

THE LIFE AND COMPLICATED TIMES OF PIANIST  
**ELLIS MARSALIS JR.**

**A FILM BY SASCHA JUST**

# ELLIS

**MUSIC BY ELLIS MARSALIS JR.**

ELLIS MARSALIS JR.  
DELFEAYO MARSALIS

WENDELL PIERCE

JOHN ELLIS

STEVE MASAKOWSKI

BRANFORD MARSALIS  
ELLIS MARSALIS III.

JESSE MCBRIDE

DAVID TORKANOWSKY

ASHLIN PARKER

JASON STEWART

WYNTON MARSALIS  
DOLORES MARSALIS

TOM MCDERMOTT

KALAMU Y SALAAM

DEREK DOUGET

ADONIS ROSE

JASON MARSALIS  
MBOYA MARSALIS

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# ELLIS

Patriarch of the First Family of Jazz,  
who turned teaching music into a civil rights act,  
mentored a generation of top musicians and,  
drawing from his hometown of New Orleans,  
changed modern jazz.



# THE STORY

Ellis Marsalis was a towering figure in the history of jazz.

He composed and performed major works of modern jazz infused with a uniquely New Orleans touch.

"Who taught you how to play like that?" Wynton and Branford Marsalis' fans would ask. And the two brothers always gave the same answer: "My dad."

Along with his own uber-talented children, he mentored a "who's who" of jazz from multiple Grammy winner Jon Batiste to Harry Connick Jr., to hundreds of students who passed through his classes.

Ellis lived through the Jim Crow era in New Orleans. With his music and his teaching, he defied the strictures of this rigidly segregated society and reframed jazz as a powerful tool in moving beyond racist oppression.

He continually defined his own standards of excellence and instilled in Black students a deep understanding of their own cultural history—a civil rights act in itself!

As we are losing a generation that took its lived experience of racism and turned it into music that broke all boundaries, Ellis' story of a life lived with self-determination offers a path to confronting racial injustice through art today.

# THE FILM & STYLE

*ELLIS* is the first feature-length documentary produced with the full cooperation of Ellis and the entire Marsalis family.

It provides a unique insider view of one of American jazz's true masters. Ellis sat for three in-depth interviews for this film. He performed a solo concert exclusively for our cameras, and allowed us to film other performances, for example at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

He and his family have provided us with a treasure trove of archival material. No other filmmaker has had this kind of access to the Marsalis family history.

## **IN HIS OWN WORDS AND HIS OWN MUSIC...**

*ELLIS* is told through his own music and words and by his sons Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo, Ellis III., and Jason, his colleagues and disciples. With never-before-seen footage it creates a deep intimacy with its protagonists.

## **ELLIS IS A JAZZ FILM**

Reflecting the improvisational nature of a jazz composition, it develops themes, moves on, and returns to them to explore them from a variety of perspectives. It uses a range of visual elements and cinematic techniques, each adding a different aspect to the whole of the film to paint a portrait of a complex life.

## **ELLIS IS A HISTORY FILM**

Archival footage and photos take the audience on a journey to New Orleans of the early twentieth century, to California of the fifties where Ellis served in the Marines and played with modernist giant Ornette Coleman, to the struggle for civil rights in the sixties, to New York of the seventies where he toured, and to his classrooms throughout the years.

The result is more than a biography of one of jazz's heroes. The film interweaves Ellis' accomplishments with key threads of American cultural history and reveals the story of a master musician who pursued his own values and artistic ideals.

# FULL SYNOPSIS

This is a story of jazz, a jazz musician, and a city known for its jazz. It is also a story of how one man transcended racial injustices he faced from his birth in the Jim Crow South to his death from COVID 19, living a life of art and education, helping to teach and support the next generation of jazz musicians.

After years of struggle to make ends meet, Ellis became known beyond his hometown for teaching a who's who of jazz — from multiple Grammy winner Jon Batiste to performer Harry Connick Jr. — and for fathering uber-talented sons who upended the jazz world in the early 1980s. Yet, Ellis had been quietly shaping modern music for decades. In an era dominated by racial injustices and a Eurocentric value system, Ellis defined his own standards of excellence and instilled in Black students a deep understanding of their own cultural history. He composed and performed major works of modern jazz infused with a uniquely New Orleans touch. He only left New Orleans for short stretches to perform or teach but influenced the entire world of jazz. In April 2020, Ellis Marsalis Jr. died in his hometown from complications related to COVID 19.

Before he passed, Ellis Marsalis gave our crew years of exclusive and intimate access to his life and legacy, including three extended interviews. Told in his own words, and by his sons Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo, Ellis III., and Jason, colleagues, and disciples, Ellis chronicles a profound 20th century life. Ellis grew up in a family that owned the first hotel for Black patrons in the region. He studied music at

university and by the early '50s was playing with some of jazz' leading lights.

As segregation began to loosen its grip in the 1960s, Marsalis found himself swimming against several currents. He pursued his love for bebop while most of the US was taken over by rock and pop. He worked with AFO (All For One), New Orleans' first Black-owned record label. He and his wife raised a family of uniquely talented musicians on a teacher's salary. He released his own recordings, because no record company would. Then, he gained local notoriety by securing record deals, building university jazz programs, and becoming a sought-after mentor for a Black music vanguard. Finally, in the wake of his sons bursting into the jazz scene in the 1980s, Ellis was recognized nationally and internationally for his own tremendous achievements.

**This is Ellis' story. He tells it in his own words, and he guides us through the events of his life in his own way: with his music.**

Ellis' recordings and concerts captured at Lincoln Center New York, at Snug Harbor Jazz Bistro, and a solo concert performed exclusively for the film at the Marsalis Center for Music in New Orleans serve as the film's soundtrack and its spine. At most dramatic moments in the story a montage of visuals and Ellis' solo concert highlight a thought or feeling Ellis

expresses. For example, in one thematic interlude this concert is interlaced with archival footage of three major historic floods (including the one caused by Hurricane Katrina) that predominantly destroyed Black neighborhoods in New Orleans.

Emulating the call and response typical of a jazz piece, his sons Wynton, Branford, Ellis III., Delfeayo, and Jason, students, and colleagues react to Ellis' storytelling, fill in gaps, and share never-before-heard anecdotes. Select verité scenes underscore these insider views, observing Ellis teaching and in other music-related situations to illustrate where his greatest accomplishments originate.

Archival footage and photos take the audience back to New Orleans of the early twentieth century where Ellis' parents met, to California of the fifties where Ellis served in the Marines and played with modernist giant Ornette Coleman, to New York of the seventies where he toured, and to his classrooms throughout the years. To engage viewers around how Ellis experienced the past, these personal milestones are interspersed with archival footage of important events in American history.

Mirroring the intricacies of Ellis' life, the film's cinematography is as varied as its storytelling elements. Shot on HD 4K, the cinematic style ranges from carefully lit and composed interviews and multi-camera concert shoots to drone footage and street scenes filmed with a direct cinema aesthetic. All newly filmed footage captures protagonists free

of artifice in the reality of their environments, allowing their personalities to shine while always setting Ellis center stage.

The result is more than a biography of one of jazz's heroes. The film interweaves Ellis' accomplishments with key threads of American cultural history, placing him in historical context as someone who was both deeply affected the by world around him, and who by responding to it helped to shape that world.

# ELLIS A FREYTAG PRODUCTIONS TINY TEAM FILM

## DIRECTOR-PRODUCER

### Sascha Just

Born and raised in Berlin, Sascha Just emigrated to the US to make films about jazz and music-related topics.

Prior to *ELLIS*, Sascha has produced and directed the feature-length documentary *Heirs/Big Chief* about New Orleans Black Indian Chief Darryl Montana's path to Mardi Gras.

With her short documentary *Ambassadors – The Native Jazz Quartet at Work* she follows a jazz group as they compete for the title “Jazz Ambassadors to the United States.”

Sascha's films screened among others at the American Documentary Film Festival & Fund, Katra Film Series, The Segal Film Festival on Theatre and Performance, and the International Institute “Interweaving Performance Cultures.” *Ambassadors* is part of the permanent collection of the Rancho Mirage Public Library and was finalist for best short documentary at the Queens World Film Festival, 2014.

For her work on the Freytag Collection, an online archive of New Orleans performers and performance traditions, the U.S. Government granted her the rare national interest-based permanent resident status.

Sascha holds a BA in Film, a MA and a Ph.D in Theater Studies from the City University of New York (CUNY). She teaches film production at Baruch College, CUNY.

## PRODUCER

**Elizabeth Kalos-Kaplan** brings years of event coordination, administrative, and accounting experience – for, among others, the Capital Appeals Project/Promise of Justice Initiative, New Orleans – to her role as a producer. She holds a Ph.D from Tulane University, New Orleans, in American literature with a focus on local Creole culture. She teaches in the English Department of Tulane University.

## CINEMATOGRAPHERS

**David S. White** is a New Orleans-based cinematographer. He was the cinematographer for the documentaries *Bayou Maharajah*, *7 Days in Nepal*, *Innocence Project*, and *The Heart is an Organ*, and for TV shows including, *The Deed*, *NOLA Reno*, *Emerald Gems*, *Small House*, *Big Easy*, and *The Chew*.

## EDITOR

**Michelle Barbin** is the editor of numerous documentaries including *Pianomania*, winner of the Locarno Film Festival Critics' Week Award, and *Born For Ballet*. She regularly edits documentations for 360 Degree, a program for the French-German broadcaster ARTE.

## GRAPHIC DESIGNER

**Kevin King** is founder of **Motherhaus**, a brand consultancy known for solid, strategic insights and meaningful, elegant communications. Based in New York with a creative studio in Cape Town, Kevin is a long-time collaborator. He designed Sascha's website, the artwork for her documentary *Big Chief*, and the accompanying soundtrack CD *Heirs to the Crescent City* (Jason Marsalis).

## MUSIC SUPERVISOR

**Jason Marsalis** is the youngest son of pianist Ellis Marsalis Jr. and his wife Dolores. At age seven, he began sitting in with Ellis' jazz group and has since performed and recorded with his father and many others, for example pianist Marcus Roberts, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, and the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. Jason leads his own group as a drummer and vibraphonist.

## SOUND EDITOR, ADR, FOLEY, AND RE-RECORDING MIXER

**Jon Vogl** owns and operates **Apex Post Production**, the Louisiana-based media company he founded in 2008. As a film industry veteran from 20th Century Fox Studios in Los Angeles, he provides services through Apex that include post-production and sound supervision, re-recording mixing and sound editing for feature films, television, home entertainment, and web-based content. His background includes work on major studio and independent film and television productions, live sound recording, international dubbing and graphics supervision, acoustics, studio design, ADR and foley mixing, and he holds a doctorate degree in music composition.

**Aidan Dykes** has worked at **Apex Post Production** since 2015. Born and raised in Baton Rouge, he quickly relocated to New Orleans after graduating from LSU's E.J. Ourso College of Business to begin working at Apex Post. Formerly coming from a primarily music production background, he stepped into the world of film sound design and mixing with open ears. He's been privileged enough to have worked on all scales of productions from summer blockbusters to independent short films as an ADR mixer, sound editor, and re-recording mixer.

## MUSIC LICENSE CONSULTANT

**Milena Fessmann** is the CEO of **CINESONG**. She has worked on more than 400 movies and tv series as a music supervisor. She is the moderator of several national and international events and panels such as Reeperbahn-Festival 2014-21, c/o pop Cologne 2014-2021, Soundtrack Cologne 2004-2022 and many more. Milena Fessmann teaches music supervising and copyright clearing at film schools such as DFFB Berlin, is an advisory board member of the World Soundtrack Academy and member of the European Film Academy.

## MEDIA RESEARCHER

**Bonnie Rowan** has over 21 years of experience and research credits on over 650 documentaries, exhibits, and publications.

# FULL CREDITS

## DIRECTOR-PRODUCER

Sascha Just

## PRODUCER

Elizabeth Kalos-Kaplan

## CINEMATOGRAPHERS

David S. White  
Paul Galan  
Crista Rock  
Kevin O'Donnell  
Louis P. Zeja  
Matthew Kohn  
Sascha Just

## SOUND RECORDISTS

Michael Delashmet  
Devin Lawrence  
Joshua Wood

## EDITOR

Michelle Barbin

## ONLINE EDITOR

Christian Bäucker

## GRAPHICS, TITLES & ANIMATION

Motherhaus | Kevin King

## MUSIC SUPERVISOR

Jason Marsalis

## SOUND SUPERVISOR

Jon Vogl

## RE-RECORDING

### MIXERS

Jon Vogl  
Aidan Dykes

## SOUND EFFECTS EDITORS

Aidan Dykes  
Maya Lewis  
Joe Diliberto

## DIALOGUE EDITOR

Julia Perret

## FOLEY

Joe Diliberto  
Maya Lewis  
Julia Perret

## DI & COLOR GRADING

Will Milvid

## ADDITIONAL COLOR GRADING

Maura Lindsey

## POST PRODUCTION SERVICES

provided by  
Apex Post Production  
New Orleans, LA

## ARCHIVAL FILM RESEARCHER

Bonnie G. Rowan

## ARCHIVAL CONSULTANTS

Lynn Abbott  
Alaina W. Herbert  
Bruce Raeburn

## PROXY RESEARCHER

Artie Bennett

## CONSULTANTS

Michele Brierre  
Erica Ginsberg  
Peter Frumkin  
Greg Lambousy  
Birgit Reuther

## LEGAL CONSULTANT - NEW YORK

Laverne Berry LLC

## LEGAL CONSULTANT - BERLIN

Julia Bezenberger

## MUSIC LICENSING CONSULTANT

Cinesong | Milena Fessmann

## FOOTAGE TRANSFER & COORDINATION

for the Jazz & Heritage  
Foundation Archive  
Tom Murphy  
Joe Stolarick

## TRANSFERS OF FOOTAGE FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Colorlab - Archival Film Services

## TRANSFERS OF STEVE MASAKOWSKI'S TEACHING FOOTAGE

Ian Painter

## ADDITIONAL EDITING

Aaron Zake

## ADDITIONAL SOUND WORK

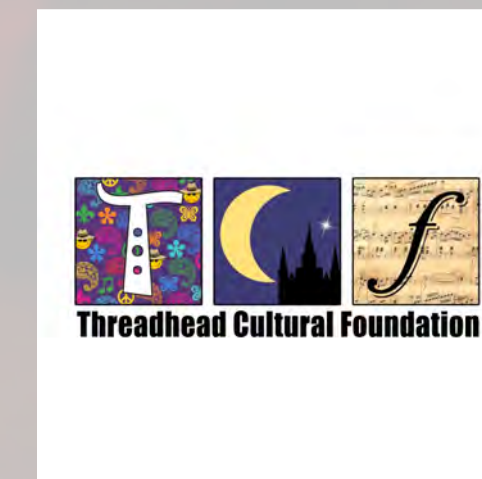
Jochen Jezussek

## PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

David Rivera

## MAKE UP

BrittanyRose La Femina



# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*In 2011, on my very first visit to New Orleans, I had the great fortune to be introduced to Ellis Marsalis. His affable modesty, his subtle sense of humor, and of course his music impressed me immensely. Though Ellis was notoriously private, we easily formed a bond and, over the next years, he entrusted me with bringing his story to the screen. It was the greatest gift he could have given me.*

*Ellis is the film to which everything in my life has led up. Making this film is a continuous series of personal and artistic revelations.*

*I have always loved jazz for its improvisation, its ability to look at a theme from many directions and to intertwine the musical stories it tells. Yet only as Ellis and I worked in tandem on this film I became aware how deeply jazz influences the way that I approach cinematic storytelling, the way I look at life.*



*Ellis and I shared a belief in the transformative power of the arts. It is my film's goal to continue in this spirit.*

*Sascha*

*Sascha Just*

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