

Everybody was out of work...feeling bad. They would congregate at the corner club to commiserate together. It was sad...quiet...and alcohol-tinged.

Here comes John with a tambourine.

Wynton Marsalis - Tremblin' in the Sky



I'm broke I'm trou-bled, there's a trem-bl-in' in the sky. I'm
broke I'm trou-bled, there's a trem-bl-in' in the sky. When I
shake this tam-bou-rine, I look the De-vil in his eye. Ain't a
thing in this world, not left up to chance. Ain't a
thing in this world, not left up to chance. So I
sing theses trem-blin' blues, I grab my wo-man and dance.

Folks started laughing, and dancing, and singing, and being alive again...and they were still drinking too.

In jazz, we play the blues. The blues plays with joy and tragedy – both the same. It affirms by saying I *will* sing and dance my life. Through acceptance and transcendence, the blues makes what hurts, feel good, and what is good, feel even better. The blues is survival music.

Congratulations! You have survived. And in this moment – perfect in both its accomplishment and its potential – we stand on the threshold of your liberation...and I suspect your parents' as well.

The generations of family, educators and alumni who have nurtured us let us know that we are part of a continuum...and your graduation redeems the hopes, dreams and labors of everyone in this continuum. Graduates, you fulfill the promise of this university's legacy; justify the optimism of your ancestors; reward the investment of your parents; deepen a kinship with peers; and provide inspiration for younger generations who will benefit from your example. And more importantly, you have realized your promise to yourself. In getting to the cap and gown and that expensive piece of paper, you have achieved a portion of your dream of yourself. You have succeeded in the realm of ideas where theory and philosophy are carefully nurtured.

Well done...now welcome to the world of free choice...a sloppy, messy unruly world filled with "I thought it was"... "It should have been"... "They said"...and "Oh".

You are suddenly called upon to contribute to the collective dream of who we are...have been...and want to be. That is why I want you to take this moment to affirm *your* dream of yourself.

In jazz, improvisation is the act of self-expression. It allows the freedom to invent your own music, but requires a home-grown instrumental virtuosity as well as the courage to express who you truly are. Tenor saxophonist Lester Young said, "You got to sing your own song if you want to join the throng, baby."

Your song is the embodiment of your dream. Make it of the finest things. It is the poetry in the way that you live. Not *what* you have, but what you *do* with what you have.

This is the year of advice on navigating the recession – You graduating? How you gon' find a job in these hard times? Ain't nobody really talkin' 'bout no frivolous singing. But what I'm telling you is that some principles are timeless...they assist us through the worst of times and *across* times. The marketplace may change – but these fundamentals

remain. They are unaffected by gender, race, religion, ideology or even generational shifts. They are found not just in the notes of songs, but in the *way* you sing a song and what that song says about *who* you are or aspire to be. These essences nourish our humanity - things like laughter, heartbreak, empathy, love, loss. And when we dream *in* them, sing *of* them and live *through* them, we become confident and resilient...grounded. We can endure hardship with style.

Singing a solution to overwhelming problems in his song “Trouble in My Mind,” bluesman Richard Jones decided:

Trouble in Mind

I'm gon-na lay my head ___ on that lonesome rail-road track. ___ And when that
train come a - long, ___ I'm gon-na pull my fool head back. ___

Trouble, trouble, oh trouble
Trouble on my worried mind
When you see me laughin'
I'm laughin' ust to keep from cryin'

When you look with student eyes at the corruption and decay that has created our blighted economic and cultural environment, consider that the many architects of our current condition were once like you – full of passion about changing the world for the better. But the erosion of a dream for yourself happens slowly...then quickly. And if you don't pay attention, if you don't tend to the meaning of your song, if you don't act on what you dream, you could become what you most despise.

You can trust that there will be much opposition to your song – no matter how well sung. This opposition comes in the form of status quo, “no one will know,” “don’t rock the boat” and “here she comes with that.” It also comes from the prejudices and ignorances of like-minded friends. Father of the Delta blues, Son House, told us,

Son House - Don't You Mind

Don't you mi-nd peo-ple grin-ning in your fa-ce. Don't you

mi-nd peo-ple grin-ning in your face. Just

bear this is missed a true friend is hard to find. Don't you

mi-nd peo-ple grin-ning in your face.

Oh yes, tending to your song will require unyielding concentration and determination, for the ultimate enemy of your dreams will not likely come in some grand form like a nuclear holocaust ...or your parents – the opposition will be *your* willingness to compromise what *you* know and feel to be true. The corruption that we ultimately decry is in the terminology, code words, and even silence that we all gradually accept as we live out our lives.

Clear language is paramount to the integrity of any issue. Tenor saxophonist Ben Webster once stopped playing his horn in the middle of a tender song because, he explained, “I forgot the words.” In that spirit, look underneath the *sound* of words for their *meaning*

and *act* in the spirit of what is meant...lest we forget that corporate theft became acceptable under the label of “innovative investment strategies” and “cutting-edge business practices.” Words are value. Insist on an integrity of language for yourself in your everyday life. When lies become “the way we do things around here,” over time, your idealism is drained...and without even realizing it, your song starts to sing untrue.

That’s what happened to the blues. And no one even remembers what this vital American music should sound like.

Wynton Marsalis - The Blues

What they call-in' blues, _____ ain't no blues I know. _____

What they call-in' blues, _____ ain't no blues I know. _____ They play-in'

loud, mean and rough, The Blues is soft weat and slow. _____

Yes, words have meaning...and meaning is connected to contact, and contact – touch – forces us to develop a concrete understanding of things...and each other. The further we get from the tactile, the more virtual and abstract our realities.

I recently saw three 12-year-olds in a room texting each other. I regularly see people standing next to the stage at a concert, but looking at the screen...or giving money to someone on the street and never touching or looking at them. The greatest gift you can give someone is your attention, your interest, your presentness. Being present means that we *feel* those around us and seek to have them feel us.

Be careful to not take people around you for granted. It's not as easy as it sounds. Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson told us in "When You Got a Good Friend":

Robert Johnson - Got a Friend

When you got a good friend, that will stay right by your side. _____

When you got a good friend, _____ that will stay right by your side. _____

Give her all yo' spare time, love and _____ treat her right. _____ I mis-

treat-ed my ba-by, _____ I can't see no rea-son why. _____ I mis-

treat-ed my ba-by, _____ I can't see no rea-son why. _____ Ev-ry

time I think a-bout it, I just wring my hands and cry. _____

We're often taught to embrace compromise as a sign of a pragmatic mind. But many times action requires *separating* compromise from practicality. What often creates rich experiences and drives innovation is strong belief and definitive action.

Now, I'm not talking about being rigid and obdurate just for the fun of it. What I'm talking about has to do with integrity. And sometimes, there is an impractical nature to improving the world.

Take Duke Ellington for instance... After WWII, almost all of the great jazz orchestras disbanded because a ballroom tax made gigging economically unfeasible. Duke, however, kept his big band together – against the grain of every popular trend – and was forced to play small circuit, low paying gigs that would have been to shameful to a lesser person. In 1956 at the Newport Jazz Festival, his orchestra swung so hard it drove the audience to a near riot. The decision made years earlier – to maintain the integrity of his sound and keep his band together – landed him on the cover of Time magazine with a top-selling recording...and added another glorious chapter to the story of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, which is forever one of the centerpieces of 20th century American music.

Remember, your song is the embodiment of your dream. The poetry of your life will be in the *way* you live it...not with what you have, but what you do with what you have.

You see, part of being present is confronting the proverbial fork in the road consciously aware that you have a choice, and that every choice determines what you will experience. Every choice is a test of your insight, your intelligence, your feeling and, ultimately, your courage.

Sometimes our dream, our song, requires us to make impractical decisions.

And as you make these decisions, it's important to realize that you will shape your *life* to your dream and the *nature* of life is internal.

I remember I had a somewhat contentious relationship with my college trumpet instructor...and stopped studying with him after one year. But six months later, I called him for a lesson and went to his house. He was the most successful trumpet teacher of the 20th Century...having taught many first-chair trumpeters of major orchestras and jazz musicians like Miles Davis. He was a legend...a man who had joined the New York Philharmonic in the 1930s and had an amazing career of more than four decades.

He was of the Great Depression generation and was not sentimental *at all*. But on this particular day, he told me his son had suddenly and, I assumed, tragically passed away as

a young man, and that his wife was ill and had been an invalid for some years. He said that before his son died, they had squabbled because he wasn't satisfied with some of the choices his son made...and that of all the successes he enjoyed in his life, he found himself reflecting on his son. He couldn't bring him back, so there would be no reconciliation. Then he said, in a broken tone, "When my wife dies, I will be alone. I've been very successful in my professional life. But, my internal life...I don't know. You are your internal life. If your internal life is unhappy, you are an unsuccessful person."

I didn't know it at the time, but Son House had addressed these very same sentiments in "Death Letter":

Look like it was 10,000 people standing 'round the burying ground

Look like it was 10,000 people standing 'round the burying ground

You know I didn't know I loved her 'til they laid her down.

It's so hard to love someone who don't love you

It's so hard to love someone who don't love you

No satisfaction don't care what you do

I got up this morning at the break of day

I got up this morning at the break of day

Just hugging the pillows where she used to lay

Your internal life is what you sing from...your everyday thoughts and feelings...how you relate to the world, and how you *allow* the world to relate to you.

New Orleans clarinetist Sidney Bechet said of his playing, "I'm trying to give you a *feeling*. If all I'm playing for is a contract, how am I going to give you a contract?"

And Robert Johnson said, “If you cry about a nickel, you’ll die about a dime.”

See, we are always in the process of becoming ourselves. So, enjoyment – whatever it means to you – is something to pursue. Just like you lay out plans to be rich or in shape, *plan* to be happy. When something makes you happy – chase it. And if you’re not good at it, work on becoming good at it. And if you can’t be good at it, be happy being bad. The positive frame of reference and the power of affirmation create good health.

Affirm people around you, and you will be affirmed.

Ray Charles told us about it when he sang “Let the Good Times Roll”:

Louis Jordan - Let The Good Times Roll

ey ___ ev'ry body, let's have some fun. You onlu live but once and when you'r dead you're done ___ so let the

good times roll. _____ Let the good times roll. _____ Dont

care if you're young or old, ___ Get to-ge-ther let the good times roll. _____

And passing on from this moment, you will work with people you like and dislike. You will win and lose jobs...experience exaltation and embarrassment. You will attend some of the worst athletic events you’ve ever seen to root for your kids, some of the worst sounding recitals, worst plays...it goes on. Every missed note, dropped touchdown, failed test, dumb excuse – one day you’ll yearn for those moments again, but they’ll be long gone. Just ask your parents. In all those meetings, at all those games, in the everyday playing out of life, make it be glorious for all concerned.

And as time passes, you will go through unimaginable things that will force you to find the frontier of your soul – the great fundamentals of human life. You will know love and heartbreak... marriage and divorce... birth, and yes, death. And through tears of sorrow and joy and tears again, tambourines will be tambourines. And people will sing their own songs and dance, and not ...but the question is never why *they* do what they do. The question is what will *you* do. Remember your dream for yourself.

You see...

Wynton Marsalis - The Blues Is

I sing the blues when I'm happy. ___ I sing the blues when I'm sad. - I say the blues is the best friend, ___

an - y man e - ver had. The blues is, ___ the blues is, ___

the blu__ ues ___ is, ___ the blues is, ___ the best friend ___

an - y man ___ e - ver had. ___

The blues is survival.

Charlie Parker said, “You have to live it for it to come out of your horn” and you will find that living it is beyond your control...you *will* live it.

From the birth to the grave, in your ultimate pursuit of meaning, with the deepening of your humanity, and as your life experiences intensify, let *the* constant be your dream of who you are. Tend to your dream and sing your song. That song is there to educate you,

hold your hand, entertain you, and nourish you in the best and worst of times. And hear, as your fortunes rise against the turbulent skies of uncertain tomorrows, always the homing pitches of your song, of your dream. It tells you, everything's gon' be alright.

Wynton Marsalis - Ev'rything Gon' Be Alright

