

Piano Master Brings Jazz to Campus

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When jazz legend Ellis Marsalis performs at Dixon Hall on the Tulane uptown campus tonight (Oct. 21), be ready to see jazz done Marsalis' way — the way it should be done.



Jazz master Ellis Marsalis has played concerts in Dixon Hall on the uptown campus more years than he can remember. (Photo by Sally Asher)

Regarded today as the premier modern jazz pianist in New Orleans and the recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Award, Marsalis began his music career in the 1950s playing rhythm and blues music on saxophone.

“All of us (musicians) were available to play any style — traditional jazz, rhythm and blues . . .” Marsalis says. “If you were a piano player, like Fats Domino or Allen Toussaint, you got more studio work.”

Marsalis eventually switched to playing piano and to playing modern jazz.

“I began playing jazz because it was a challenge,” he says. “I started to play with like-minded local musicians, even though at that time there weren't a lot of avenues

to express that,” and to play the non-traditional sounds of the “newest recordings” by his influences John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie and Oscar Peterson.

For Marsalis, heralding a new age of modern jazz performance in New Orleans soon included joining the American Jazz Quartet, with Alvin Batiste, Harold Battiste and Ed Blackwell. It also included adding the title “music educator” to his repertoire.

In 1974, he began teaching music with a jazz studies emphasis at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. There he mentored such jazz musicians as Harry Connick Jr., Donald Harrison Jr., Nicholas Payton and his own sons Wynton, Branford and Delfeayo Marsalis.

Tulane awarded Ellis Marsalis an honorary doctorate degree in 2007.

Marsalis' annual Lagniappe Series performance at Tulane is a popular tradition, one that he enjoys as much as students. The Ellis Marsalis Quartet will take the stage today at 7 p.m. for a [concert](#) that is free and open to the public. It is presented by the Lagniappe Series of [Newcomb-Tulane College Cocurricular Programs](#).

“I've been doing these (Dixon Hall concerts) a good many years,” he says. “I enjoy them because it's interesting when students who don't know about us come to see how we do things.”

Undoubtedly, the way they should be done.

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