

Marsalis celebrates a year with Leno and 'Tonight'

By John Crook

If anyone out there is contemplating a major lifestyle change, Branford Marsalis has a few words to offer on the subject. On May 25, 1992, he took over as the host's hand-picked music director on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* - and, to paraphrase the famous Chinese curse, he's lived in interesting times ever since.

Not that he has any regrets, as he phones from his Burbank office two weeks before his one-year anniversary with Leno. In fact, he's very proud of the show, even if he doesn't have a lot of time to brag about it. "It's been a strange year, just in terms of making the adjustment to being on television. I'm still making that adjustment," he says.

Things weren't made any easier by the storm of controversy, however unjustified, that soon broke over Leno and his team. Helen Kushnick, the original executive producer, was

replaced late in the year by NBC after she was accused of using strong-arm tactics to keep prospective guests away from rival talk shows. At about the same time, gossip hinted that disgruntled Johnny Carson friends and colleagues were trying to make things tough for his successor, and David Letterman went public with his displeasure over being passed over for the *Tonight* job. Weeks passed before NBC formally confirmed that they were sticking with Leno and company, as originally announced.

Now that the dust has settled and the tension dissipated, the 32-year-old Marsalis can be philosophical about what was at the root of the controversy.

"Change," he says quietly. "Change is a hard thing for a lot of people to deal with. To accept change is to accept that the way some things were when you grew up is becoming outdated. I mean, my

grandfather had a hard time accepting that a man had been on the moon. He had a real problem with that. But change is the way of history. It's just going to happen."

Leno moved quickly to make some sweeping changes, the composer/saxophonist acknowledges, adding that "some people" were just too thin-skinned about the new look and sound.

"Early on, someone asked me how our new band would differ from Doc's (Severinsen)," he recalls, "and I said, 'Well, we're going to have a hipper band.' And all hell broke loose."

During what he now drily refers to as "the Quandary, Decision '92," he tried to concentrate on his musical chores and let Leno handle the bigger issues. For his part, Marsalis knew that he would remain loyal to Leno.

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