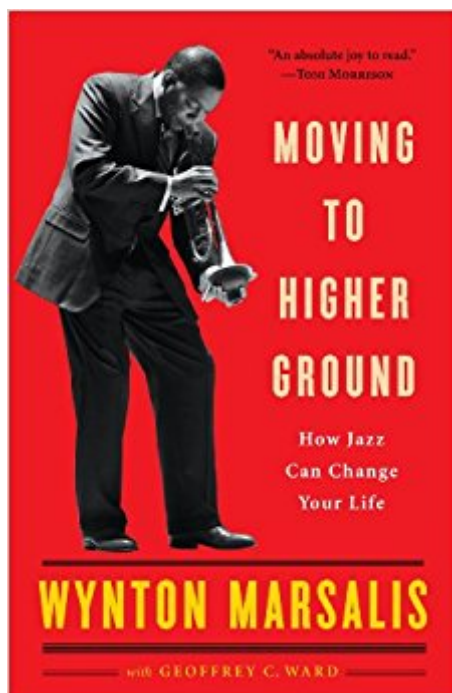


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# Moving To Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life



## 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

Product Description "In this book I hope to reach a new audience with the positive message of America's greatest music, to show how great musicians demonstrate on the bandstand a mutual respect and trust that can alter your outlook on the world and enrich every aspect of your life—from individual creativity and personal relationships to conducting business and understanding what it means to be American in the most modern sense." --Wynton Marsalis In this beautiful book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning musician and composer Wynton Marsalis explores jazz and how an understanding of it can lead to deeper, more original ways of being, living, and

relating for individuals, communities, and nations. Marsalis shows us how to listen to jazz, and through stories about his life and the lessons he has learned from other music greats, he reveals how the central ideas in jazz can influence the way people think and even how they behave with others, changing self, family, and community for the better. At the heart of jazz is the expression of personality and individuality, coupled with an ability to listen to and improvise with others. Jazz as an art--and as a way to move people and nations to higher ground--is at the core of this unique, illuminating, and inspiring book, a master class on jazz and life by a brilliant American artist.

**An Interview with Wynton Marsalis**

**Q:** You're a musician and composer. Why did you write this book, which is about life and lots of other things besides jazz?

**A:** When I first decided to become a musician, at the age of 12 or 13, I was inspired by my father, and by the New Orleans jazz tradition. I was under the impression that I had only to learn the fundamentals of music--rhythm, melody, harmony, texture--to progress as a musician. What I didn't know then was that over the next three decades, jazz music would teach me many significant things about living. This book grew out of ten years of conversations with my friend Geoff Ward, and is my attempt to share some of it--about how important it is to be yourself in the world, and at the same time create while respecting the creativity of others.

**Q:** What does the title of this book, *Moving to Higher Ground*, mean to you?

**A:** Too often in life, petty squabbles and small-mindedness keep us from realizing a higher purpose. In jazz, that higher purpose is not theoretical: We want to sound good. And when we do, you can hear what it's like when people are really trying to get along. It's purely human: In Jazz, you can mess up and still come together, still move together to higher ground. The title means ascending through engagement.

**Q:** You suggest that the ideas at the heart of jazz can carry over into everyday life. How so?

**A:** Let's take two ideas in jazz that are most central: swinging and the blues. Swinging is the art of negotiation with someone else, under the pressure of time. It shows you how opposites can come together, without compromising who they are. The one who plays the highest-sounding instrument in the rhythm section--the time-keeping cymbal--has to find a way of working with the one who plays the lowest instrument, the bass. And the bass player, who plays the softest instrument, has to find a way of working with the player of the loudest, the drums. To succeed, everybody has to have a very clear idea of the common goal: What exactly are we here to do? In jazz we know: swing. In life, if everyone involved can agree on a primary objective, a group can accomplish almost anything. The blues is many things--a musical form, a distinctive sound, a universal feeling--but above all, the blues is survival music. Its message is simple: things are never so bad that they can't get any better. It's about crying over something, actually wailing--and it's about coming back. The words may be sad but the

dancing shuffle (the definitive rhythm of the blues) is always happy or heading toward happiness. The blues is about what is--and what is has demons and angels sitting at the same table. That's a bitter-sweet and realistic message about life that everybody needs, that everybody can hear and respond to. I've heard people respond to it, all over the world. Q: How do jazz principles apply to, say, holding a successful meeting? A: If you come to a meeting without an agenda it's probably not going to be a very good meeting. In jazz improvisation, the agenda is the form of the song. But an agenda alone doesn't guarantee success. If everybody feels free to participate, unexpected things are sure to come up and will have to be dealt with intelligently. That's true in jazz improvisation, too. Things are bound to come up. Some need to be discarded right away. Others need to be expounded upon. Anyone in the rhythm section playing along behind the soloist can decide, "Hey, we need to investigate this further." And the soloist can respond, "Yeah, let's go into that." It's a system of checks and balances, but what makes it work is the fact that everybody is listening and responding to what the soloist is saying without ever forgetting the agenda. That's a pretty good model for swinging, and for getting things done. Q: How do jazz principles apply to a family? The central relationship on the bandstand is between the bass and the drums. They're opposites of volume and register. The drums are the loudest and the swung cymbal is the highest-pitched while the bass is the softest and lowest-pitched. In order to swing, the right-hand stroke on the cymbal must find the right-hand pluck of the bass on every beat. While it is impossible to line those beats up with metronomic perfection it is possible to achieve a perfect intent to be together. That's what you would like to see with a mama and a daddy. They represent gender opposites. While they try to come together to solve a problem we can go in the direction of a good time. When they don't--when one is too loud or the other is unyielding--it becomes a matter of endurance, not swinging. Q: What can jazz teach us about our feelings and ourselves as individuals? A: We're all given the gift of creativity. It comes out in all kinds of ways--the way we talk or dress or cook or whistle. I remember when I was a kid my friends and I used to see who could cut grass in the most creative way. But many times young people are put down for having a gift or skill that doesn't fit with somebody else's idea of what he or she should do with their lives. Jazz is the opposite of that. It tells you, "That's you! Take pride in this thing. Express yourself. Your sound is unique. Work on it. Understand it." Often it teaches you to celebrate yourself. When we talk about expressing feelings in jazz, we mean spiritual feelings, empathetic feelings, feelings that are beyond thought. In jazz, musical ideas move too quickly for you to stop and analyze or to formulate a lie. By the time you think about it, that moment of music is long gone. Jazz teaches you to cherish how you feel in the

moment. It puts a premium on having faith in the people you're playing with. Because the second you lose that faith and start to question what they're doing, the distraction takes your mind off the music and onto bad decisions that you will surely begin to make. The combination of emotional honesty and mutual trust that jazz demands can help you if applied to almost any field.

Q: How can jazz help you understand your own friends and family better? A: At first it may seem like a paradox, but jazz helps you understand other people by teaching you that you never really know anybody. When you play music with someone--even someone you think you know really well--they'll play things you don't expect and can't anticipate. You'll go in one direction, based on what you think is going to happen and they'll take a completely different path. Jazz lets people be free, and to surprise you--and them. It doesn't let you mail in your response or let you lump people into categories that turn out to be meaningless. It also shows you that people, even geniuses, evolve over time. The Duke Ellington who played in 1931 was very different from the Duke of 1961. So you learn to be patient with other people and respect the progress they've made and are still capable of making. One of the biggest challenges in dealing with friends and family is communication and more communication. Jazz forces us to communicate with people while recognizing their objectives, and over objectives, and where we can come together.

Q: How is jazz related to America, the country that created it? A: This art form was created to explain who we are. We have rights and responsibilities in the music just as we do as citizens. The Constitution can be amended and songs can always be added to or changes. In jazz we place a premium on the individual's right to self-expression but we also insist on checks and balances between one person's rights infringing on another--the soloists and the rhythm section have to work things out together. Otherwise the piece is a mess. Jazz allows us to improvise, to negotiate with one another. It's the sound of many people coming together in one thing. You might be from Chicago and be Jewish but you can stand on this bandstand with a Creole from New Orleans and when both of you play, you'll agree on what sounds good, and you'll agree on it because you both can hear it. It's democracy in action and it allows us, for all our faults, to see the success of our history. It tells us who we have been, who we are now, and who we can be in the future.

Q: Why is jazz especially relevant today? A: This country is looking for change. Just look at what's going on: An African American and a woman were leading contenders for the presidency; Big questions of race and identity; millions of brand-new voters turning out. Barack Obama carrying southern states in the primaries with a charismatic message of coming together. It's a different time in our country and I think it's the perfect time for this music. Now, jazz has always been timely because it deals with

the timeless issues of people, and of our democracy. Louis Armstrong dealt with them. So did Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman. But if you listen to political candidates today, they almost never talk about culture. It's never really been part of our national dialogue and it should be, because it's the best way for us actually to come together. We talk a lot about having national conversations and we've tried legislating unity. But we need to understand that art can bring people who are different together. Jazz provides a context for all the experiences we as human beings share. The direction of our culture is ascendant. Jazz is a perfect embodiment of that. Jazz is ascendant. If we take a long view of the past 150 years, we won't come to the conclusion that things are getting worse. We still have problems of corruption and greed. Jazz can provide a good antidote for them, too. To maintain their integrity, musicians have had to make many decisions that placed substance over commercial success. Jazz musicians have always aspired to an almost Utopian vision of a country in which everybody would come together and swing. The contemporary excitement around empowering people is not new to jazz. Jazz is empowerment. Its first great achievement was to empower individual musicians to take part in the creative process through improvisation. Participation is essential to a healthy American democracy, and it's essential to America's greatest music, too. Everybody has to participate to make it sound good. Whether you're playing or listening, you have to be active. If you're just sitting there and waiting for something to happen, nothing will. I hope this book will empower as many people as possible to take part by showing how an understanding of jazz and its principles can change your life, and our lives together. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** Marsalis, in whose first-person voice this book is presented (so attentively to speech rhythms, thanks to Ward, that the text seems transcribed more than written), may be the finest trumpeter alive. So when he says, as he has throughout a stellar career in classical music as well as jazz, that the latter is his first love, he demands respectful attention. That's easy to give him for this loving, candid, almost reverential exposure of how jazz has shaped his life, from boyhood learning in veteran New Orleans banjoist-guitarist Danny Barker's children's brass band to his present eminence as director of jazz at Lincoln Center. He does several worthwhile things—defining swing, explaining the musical language of jazz, realizing the blues as the American apotheosis of a universal expressive mode, describing the sensations of learning to play and keeping on playing, and hailing a baker's dozen of great jazz artists—with more feeling than most jazz critics. More, he explains the cutting remarks he spouted as a young turk that have haunted him since and winningly reformulates the naive old wish for jazz to be a force of world

reconciliation. What a honey of a book. --Ray Olson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As one who conducts research, gives lectures, and writes about the psychology of musicianship (see my book "Social Psychology of Musicianship" on .Social Psychology of Musicianshipcom), I assiduously study the viewpoints on the subject set forth by others. From his early days on the National music scene, I have followed the "teachings" of Wynton Marsalis. Whether in a master class, a concert, or this book, Mr. Marsalis has become increasingly competent at scholarly analysis of musicianship. Although done with the assistance of another writer, Mr. Marsalis offers unique insights into the world of jazz. Far more than storytelling (albeit there are plenty of anecdotes), the information explores the "musical elements" that pave the way to knowledge about musicianship. For any student music (in addition to a copy for myself, I bought a copy to my eleven year-old granddaughter), this book is enlightening.

I love this book!! As someone who has played jazz and loves the music, I only wish I had read this sooner. Not only does Wynton Marsalis clearly bring a great deal of knowledge to the subject, but he articulates it with such clarity and readability. Marsalis captures the essence of the music and the musicians who play it making the music he loves relatable to people even if they do not play music at all. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who plays jazz, wants to play jazz, or just wants to learn more about jazz!

Great book for beginners to Jazz (young adults or adults newly opening their mind to jazz).

I really enjoyed reading "Moving To Higher Ground - - How Jazz Can Change Your Life." I especially like the statement "Be proud of being you." The introduction, and the entire book grabbed me. Reading about the trials/tribulations, discipline and endurance of musicians was the motivating force I needed to pull out my hand drum and start drumming again.....Not just daydreaming about drumming! I'd forgotten how good drumming made my heart feel in the past. ... Motivating!

Wynton Marsalis is widely known as a fine performer. However, not everyone knows his importance as a student of musical history and, perhaps even more important, as an inspiring master teacher. This is an easily readable and useful instruction manual with lessons taken from the musical idiom and applicable across all aspects of human life. Portable, quotable, insightful.

Wynton is clear and concise, and his passion for the music shines through every page of this book. He may wax a little poetic at times, but it shows how much he thinks about the philosophy behind jazz.

This was a very interesting read. As a jazz lover I truly enjoyed Marsalis' insight into the music. It also gave me an even better insight into how he views jazz.

I had a lot of fun reading this book. Marsalis has obviously spent a lot of time thinking about jazz and its relation to larger cultural issues. The result is a book that is deep and yet conversational/accessible. The point of a book like this isn't indoctrination; it's provocation. Marsalis wants us to think about what jazz is (and is not) and why the answer to those questions matter.

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