

b jenkins

Her territory sunflower, insurgent floor time in real time in the field  
museum—bertha lee and her lyric ways and her urban plan. up and down  
the regular highway and every two-tone station, passing through  
to cure, for preservation to unfold it all away, she put the new thing  
in the open cell, one more time about the theory of who we are.

In the names away in blocks  
with double names to interrupt and  
gather, kept dancing in tight circles  
between break and secret, vaulted  
with records in our basement, where  
the long-haired hippies and afro-  
blacks all get together across the  
tracks and they party, everybody sown  
like grain and touched in stride.

Now the cold new reckoning is tired and you've been  
waiting for a preferential song. the multiplex should be in the  
frame like bodies in a house way back in the woods, fled in  
suspended projects like the real thing, posed for the midnight  
trill. essential shtetl of the world stage, born way before you  
was born, move the administered word by breathing, to hand  
beautiful edge around.

**Harmony Holiday** <harmonyholiday@gmail.com> Sun, May 6, 2012, 4:05PM ☆ ☺ ↶ ⋮  
to amirib ▾

Dear Amiri,

I'm really excited about the shows you're doing at Gatehouse with Cecil this week. Won't sleep on them the way I did Pharoah at Birdland. Looking forward to it... And if by chance you've located a copy of your Black Spirits (festival of new...) LP, or a digital version or anything, would still love to hear it and help get the ball moving on a re-issue if you're up for it. Hope all is great in the Ark. Vous Etes Swing, H

...

[Message clipped] [View entire message](#)

**Amirib@aol.com** Mon, May 7, 2012, 5:12PM ☆ ☺ ↶ ⋮  
to me ▾

Hey, Haven't been able to find a copy of Black Spirits. See you tomorrow, you'll meet my wife, Amina. Amiri B

\*\*\*

**Harmony Holiday** <harmonyholiday@gmail.com> Mon, May 7, 2012, 5:15PM ☆ ☺ ↶ ⋮  
to Amirib ▾

); Looking forward to it! See you tomorrow.

\*\*\*

...

# RIPPING OFF BLACK MUSIC

From Thomas "Daddy" Rice to Jimi Hendrix

**Part the First: Being an Exposition on the Development of the Myth of Rock Music as Viewed by Antagonistic Participants, and Containing as Much of the History of the Minstrel Show as Is Necessary for the Reader's Understanding.**

ELVIS PRESLEY was the greatest minstrel America ever spawned, and he appeared in bold whiteface. He sang like a nigger, danced like a nigger, walked like a nigger, and talked like a nigger. Chuck Berry, unfortunately, was a nigger. They are two of the more splendid beings in the Great Chain of Minstrelsy that stretches from the start of the nineteenth century to the present, encompassing circuses, medicine shows, Broadway, the Fillmore East, nightclubs, concert halls, television, and Las Vegas.



Thomas "Daddy" Rice

The patriarch of the minstrel show was Thomas "Daddy" Rice, a white gentleman who, with a keen eye for entertainment, based his 1829 debut on the antics of a deformed and rheumatic ex-slave. The ex-slave made a few pennies a day performing a necessarily limited but appealing song and dance he called "Jump Jim Crow"; charmed with it, Daddy studied, rehearsed, and in a short time made show-business history. His "Jump Jim

Crow," buttressed with ragged clothes and blackface makeup, was acclaimed the comic performance of the Louisville season; within weeks Daddy was the toast of New York, and eight years later the toast of London.

Naturally, minstrel shows grew like Topsy, playing to the highborn and the lowly across the land. With their Irrepressible High Spirits they cheered the South through the Civil War, and managed to create such goodwill in their audiences that by the late 1860s even Negro performers were in demand. Negro minstrels, though, were accorded no special privileges, the assumption being that none had a patent on the "pathos and humor," the "artless philosophy," or the "plaintive and hilarious melodies" of Negro life once it became public entertainment. Like their white co-workers, black minstrels wore burnt cork makeup and colorful rags (as country bumpkin Jim Crow) or white gloves and tails (as city dandy Zip Coon). Once these Ethiopian bards overcame some prejudice, particularly among Southern audiences, they were said to be very funny indeed.

Secession, abolition, the Civil War, and Reconstruction passed: the minstrel remained. When the form itself faded toward the century's end (lamented by song publisher E.B. Marks as a sign that manners no longer flourished in America), its clowning and soft-shoe routines trotted into vaudeville and its songs drifted into Tin Pan Alley and musical comedy. Songs by black writers were placed in white shows, serving as vehicles for white stars and as best sellers for white publishers. White composers, updating Stephen Foster's habit of borrowing melodies from black churchgoers and boatmen, spent hours in black clubrooms writing down the tunes they heard and copyrighting them as their own.

Song-and-dance comics George Walker and Bert Williams were billed

for a time as "The Two Real Coons" by managers anxious to distinguish them from numerous noncoon rivals. And James Weldon Johnson writes about the famous New York producer who gained a reputation for inventiveness by studying the Will Cook-Paul Lawrence Dunbar show, *Clorindy—the Origin of the Cakewalk*, and learning from it that choruses might be taught to sing and dance simultaneously, and that a certain syncopated beat was very catchy when applied to orchestral music. As radio took its place in the entertainment pantheon, minstrels began to call themselves Amos 'n' Andy; and when the first talkie musical film opened, no one was surprised to see veteran vaudeviller Al Jolson enter in blackface, prance down a runway, fall on one knee and cry "Mammy!" while the orchestra played "Swanee" furiously in the background.

The white minstrel has an endless supply of incarnations: playing nigger is first-rate theater. It has laughs, tears, cheap thrills—a bargain catharsis. The performer's white skin, like an actor's curtain call, is an ingenious safety device, signaling that the show is over and nothing has changed. Aristotle neglected to mention that the aftermath of a catharsis is the viewer's smug satisfaction with the capacity for feeling, a satisfaction that permits a swift and comfortable return to business as usual. You can't lose playing the White Negro, because you are in the unique position of retaining the material benefits of being white while sampling the mythological ones of being black.

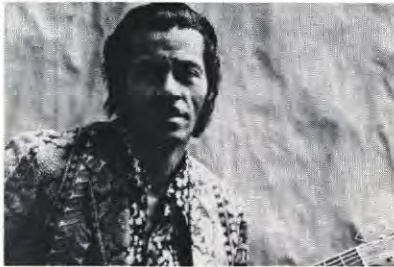
MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the 1950s, when America's teenagers thrilled to the sounds of rhythm and blues. It began, so they say, with a small group, first listening to the

Margo Jefferson, a free-lance writer living in New York, graduated from Columbia University School of Journalism in 1971.

PERFORMING ARTS

fugitive sounds on black radio stations, then venturing into black clubs and theaters. White disc jockeys took notice, white record producers and radio station owners took action, and faster than you could say "Zip Coon" the country's youth was dancing to the sounds of Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry.

Chess



Chuck Berry

RCA



Elvis Presley

In fact, one portion of America chose Elvis, son of Daddy Rice, and the other opted for Chuck, bastard of Jim Crow. Elvis was a good boy. In addition to appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, he made movies in Hollywood with scrubbed starlets and stage-set teenagers who hopped like the Peter Gennaro Dancers. Chuck Berry remained in rock shows and black theaters, complaining about courts and car salesmen, mocking high school, and begging rock and roll to deliver him from the days of old. Elvis lived quietly in Hollywood with his mother while Chuck tried to smuggle a child bride across the Georgia state line, and when Elvis went into the Army, Chuck went to jail.

Then there was Bo Diddley, Chicago follower of Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, who declared that he had a tombstone hand and a graveyard mind, a taste for diamond rings, barbed wire, and cobra snakes; he warned, prophetically, that you can't judge a book by looking at its cover. And there was Little Richard, who piled his hair in lush waves, dressed in satin and brocade, taught the Beatles to cry "Woooo!" and forbade a young band member named Jimi Hendrix to wear a fancy shirt onstage

because "I am the King, the King of Rock and Rhythm. I am the only one allowed to be pretty."

There was Fats Domino too, and Jackie Wilson and Chuck Willis; also Bill Haley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bobby Darin; there was LaVern Baker, minstrelized by Theresa Brewer, and Etta James, Jane Crowed by Georgia Gibbs. There were many others too, like Big Maybelle, Ruth Brown, the Chantels, and the Jesters, who stayed in the rhythm and blues market, with their unpalatably ethnic voices and rhythms, and were rarely heard of by whites until the 1950s revival nearly twenty years later, when no one cared to spoil the nostalgia by remembering whom they had or hadn't grown up listening to. Peter Townsend of the Who has written about those days:

*I'm a substitute for another guy,  
I look pretty tall but my heels are high.*

*The simple things you see are all complicated,  
I look pretty young but I'm just backdated.*

*It's a substitute lies for fact . . .  
I look all white but my dad was black . . .*

Elvis and his contemporaries shocked and thrilled because they were hybrids. What had taken place was a kind of Immaculate Miscegenation, resulting in a creature who was at once a Prancing Nigger and a Blue-Eyed Boy.

**T**HE BEATLES emerged before American audiences in 1963, with a varied assortment of songs, some clever updatings of the Everly Brothers sort, some new versions of old black rock hits by the Isley Brothers, the Shirelles, Little Richard, the Miracles, and Chuck Berry. According to rock and roll chroniclers, the Beatles "revolutionized rock and roll by bringing it back to its original sources and traditions"—in other words, they brought Us together. It would be more accurate to say that the Beatles seasoned, cooked, and served some of Us up to others of Us with appropriate garnishing. They refined and expurgated the minstrel show performed rather crudely by Elvis, preferring to sketch what he had filled in and to suggest what he had made literal.

Their charm lay in the fact that they were the visual antithesis of what they sang, "a minstrel entertainment en-

tirely exempt from the vulgarities which have hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas." \* When Chuck Berry sings, "Roll Over Beethoven/Dig these rhythm 'n' blues!" it is an outlaw's challenge to white culture. When the Beatles sing their version, it has the sweet naughtiness of Peter Pan crowing "I Won't Grow Up."

The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and others sparked a jubilee. In news conferences they boldly announced that they listened to Chuck Jackson, Smokey Robinson, and Solomon Burke; white fans listened too, or at least memorized the names. The Stones pronounced Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour" the best record of the year; "Midnight Hour" became the hit record of the year.

Far from breaking ground, these groups were the inheritors of a tradition that began in England with the eighteenth century, when "Negro songs" were first performed on the concert stage. In 1866 a black minstrel troupe visited London, and the local streetsingers began to blacken their faces; English music-hall stars were soon crossing the Atlantic to popularize black-inspired American songs with white American audiences. During the 1920s small groups of English people began to cultivate the jazz styles that black creators had abandoned, collecting records, bringing performers to Europe, and forming their own bands.



Howlin' Wolf

Muddy Waters

Eventually a country blues revival developed, during which bluesmen like Big Bill Broonzy, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Leadbelly

\* An advertisement for the Virginia Minstrels, one of the most successful white groups of 1843.

found themselves celebrated less as musicians than as walking marks of American oppression. Tours for "authentic" blues and gospel singers were arranged and the new urban blues represented by Muddy Waters' electric guitar frowned upon. By the early Sixties, though, rhythm and blues had taken hold, and young Britishers were listening eagerly to Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Slim Harpo, and Bo Diddley, while practicing black voices in local clubs and basements. After a time they began to take themselves very seriously: "We sing more colored than the Africans," boasted John Lennon, and few Americans were inclined to dispute him.

High-school and college students stepped out in style. People began to drive onto campus in their convertibles with the local soul station blaring at maximum intensity. Boys began to landscape their sentences with "man," "together," and "can you dig it?" Everybody had an amusing story about a trip to the Apollo or the Regal in the custody of a black friend. Black rock history became fashionable as a kind of gutter camp: one spoke of how dynamic the Temps were live; one spent an afternoon in Roxbury tracking down a copy of "Function at the Junction." One murmured the words of songs by Gary "U.S." Bonds and the Coasters, and invited them to perform at one's school, wishing privately that they would get rid of their iridescent suits and try to look as if they hadn't been drinking. If one was really into black music, one spoke to a black friend about the tragedy of Billie Holiday—did she know the song "Don't Explain"?—and one was puzzled and a bit hurt when the black friend answered sharply that she had known "Don't Explain" since she was eleven years old.

It is jarring and most distressing to walk into a room one has considered private and find it ringed with cameras, spotlights, and insistent strangers claiming long acquaintance and making plans to move in and redecorate without being invited. Black music and with it the private black self were suddenly grossly public—tossed onstage, dressed in clown white, and banded about with a gleeful arrogance that just yesterday had chosen to ignore and condescend.

Blacks, it seemed, had lost the battle for mythological ownership of rock, as future events would prove.



# Remedios Guanzon.

## Father dead.

## Mother blind.

**REMEDIOS GUANZON**  
**AGE 5. Father dead. TB. Mother blind. Earns a few pennies begging. Brother is a scavenger. Remedios guides mother's hands to spots on clothes that require particular scrubbing. Family lives in one small room. Must crawl through small opening to enter. Walls from material found at city dump. No facilities. Help to Remedios means help to entire family.**

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**35 YEARS OF HELP WITH A HUMAN TOUCH**

**Part the Second: A Short Account of the Monterey Pop Festival, With Special Attention Paid to Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.**

**T**HE MONTEREY POP FESTIVAL. Summer. 1967. California. Acid rock was decreed the new force in rock music, its best exponent being the Jefferson Airplane. The East was honored through Ravi Shankar, Africa acknowledged through Hugh Masakela, and hovering over it all was Otis Redding, veteran of the rhythm and blues-gold lamé suit circuit. Having been largely ignored by American whites until Monterey (and possibly until England voted him the number one vocalist of the year), Otis was praised extravagantly and dubbed the King of Soul promptly after he died that winter. A tragedy that he had been so taken for granted (blacks were unaware that *they* had taken him so for granted), and there will never be another Otis (no, of course not, said blacks, but there will be Wilson and Bobby and LeRoy and Sonny), and his recording of "Satisfaction" was not up to the Stones', still . . .

Monterey was the counterculture melting pot, and the blend was, as usual, suspiciously lacking in variety. "It's an American Dream," declared Eric Burdon. "Includes Indians too." There were none onstage at Monterey and few in the audience, but clearly people thought well of them: why else were they all wearing beaded headbands and fringed vests?

Two cult figures performed at Monterey: Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

Jimi Hendrix learned to play the

guitar listening to Muddy Waters, Elmore James, B.B. and Albert King. He played with Little Richard, the Isley Brothers, Ike and Tina Turner, and King Curtis, and he found success in England with music that was a tense fusion of acid electronics, jazz, and blues. He made himself a grotesque and a god—America's handcrafted Spade, obscene and absurd, sensual and elegant. He came onstage at Monterey with pressed hair and a shirt of scarlet ruffles. He shuffled, jived, flashed his teeth, and announced to the crowd, "I just want to grab you and—you know—one of them things man, one of them things. But I just can't *do* that. So I'm gonna sacrifice something I really love. We're gonna do the English and American combined anthem. Now don't get mad . . . It's the only thing I can do." And he began to chant "Wild Thing." Then, determined to fulfill or to parody every living fantasy of black macho-sexuality, he raped his guitar, set it on fire, and danced as it burned.

Two years later he came to Woodstock. "Wild Thing" had become an autopsy of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, his ingratiating a distant "You can all leave if you want. We're just jamming." He stood still and played, and while his music grew multiple and rich he seemed to splinter and fragment. To blacks he was the pimp of a cheap acid rock craze; to whites he was a sacred whore, dispensing grace and salvation by playing Black Stud Madman over and over. And so he began with his guitar and ended by sacrificing himself to an audience that fed off his complex pain as they would have from a dazzling display of costumes at a Ziegfeld spectacular. When he screamed they cheered; when he pounded his feet they clapped their hands; when he choked on his own vomit they played "Purple Haze" and told each other that he was kissing the sky. It was a common death, though, like the alcoholic Chicago winter death of Blind Lemon Jefferson, or the drug death of Charlie Parker; a sinister death, like Sam Cooke's shooting and Otis Redding's Wisconsin plane crash.

And then there was Janis, shifting from Bessie Smith to Mavis Staple to Big Mama Thornton, stopping at Otis Redding, Tina Turner, and Big Maybelle along the way. She was a misfit from Port Arthur, Texas—"I got treated very badly in Texas—they

don't treat beatniks too good in Texas"—and she discovered early that identifying with archetypal misfits makes life a little easier. She was 1920s in style, with ostrich feathers, silver bracelets, and a raunchiness she sometimes wore like a new and slightly tight piece of clothing. Janis's life had echoes of Bessie Smith's, both being small-town Southern girls who took the cities with their singing, drinking, and swearing; both being dubbed Queen of the Blues, which means be on top when you sing "Down-Hearted Blues" and be a winner when you sing "Women Is Losers." But Janis was a white woman using a black woman's blues to get to her own. At her worst she parodied and hid the other; at her best (harder to come by, not as pleasing to her audience), the mimicry stopped and her own pain came out in her own way. She may have dismissed or forgotten the distance between an actress and her role: having purchased a tombstone for Bessie Smith some thirty years after the fact, she died a few weeks later, on the same day Bessie had.

**Part the Third: Containing an Examination of the Rock Star, in Both His White and His Black Incarnations.**

**E**LVIS, THE BEATLES, the Stones, the Animals, Mountain, Cream, Joe Cocker, Julie Driscoll, the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Leon Russell, Rod Stewart, fans and record buyers—all took some part of the particular style of hedonism, toughness, sexuality, and cynicism found in black music and committed the sins of legitimization, definition, and miscomprehension against it. The crudity of the Daddy Rice-Jim Crow transaction has been smoothed out over the years, but no black performer yet has been able to get the praise and attention he or she deserves independent of white tutelage and translation. Rock has adopted and refined Europe's neurotic patronage system, based on a birthright of race rather than family. Here the benevolent aristocrat, sometimes a critic, more often a performer, dips into the vat of scrambling musicians and extracts one or two who appeal to him—whose impurities have been boiled away over the years. Sonny Boy Williamson, B. B. King, Muddy Waters, Papa John Creach, simmered and done to a turn.



Jimi Hendrix



The Rolling Stones

A Stones tour is rarely complete without a black performer, be it Stevie Wonder or Ike and Tina Turner; the black performer gets nationwide fame and fortune; the Stones get a crack at authenticity. Mick Jagger stood in the wings every night to watch Tina and the Ikettes slide, turn, and kick with impeccable abandon; at the time he was content to move about the stage hitting a tambourine until it broke and then hitting another. By the tour's end, much to Tina's surprise, he had managed to devise a unique if labored form of rhythmic dancing, though it is said he repaid their beneficence by having the microphones turned off if they performed too well. B.B. King, Muddy Waters, and most of the long-standing bluespeople were brought to theaters, clubs, and large audiences by bands of their young, white, and much more successful imitators. Brenda Holloway of "Every Little Bit Hurts" sings trifling backups for Joe Cocker; Merry Clayton was "discovered" backing the Stones; Billy Preston was brought forth from the wilderness by George Harrison.

What follows is inevitable. There is measured praise in the *New York Times*, comparing the performer to other black "greats" and warning against commercialism. There is a hipper interview or review in *Rolling Stone*, which also mentions commercialism (tied, it seems, to the black's overeagerness to be successful). There is a brief appearance on the Johnny Carson or Dick Cavett show where the performer is hustled off without being allowed to speak or asked for a definition of soul. There is a string of tours and an album, with notes written by a white disc jockey, producer, or performer, referring to the funkiness of the artist and the down-home quality of the black musical experience.

The economics of the patronage system are obvious. Rock music is managed by the big powers that con-

trol Madison Avenue and by the smaller ones that wish they could. Whites control the media that promote a performer, the apparatus that produces records and arranges the right concert appearances, and as consumers, they outnumber blacks ten to one. Under these circumstances it is difficult for black audiences to support black performers financially as they need and deserve to be supported, and it is not realistic to expect performers to shun an audience of several million when the returns are so great. And so whites take other whites' word on which black performers to listen to, and these black performers move from the chitling to the chopped-steak-and-caviar circuit because certain whites were clever enough to detect how black, hence how successful with black audiences, they were. The Ethiopian Business, as Stephen Foster called it, is a strange business indeed.

#### Part the Fourth: In Which Patterns of Imitation and Sacrifice Are Examined and Found Wanting.

THE CURRENT FAMILIARITY, then, breeds contempt, exploitation, and a great deal of bad music. Borrowing itself is not the question, since music lives by eclecticism. Still, if you borrow, you must return, and nobody wants an imitation back if they've lent out an original. Bonnie Raitt, Carole King, Bonnie Bramlett, Randy Newman, Joy of Cooking, Tracey Nelson, Bob Dylan, and some others have characters or traditions of their own to which they have joined blues and jazz. Others are singing and playing in styles that derive more from Country and Western, pop and musical, or classical forms. But far too many white performers thrive and survive on personas and performances that are studies in ventriloquism and minstrelsy, careless footnotes to a badly read blues text. "There are a lot of colored guys who can sing me off the stage," says Rod Stewart. "But half the battle is selling it, not singing it. It's the image, not what you sing."

And the minstrel image has grown more complex over the years: starting, as Imamu Baraka has said, with a simple, "Watch these Niggers," it moved to, "Watch how well I imitate these Niggers," then to, "Let's all abandon ourselves and act like Ne-

groes," and finally to, "Observe, participate and enjoy, as I, a white, adopt certain characteristics of the blacks, bestowing upon them a style and a setting that they are missing in their natural, rougher form."

Has a young admirer ever attached himself to you? He dogged your footsteps, dressed as nearly like you as possible, acquired your mannerisms and expressions, and told everyone how wonderful you were. At first you may have been amused, even flattered. But you became uneasy, then annoyed. You were being caricatured, your individuality undermined and cheapened. You felt used, fed off of, and your admirer took on the lewdness of the voyeur. You were being appropriated for his needs, used as raw material in his efforts to divert or remodel himself. Finally, you despised him.

Imitation is a form of cannibalism. And the imitator is never content merely to nibble; oh no, every so often, when life becomes dull or frustrating, he becomes greedy. Nothing will satisfy him but the whole, body and blood.

Black musicians have made up an impressive display of sacrifices over the years. Their records are distributed with the reverence accorded the wine and wafer, while magazine litanies lament the cruelty of the world and the tragedy of candles burned at both ends. Nevertheless, the sacrifice, it is finally agreed, was for the good of the community, since the appetite satisfied was the spiritual craving for fresh vision and emotional rebirth. Or, as Eric Clapton told the *New York Times*, the death of Jimi Hendrix was "almost a necessity." Sacrifices are always "almost a necessity" when you are not the victim.

The night Jimi died I dreamed this was the latest step in a plot being designed to eliminate blacks from rock music so that it may be recorded in history as a creation of whites. Future generations, my dream ran, will be taught that while rock may have had its beginnings among blacks, it had its true flowering among whites. The best black artists will thus be studied as remarkable primitives who unconsciously foreshadowed future developments.

Two weeks later Janis Joplin was dead. What does that mean? I asked myself, momentarily confused. It means she thought she was black and somebody took her at her word. □

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## THE SILENCE OF THELONIOUS MONK

by John Edgar Wideman

One night years ago in Paris trying to read myself to sleep, I discovered that Verlaine loved Rimbaud. And in his fashion Rimbaud loved Verlaine. Which led to a hip-hop farce in the rain at a train station. The Gare du Midi I think. The two poets exchanging angry words. And like flies to buttermilk a crowd attracted to the quarrel till Verlaine pulls a pistol. People scatter and Rimbaud, wounded before, hollers for a cop. Just about then, at the moment I begin mixing up their story with mine, with the little I recall of Verlaine's poetry—*Il pleure dans mon coeur/Comme il pleut sur la ville*—lines I recited to impress you, lifetimes ago, didn't I, the first time we met—just then with the poets on hold in the silence and rain buffeting the train station's iron-roofed platform, I heard the music of Thelonious Monk playing somewhere. So softly it might have been present all along as I read about the sorry-assed ending of the poets' love affair—love offered, consumed, spit out, two people shocked speechless, lurching away like drunks, like sleepwalkers, from the mess they'd made. Monk's music just below my threshold of awareness, scoring the movie I was imagining, a soundtrack inseparable from what the actors were feeling, from what I felt watching them pantomime their melodrama.

Someone playing a Monk record in Paris in the middle of the night many years ago and the scratchy music seeping through ancient boardinghouse walls a kind of silence, a ground against which the figure of pitta-pattering rain was displayed, rain in the city, rain Verlaine claimed he could hear echoing in his heart, then background and ground reversed and Monk the only sound reaching me through night's quiet.

Listening to Monk, I closed the book. Let the star-crossed poets rest in peace. Gave up on sleep. Decided to devote some quality time to feeling sorry for myself. Imagining unhappy ghosts, wondering which sad stories had trailed me across the ocean ready to barge into the space sleep definitely had no intention of filling. Then you arrived. Silently at first. You playing so faintly in the background it would have taken the surprise of someone whispering your name in my ear to alert me to your presence. But your name, once heard, I'd have to confess you'd been there all along.

In a way it could end there, in a place as close to silence as silence gets, the moment before silence becomes what it must be next, what's been there the whole time patiently waiting, part of the silence, what makes silence speak always, even when you can't hear it. End with me wanting to tell you everything about Monk, how strange and fitting his piano solo sounded in that foreign place and you not there to

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This story first appeared in *Esquire* (November 1997) and is reprinted here by permission of the author.



tell so it could / did end except, then as now, you lurk in the silence. I can't pretend not to hear you. So I pretend you hear me telling you what I need to tell, pretend silence is you listening, your presence confirmed word by word, the ones I say, the unspoken ones I see your lips form, that form you.

Two years before Monk's death, eight years into what critic and record producer Orrin Keepnews characterized as Monk's "final retreat into total inactivity and seclusion," the following phone conversation between Monk and Keepnews occurred:

Thelonious, are you touching the piano at all these days?

No, I'm not.

Do you want to get back to playing?

No, I don't.

I'm only in town for a few days. Would you like to come and visit, to talk about the old days?

No, I wouldn't.

Silence one of Monk's languages, everything he says laced with it. Silence a thick brogue anybody hears when Monk speaks the other tongues he's mastered. It marks Monk as being from somewhere other than wherever he happens to be, his offbeat accent, the odd way he puts something different in what we expect him to say. An extra something not supposed to be there, or an empty space where something usually is. Like all there is to say but you don't say after you learn in a casual conversation that someone precious is dead you've just been thinking you must get around to calling one day soon and never thought a day might come when you couldn't.

I heard a story from a friend who heard it from Panama Red, a conk-haired, red-bone, geechee old-timer who played with Satchmo way back when and he's still on the scene people say sounding better and better the older he gets, Panama Red who frequented the deli on Fifty-seventh Street Monk used for kosher.

One morning numerous years ago, story time always approximate, running precisely by grace of the benefit of the doubt, Red said:

How you doing, Monk.

Uh-huh, Monk grunts.

Good morning, Mr. Monk. How you do ink this fine morning? Sammy the butcher calls over his shoulder, busy with a takeout order or whatever it is, keeping his back turned.

If the dead lunch meat replied, it would be no surprise at all to Sammy compared with how high he'd jump, how many fingers he'd lose in the slicer, if the bearish, bearded schwartze in the knitted Kufi said good morning back. Monk stares at the white man in the white apron and T-shirt behind the white deli counter. At himself in the mirror where the man saw him. At the thin, perfect sheets that buckle off the cold slab of corned beef

Red has his little neat white package in his hand and wants to get home and fix him a chopped-liver-and-onion sandwich and have it washed down good with a cold Heineken before his first pupil of the afternoon buzzes so he's on his way out when he hears Sammy say:

Be with you in a moment, Mr. Monk.

Leave that mess you're messing wit alone, nigger, and get me some potato knishes, the story goes and Panama Red cracking up behind Monk's habit of niggering white black brown red Jew Muslim Christian, the only distinction of color mattering the ivory or ebony keys of his instrument and Thelonious subject to fuck with that difference, too, chasing rainbows.

Heard the story on the grapevine, once, twice, and tried to retell it and couldn't get it right and thought about the bird—do you remember it—coo-cooing outside the window just as we both were waking up. In the silence after the bird's song I said, Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king and you said Don't forget the queen and I said Queen doesn't rhyme with sing and you said It probably wasn't a blackbird singing anyway and I said I thought it was a mourning dove and then the bird started up again trying to repeat itself, trying, trying but never quite getting it right it seemed. So it tried and tried again as if it had fallen in love with the sound it had heard itself coo once perfectly

Rain in the city. When the rain starts to falling / my love come tumbling down / and its raining teardrops in my heart. Rain a dream lots of people are sharing and shyly Monk thinks of how it might feel to climb in naked with everybody under the covers running through green grass in a soft summer shower. Then it's windshield wipers whipping back and forth. Quick glimpses of the invisible city splashing like eggs broken against the glass. I'm speeding along, let's say the West Side Highway, a storm on top, around, and under. It feels like being trapped in one of those automatic car washes doing its best to bust your windows and doors, rapping your metal skin like drumsticks. I'm driving blind and crazed as everybody else down a flooded highway no one with good sense would be out on a night like this. Then I hit a swatch of absolute quiet under an overpass and for a split second anything is possible. I remember it has happened before, this leap over the edge into vast, unexpected silence, happened before and probably will again if I survive the furious storm, the traffic and tumult waiting to punish me instantly on the far side of the underpass. In that silence that's gone before it gets here good I recalled exactly another time, driving at night with you through a rainstorm. Still in love with you though I hadn't been with you for years, ten, fifteen, till that night of dog-and-cat rain on an expressway circling the city after our eyes had met in a crowded room. You driving, me navigating, searching for a sign to Woodside you warned me would come up all the sudden. There it is. There it is, you shouted. Shit. I missed it. We can get off the next exit, I said. But you said, No. Said you didn't know the way Didn't want to get lost in the scary storm. I missed the turn for your apartment and you said, It's late anyway Too late to go back and you'd get hopelessly lost coming off the next exit, so we continued downtown to my hotel, where you dropped me off after a goodnight, goodbye-again peck on the cheek. Monk on the radio with a whole orchestra rooty-tooty at Town Hall, as we raced away from the sign I didn't see till we passed it. Monk's music breaking the silence after we missed our turn, after we hollered to hear each other over the rain, after we flew over the edge and the roof popped off and the sides split and for a moment we were suspended in a soundless bubble where invisible roads crisscrossed going nowhere, anywhere. Airborne, the tires aquaplaning, all four hooves of a

galloping horse simultaneously in the air just like Muybridge, your favorite photographer, claimed, but nobody believed the nigger, did they, till he caught it on film.

Picture five or six musicians sitting around Rudy Van Gelder's living room, which is serving as a recording studio this afternoon. Keepnews is paying for the musicians' time, for Van Gelder's know-how and equipment, and everybody ready to go but Monk. Monk's had the charts a week and Keepnews knows he's studied them from comments Monk muttered while the others sauntered in for the session. But Monk is Monk. He keeps fiddle-faddling with a simple tune, da, da, da, da, plunks the notes, stares into thin air as if he's studying a house of cards he's constructed there, waiting for it to fall apart. Maybe the stare's not long in terms of minutes (unless you're Keepnews, paying the bill) but long enough for the other musicians to be annoyed. Kenny Clarke, the drummer, picks up the Sunday funnies from a coffee table. Monk changes pace, backpedals midphrase, turns the notes into a signifying riff.

K.C. you know you can't read. You drum-drum dummy Don't be cutting your eyes at me. Ima A B C this tune to death, Mister Kenny Clarke. Take my time wit it. Uh-huh. One and two and one and two it to death, K.C. Don't care if your eyes light up and your stomach says howdy One anna two anna one anna we don't start till I say start. Till I go over it again. Pick it clean. All the red boogers of meat off the bone then belch and fart and suck little strings I missed out my teefs and chew them last salty, sweet gristle bits till the cows come home and then, maybe then, it might be time to start so stop bugging me with your bubble eyes like you think you got somewhere better to go.

Once I asked Monk what is this thing called love. Bebop, hip-hop, whatever's good till the last drop and you never get enough of it even when you get as much as you can handle, more than you can handle, he said, just as you'd expect from somebody who's been around such things and appreciates them connoisseurly but also with a passionate edge so it's always the first time, the only time, love's ever happened and Monk can't help but grunt uh-huh, uh-huh while he's playing even though he's been loved before and it ain't no big thing, just the only thing, the music, love, lifting me.

Monk says he thinks of narrow pantherish hips, the goateed gate to heaven, and stately, stately he slides the silky drawers down, pulls them over her steeped knees, her purple-painted toes. Tosses the panties high behind his back without looking because he knows Phippen's where he's supposed to be, trailing the play, sniffing the alley-ooop dish, already slamming it through the hoop so Monk can devote full attention to sliding both his large, buoyant hands up under the curve of her buttocks. A beard down there trimmed neat as Monk trims his.

Trim, one of love's names. Poontang. Leg. Nooky Cock.

Next chorus also about love. Not so much a matter of mourning a lost love as it is wondering how and when love will happen next or if love will ever happen again because in this vale of Vaseline and tears, whatever is given is also taken away. Love opens in the exact space of wondering what my chances are, figuring the hopeless odds against love. Then, biff, bam. Just when you least expect it, Monk says. Having known love before, I'm both a lucky one, ahead of the game, and also scared to death by memories of how sweet it is, how sad something that takes only a small bit of anybody's time can't be found more copiously, falling as spring rain or sunlight these simple things remind me of you and still do do do when Monk scatters notes like he's

barefoot feeding chicken feed to chickens or bleeding drop by drop precious Lord in the snow.

I believe when we're born each of us receives an invisible ladder we're meant to scale. We commence slowly, little baby shaky steps. Then bolder ones as we get the hang of it. Learn our powers, learn the curious construction of these ladders leaning on air, how the rungs are placed irregularly, almost as if they customize themselves to our stepping and when we need them they're there or seem to be there solid under our feet because we're steady climbing and everybody around us steady climbing till it seems these invisible ladders, measure by measure, are music we perform as easy as breathing, playing our song, we smile shyly, uneasily the few times we remember how high and wide we've propelled ourselves into thin air step by step on rungs we never see disappearing behind us. And you can guess the rest of that tune, Monk says.

You place your foot as you always do, do, do, one in front of the other, then risk as you always do, do, do your weight on it so the other foot can catch up. Instead of dance music you hear a silent wind in your ears, blood pounding your temples, you're inside a house swept up in a tornado and it's about to pop, you're about to come tumbling down.

Don't blame the missing rung. The ladder's still there. A bridge of sighs, of notes hanging in the air. A quicksilver run down the piano keys, each rib real as it's touched, then wiped clean, gone as Monk's hand flies glissando in the other direction.

One night trying to read myself to sleep I heard the silence of rain. You might call silence a caesura, a break in a line of verse, the line pausing naturally to breathe, right on time, on a dime. But always a chance the line will never finish because the pause that refreshes can also swallow everything to the right and left of it.

Smoke curls from a gun barrel. The old poet, dissed by his young lover, shoots him, is on his way to jail. Rimbaud recovers from the wound, heads south towards long, long silence. Standing on a steamer's deck, baseball cap backward on his head, elbows on the rail, baggy pants drooping past the crack of his ass, Rimbaud sees the sea blistered by many dreamers like himself who leap off ships when no one's looking as if the arc of their falling will never end, as if the fall can't be real because nobody hears it, as if they might return to their beginnings, receive another chance, as if the fall will heal them, a hot torch welding shut the black hole, the mouth from which silence issues thick as smoke from necklaces of burning tires.

Monk speaks many languages. The same sound may have different meanings in different languages. (To say = *tu sait* = you know.) And the same sound may also produce different silences. To say nothing is not necessarily to know nothing. The same letters can represent different sounds. Or different letters equal the same sound (pane, pain, peign, Payne). In different languages or the same. A lovers' quarrel in the rain at the train station. The budding poet seals his lips evermore. The older man trims his words to sonnets, willed silence caging sound. Their quarrel echoes over and over again, what was said and not said and unsaid returns. The heart (ancient liar/lyre) hunched on its chair watching silent reruns, lip-synching new words to old songs.

Monk's through playing and everybody in the joint happy as a congregation of seals full of fish. He sits on the piano bench, hulking, mute, his legs chopped off at the knees like a Tutsi's by his fellow countrymen, listening in the dark to their hands

coming together, making no sound. Sits till kingdom come, a giant sponge or ink blotter soaking up first all the light, then the air, then sucking all sound from the darkness, from the stage, the auditorium. The entire glittering city shuts down. Everything caves in, free at last in this bone-dry house.

Silence. Monk's. Mine. Yours. I haven't delved into mine very deeply yet, have I, avoid my silence like a plague, even though the disease I'm hiding from already rampant in my blood, bones, the air.

Where are you? How far to your apartment from the Woodside exit? What color are your eyes? Is your hair long or short? I know your father's gone. I met a taxi driver who happened to be from your hometown, a friendly, talkative brother about your father's age so I asked him if he knew your dad, figuring there would have been a colored part of your town and everybody would sort of know everybody else the way they used to in the places where people like our parents were raised. Yeah, oh yeah. Course I knew Henry Diggs, he said. Said he'd grown up knowing your dad and matter of fact had spoken with him in the American Legion club not too long before he heard your father had died. Whatever took your father, it took him fast, the man said. Seemed fine at the club. Little thin maybe but Henry always been a neat, trim-looking fellow and the next thing I heard he was gone. Had that conversation with a cabdriver about five years ago and the way he talked about your dad I could picture him neat and trim and straight-backed, clear-eyed. Then I realized the picture out-of-date. Twenty years since I'd seen your father last and I hadn't thought much about him since. Picture wasn't actually a picture anyway. When I say picture I guess I mean the taxi driver's words made your father real again. Confirmed something about him. About me. The first time I met your father and shook his hand, I noticed your color, your cheekbones in his face. That's what I'd look for in his different face if someone pointed out an old man and whispered your father's name. You singing in his silent features.

Picturing you also seems to work till I try to really see the picture. Make it stand still, frame it. View it. Then it's not a picture. It's a wish. A yearning. Many images layered one atop the other, passing through one another, each one so fragile it begins to fade, to dance, give way to the next before I can fix you in my mind. No matter how gently I lift the veil your face comes away with it. . . .

James Brown, the hardest worker in showbiz, drops down on one knee. Please. Please. Please. Don't go. A spotlight fixes the singer on a darkened stage. You see every blister of sweat on his glistening do, each teardrop like a bedbug crawling down the black satin pillowcase of his cheeks. Please. Please. Please. But nobody answers. 'Cause nobody's home. She took his love and gone. J.B. dies a little bit on-stage. Then more and more. His spangled cape shimmers where he tosses it, bright pool at the edge of the stage someone he loves dived into and never came up.

Silence a good way of listening for news. Please. Please. Is anybody out there? The singer can't see beyond the smoking cone of light raining on his shoulders, light white from outside, midnight-blue if you're in it. Silence is Please. Silence is Please Please Please hollered till it hurts. Noise no one hears if no one's listening. And night after night evidently they ain't.

Who wants to hear the lost one's name? Who has the nerve to say it? Monk taps it out, depressing the keys, stitching messages his machine launches into the make-

believe of hearts. Hyperspace. Monk folded over his console. Mothership. Mothership. Beam me up, motherfucker. It's cold down here.

Brother Sam Cooke squeezed into a phone booth and the girl can't help it when she catches him red-handed in the act of loving somebody else behind the glass. With a single shot she blows him away But he's unforgettable, returns many nights. Don't cry Don't cry. No, no, no—no. Don't cry

My silence? Mine. My silence is, as you see, as you hear, sometimes broken by Monk's music, by the words of his stories. My silence not like Monk's, not waiting for what comes next to arrive or go on about its goddamned business. I'm missing someone. My story is about losing you. About not gripping tight enough for fear my fingers would close on air. Love, if we get it, as close to music as most of us get, and in Monk's piano solos I hear your comings and goings, tiptoeing in and out of rooms, in and out of my heart, hear you like I hear the silence there would be no music without, the silence saying the song could end at this moment, any moment silence plays around. Because it always does, if you listen closely. Before the next note plays, silence always there.

Three-thirty in the a.m. I'm wide awake and alone. Both glow-in-the-dark clocks say so—the square one across the room, the watch on the table beside the bed—they agree, except for a ten-minute discrepancy, like a long-standing quarrel in an old marriage. I don't take sides. Treat them both as if there is something out there in the silence yet to be resolved, and the hands of these clocks are waiting as I am for a signal so they can align themselves perfectly with it.

I lie in my bed a thousand years. Aching silently for you. My arms crossed on my chest, heavy as stone, a burden awhile, then dust trickling through the cage of ribs, until the whole carcass collapses in upon itself, soundlessly, a heap of fine powder finally the wind scatters, each particle a note unplayed, returned perfectly intact.

When Monk finishes work it's nearly dawn. He crosses Fifty-seventh Street, a cigarette he's forgotten to light dangles from his lower lip.

What up, Monk.

Uh-huh.

Moon shines on both sides of the street. People pour from lobbies of tall hotels, carrying umbrellas. Confetti hang-glides, glittery as tinsel. A uniformed brass band marches into view, all the players spry, wrinkled old men, the familiar hymn they toot and tap and whistle and bang thrashes and ripples like a tiger caught by its tail.

Folks form a conga line, no, it's a second line hustling to catch up to Monk, who's just now noticed all the commotion behind him. The twelve white horses pulling his coffin are high-steppers, stallions graceful, big-butted, and stylized as Rockettes. They stutter-step, freeze, raise one foreleg bent at the knee, shake it like shaking cayenne pepper on gumbo. The horses also have the corner boys' slack-leg, drag-leg pimp-strut down pat and perform it off-time in unison to the crowd's delighted squeals down Broadway while the brass band cooks and hordes of sparrow-quick pickaninnies and rump-roast-rumped church ladies wearing hats so big you think helicopter blades or two wings to hide their faces and players so spatted and chained, ringed and polished, you mize well concede everything you own to them before the game starts, everybody out marching and dancing behind Mr. Monk's bier, smoke

from the cigarette he's mercifully lit to cut the funk drifting back over them, weightless as a blessing, as a fingertip grazing a note not played.

In my dream, we're kissing goodbye when Monk arrives. First his music, and then the great man himself. All the air rushes from my lungs. Thelonious Apoplectic, immensely enlarged in girth, his cheeks puffed out like Dizzy's. He's sputtering and stuttering, exasperated, pissed off as can be. Squeaky chipmunk voice like a record playing at the wrong speed, the way they say Big O trash-talked on the b-ball court or deep-sea divers squeak if raised too rapidly from great depths. Peepy dolphin pip-pip peeps, yet I understand exactly.

Are you crazy, boy? Telling my story. Putting mouth in my words. Speechless as my music rendered your simple ass on countless occasions what kind of bullshit payback is this? Tutti-frutti motherfucker. Speaking for me. Putting your jive woogie in my boogie.

Say what, nigger? Who said I retreated to silence? Retreat hell. I was attacking in another direction.

The neat goatee and mustache he favored a raggedy wreath now, surrounding his entire moon face. He resembles certain Hindu gods with his nappy aura, his new dready cap of afterbirth in flames to his shoulders. Monk shuffles and grunts, dismisses me with a wave of his glowing hand. When it's time, when he feels like it, he'll play the note we've been waiting for. The note we thought was lost in silence. And won't it be worth the wait.

Won't it be a wonder. And meanwhile, love, while we listen, these foolish things remind me of you.

**BLACK  
MUSIC**



*LeRoi Jones*

DA CAPO PRESS • NEW YORK



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baraka, Imamu Amiri, 1934—

Black music / LeRoi Jones.—1st Da Capo Press ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York: Wm. Morrow, 1967.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-306-80814-5 (alk. paper)

1. Afro-Americans—Music—History and criticism. 2. Jazz—

History and criticism. 3. Afro-American musicians. I. Title.

ML3556.B15 1998

780'.89'96073—dc21

97-41725

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First Da Capo Press edition 1998

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A Subsidiary of Plenum Publishing Corporation  
233 Spring Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

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## 1963

### Jazz and the White Critic

MOST JAZZ CRITICS have been white Americans, but most important jazz musicians have not been. This might seem a simple enough reality to most people, or at least a reality which can be readily explained in terms of the social and cultural history of American society. And it is obvious why there are only two or three fingers' worth of Negro critics or writers on jazz, say, if one understands that until relatively recently those Negroes who *could* become critics, who would largely have to come from the black middle class, have simply not been interested in the music. Or at least jazz, for the black middle class, has only comparatively recently lost some of its stigma (though by no means is it yet as popular among them as any vapid musical product that comes sanctioned by the taste of the white majority). Jazz was collected among the numerous skeletons the middle-class black man kept locked in the closet of his psyche, along with watermelons and gin, and whose rattling caused him no end of misery and self-hatred. As one Howard University philosophy professor said to me when I was an undergraduate, "It's fantastic how much bad taste the blues contain!" But it is just this "bad taste" that this Uncle spoke of that has been the one factor that has kept the best of Negro music from slipping sterilely into the echo chambers of middle-brow American culture. And to a great extent such "bad

taste" was kept extant in the music, blues or jazz because the Negroes who were responsible for the best of the music, were always aware of their identities as black Americans and really did not, themselves, desire to become vague, featureless, Americans as is usually the case with the Negro middle class. (This is certainly not to say that there have not been very important Negro musicians from the middle class. Since the Henderson era, their number has increased enormously in jazz.

Negroes played jazz as they had sung blues or, even earlier, as they had shouted and hollered in those anonymous fields, because it was one of the few areas of human expression available to them. Negroes who felt the blues, later jazz, impulse, as a specific means of expression, went naturally into the music itself. There were fewer social or extra-expressive considerations that could possibly disqualify any prospective Negro jazz musician than existed, say, for a Negro who thought he might like to become a writer (or even an elevator operator, for that matter). Any Negro who had some ambition towards literature, in the earlier part of this century, was likely to have developed so powerful an allegiance to the sacraments of middle-class American culture that he would be horrified by the very idea of writing about jazz.

There were few "jazz critics" in America at all until the 30's and then they were influenced to a large extent by what Richard Hadlock has called "the carefully documented gee-whiz attitude" of the first serious European jazz critics. They were also, as a matter of course, influenced more deeply by the social and cultural mores of their own society. And it is only natural that their criticism, whatever its intention, should be a product of that society, or should reflect at least some of the attitudes and thinking of that society, even if not directly related to the subject they were writing about, Negro music.

Jazz, as a Negro music, existed, up until the time of the big bands, on the same socio-cultural level as the sub-culture from which it was issued. The music and its sources were *secret* as far as the rest of America was concerned, in much the same sense that the actual life of the black man in America was secret to the white American. The first white critics were men who sought, whether consciously or not, to understand this secret, just as the first serious white jazz musicians (Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Bix, etc.) sought not only to understand the phenomenon of Negro music but to appropriate it as a means of expression which they themselves might utilize. The success of this "appropriation" signaled the existence of an American music, where before there was a Negro music. But the white jazz musician had an advantage the white critic seldom had. The white musician's commitment to jazz, the *ultimate concern*, proposed that the sub-cultural attitudes that produced the music as a profound expression of human feelings, could be *learned* and need not be passed on as a secret blood rite. And Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made. The white jazz musician came to understand this attitude as a way of making music, and the intensity of his understanding produced the "great" white jazz musicians, and is producing them now.

Usually the critic's commitment was first to his *appreciation* of the music rather than to his understanding of the attitude which produced it. This difference meant that the potential critic of jazz had only to appreciate the music, or what he thought was the music, and that he did not need to understand or even be concerned with the attitudes that produced it, except perhaps as a purely sociological consideration. This last idea is certainly what produced the reverse patronization that is known as Crow Jim. The disparaging "all you folks got rhythm" is no less a stereotype, simply

because it is proposed as a positive trait. But this Crow Jim attitude has not been as menacing or as evident a flaw in critical writing about jazz as has another manifestation of the white critic's failure to concentrate on the blues and jazz attitude rather than his conditioned appreciation of the music. The major flaw in this approach to Negro music is that it strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or a folk art) that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy.

We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart. As western people, the socio-cultural thinking of eighteenth-century Europe comes to us as a history legacy that is a continuous and organic part of the twentieth-century West. The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important for any intelligent critical speculation about the music that came out of it. And again, this is not a plea for narrow sociological analysis of jazz, but rather that this music cannot be completely understood (in critical terms) without some attention to the attitudes which produced it. It is the philosophy of Negro music that is most important, and this philosophy is only partially the result of the sociological disposition of Negroes in America. There is, of course, much more to it than that.

Strict musciological analysis of jazz, which has come into favor recently, is also as limited as a means of jazz criticism as a strict sociological approach. The notator of any jazz solo, or blues, has no chance of capturing what in effect are the most important elements of the music. (Most transcriptions of blues lyrics are just as frustrating.) A printed musical example of an Armstrong solo, or of a Thelonius Monk solo, tells us almost nothing except the futility of formal musicology when dealing with jazz. Not only are the various

jazz effects almost impossible to notate, but each note *means something* quite in adjunct to musical notation. The notes of a jazz solo exist in a notation strictly for musical reasons. The notes of a jazz solo, as they are coming into existence, exist as they do for reasons that are only concomitantly musical. Coltrane's cries are not "musical," but they *are* music and quite moving music. Ornette Coleman's screams and rants are only musical once one understands the music his emotional attitude seeks to create. This attitude is real, and perhaps the most singularly important aspect of his music. Mississippi Joe Williams, Snooks Eaglin, Lightnin' Hopkins have different emotional attitudes than Ornette Coleman, but all of these attitudes are continuous parts of the historical and cultural biography of the Negro as it has existed and developed since there was a Negro in America, and a music that could be associated with him that did not exist anywhere else in the world. The notes *means something*; and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture.

Another hopeless flaw in a great deal of the writing about jazz that has been done over the years is that in most cases the writers, the jazz critics, have been anything but intellectuals (in the most complete sense of that word). Most jazz critics began as hobbyists or boyishly brash members of the American petit bourgeoisie, whose only claim to any understanding about the music was that they knew it was *different*; or else they had once been brave enough to make a trip into a Negro slum to hear their favorite instrumentalist defame Western musical tradition. Most jazz critics were (and are) not only white middle-class Americans, but middle-brows as well. The irony here is that because the majority of jazz critics are white middle-brows, most jazz criticism tends to enforce white middle-brow standards of excellence as criteria for performance of a music that in its

most profound manifestations is completely antithetical to such standards; in fact, quite often is in direct reaction against them. (As an analogy, suppose the great majority of the critics of Western formal music were poor, "uneducated" Negroes?) A man can speak of the "heresy of bebop" for instance, only if he is completely unaware of the psychological catalysts that made that music the exact registration of the social and cultural thinking of a whole generation of black Americans. The blues and jazz aesthetic, to be fully understood, must be seen in as nearly its complete human context as possible. People made bebop. The question the critic must ask is: *why?* But it is just this *why* of Negro music that has been consistently ignored or misunderstood; and it is a question that cannot be adequately answered without first understanding the necessity of asking it. Contemporary jazz during the last few years has begun to take on again some of the anarchy and excitement of the bebop years. The cool and hard bop/funk movements since the 40's seem pitifully tame, even decadent, when compared to the music men like Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor and some others have been making recently. And of the bop pioneers, only Thelonius Monk has managed to maintain without question the vicious creativity with which he first entered the jazz scene back in the 40's. The music has changed again, for many of the same basic reasons it changed twenty years ago. Bop was, at a certain level of consideration, a reaction by young musicians against the sterility and formality of Swing as it moved to become a formal part of the mainstream American culture. The New Thing, as recent jazz has been called, is, to a large degree, a reaction to the hard bop-funk-groove-soul camp, which itself seemed to come into being in protest against the squelching of most of the blues elements in cool and progressive jazz. Funk (groove, soul) has become as formal and clichéd as cool or swing, and opportunities for imaginative expression within that form have dwindled almost to nothing.

The attitudes and emotional philosophy contained in "the new music" must be isolated and understood by critics before any consideration of the *worth* of the music can be legitimately broached. Later on, of course, it becomes relatively easy to characterize the emotional penchants that informed earlier aesthetic statements. After the fact, is a much simpler way to work and think. For example, a writer who wrote liner notes for a John Coltrane record mentioned how difficult it had been for him to appreciate Coltrane earlier, just as it had been difficult for him to appreciate Charlie Parker when he first appeared. To quote: "I wish I were one of those sages who can say, 'Man, I dug Bird the first time I heard him.' I didn't. The first time I heard Charlie Parker, I thought he was ridiculous . . ." Well, that's a noble confession and all, but the responsibility is still the writer's and in no way involves Charlie Parker or what he was trying to do. When that writer first heard Parker he simply did not understand *why* Bird should play the way he did, nor could it have been very important to him. But now, of course, it becomes almost a form of reverse snobbery to say that one did not think Parker's music was worth much at first hearing, etc. etc. The point is, it seems to me, that if the music is worth something now, it must have been worth something then. Critics are supposed to be people in a position to tell what is of value and what is not, and, hopefully, at the time it first appears. If they are consistently mistaken, what is their value?

Jazz criticism, certainly as it has existed in the United States, has served in a great many instances merely to obfuscate what has actually been happening with the music itself—the pitiful harangues that raged during the 40's between two "schools" of critics as to which was the "real jazz," the new or the traditional, provide some very ugly examples. A critic who praises Bunk Johnson at Dizzy Gillespie's expense is no critic at all; but then neither is a man who turns it around and knocks Bunk to swell Dizzy. If such critics

would (or could) reorganize their thinking so that they begin their concern for these musicians by trying to understand why each played the way he did, and in terms of the constantly evolving and redefined philosophy which has informed the most profound examples of Negro music throughout its history, then such thinking would be impossible.

It has never ceased to amaze and infuriate me that in the 40's a European critic could be arrogant and unthinking enough to inform serious young American musicians that what they were feeling (a consideration that exists before, and without, the music) was false. What had happened was that even though the white middle-brow critic had known about Negro music for only about three decades, he was already trying to formalize and finally institutionalize it. It is a hideous idea. The music was already in danger of being forced into that junk pile of admirable objects and data the West knows as *culture*.

Recently, the same attitudes have become more apparent in the face of a fresh redefinition of the form and content of Negro music. Such phrases as "anti-jazz" have been used to describe musicians who are making the most exciting music produced in this country. But as critic A. B. Spellman asked, "What does anti-jazz mean and who are these ofays who've appointed themselves guardians of last year's blues?" It is that simple, really. What does anti-jazz mean? And who coined the phrase? What is the definition of jazz? And who was authorized to make one?

Reading a great deal of old jazz criticism is usually like boning up on the social and cultural malaise that characterizes and delineates the bourgeois philistine in America. Even rereading someone as intelligent as Roger Pryor Dodge in the old *Record Changer* ("Jazz: its rise and decline," 1955) usually makes me either very angry or very near hysterical. Here is a sample: ". . . let us say flatly that there is no future in

preparation for jazz through Bop . . .," or, "The Boppists, Cools, and Progressives are surely stimulating a dissolution within the vagaries of a non-jazz world. The Revivalists, on the other hand have made a start in the right direction." It sounds almost like political theory. Here is Don C. Haynes in the April 22, 1946 issue of *Down Beat*, reviewing Charlie Parker's *Billie's Bounce* and *Now's The Time*: "These two sides are bad taste and ill-advised fanaticism. . . ." and, "This is the sort of stuff that has thrown innumerable impressionable young musicians out of stride, that has harmed many of them irreparably. This can be as harmful to jazz as Sammy Kaye." It makes you blush.

Of course there have been a few very fine writers on jazz, even as there are today. Most of them have been historians. But the majority of popular jazz criticism has been on about the same level as the quoted examples. Nostalgia, lack of understanding or failure to see the validity of redefined emotional statements which reflect the changing psyche of the Negro in opposition to what the critic might think the Negro ought to feel; all these unfortunate failures have been built many times into a kind of critical stance or aesthetic. An aesthetic whose standards and measure are connected irrevocably to the continuous gloss most white Americans have always made over Negro life in America. Failure to understand, for instance, that Paul Desmond and John Coltrane represent not only two very divergent ways of thinking about music, but more importantly two very different ways of viewing the world, is at the seat of most of the established misconceptions that are daily palmed off as intelligent commentary on jazz or jazz criticism. The catalysts and necessity of Coltrane's music must be understood as they exist even before they are expressed as music. The music is the result of the attitude, the stance. Just as Negroes made blues and other people did not because of the Negro's peculiar way of looking at the world. Once this attitude is delineated as a

continuous though constantly evolving social philosophy directly attributable to the way the Negro responds to the psychological landscape that is his Western environment, criticism of Negro music will move closer to developing as consistent and valid an aesthetic as criticism in other fields of Western art.

There have been so far only two American playwrights, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams who are as profound or as important to the history of ideas as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker or Ornette Coleman, yet there is a more valid and consistent body of dramatic criticism written in America than there is a body of criticism about Negro music. And this is simply because there is an intelligent tradition and body of dramatic criticism, though it has largely come from Europe, that any intelligent American drama critic can draw on. In jazz criticism, no reliance on European tradition or theory will help at all. Negro music, like the Negro himself, is strictly an American phenomenon, and we have got to set up standards of judgment and aesthetic excellence that depend on our native knowledge and understanding of the underlying philosophies and local cultural references that produced blues and jazz in order to produce valid critical writing or commentary about it. It might be that there is still time to start.

## 1962

### Minton's

BY NOW it is almost impossible to find out just what did go on at Minton's during the early 40's. There are so many conflicting stories, many by people who have no way of knowing. But in my adolescence the myth went something like this: "Around 1942, after classical jazz had made its conquests, a small group used to get together every night in a Harlem night club called Minton's Playhouse. It was made up of several young colored boys who, unlike their fellow musicians, no longer felt at home in the atmosphere of 'swing music.' It was becoming urgent to get a little air in a richly decked out palace that was soon going to be a prison. That was the aim of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Thelonius Monk, guitarist Charlie Christian (who died before the group's efforts bore fruit), drummer Kenny Clarke and saxophonist Charlie Parker. Except for Christian, they were poor, unknown and unprepossessing: but Monk stimulated his partners by the boldness of his harmonies, Clarke created a new style of drum playing, and Gillespie and Parker took choruses that seemed crazy to the people who came to listen to them. The bebop style was in the process of being born."

It sounds almost like the beginnings of modern American writing among the emigrés of Paris. But this is the legend

**From Rock's  
Backpages**  
Lauryn Hill

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## Lauryn Hill: 'I'm not afraid to be the person I am'

It's 15 years since the release of landmark album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. A year after its release, she is passionate, funny and unguarded in this classic interview by Simon Witter from 1999 from Rock's Backpages

*Simon Witter*

Wed 21 Aug 2013 11:07  
EDT



📷 'A woman of substance' ... Lauryn Hill. Photograph: Paul Hawthorne/Getty Images

**T**hings are not looking good. The 12th floor of the forbiddingly fashionable Metropolitan Hotel is awash with hangers-on and pan-European Sony personnel. The star at the centre of it all, woman-of-the-moment [Lauryn Hill](#), is first 30 minutes late, then an hour and, when she does arrive, is surrounded by people ordering her food, tasting her food, combing her hair and generally getting in the way of any meaningful contact.

I know this only by hearsay, as the star has been rushed unseen into another of the suite's rooms. Interviews are being recorded on digicam and attended by a battery of supervisors - a journalist's worst nightmare. It's doubtful whether the pre-match order to avoid all personal questions serves anyone but the record company's ends - leaving, were one to obey it, only "the product" as focus - but meeting Lauryn Hill could prove to be the ultimate, maddeningly fruitless diva encounter.

An hour later I stroll back out into the corridor with a glide in my stride. Behind the inevitable entourage, the biggest sales in the history of rap and the umpteen Grammy awards there lurks a woman of real substance, dismissive of the trappings, passionate and knowledgeable about her craft, unexpectedly humble, funny and refreshingly unguarded. Someone you could realistically expect to be pampered, defensive and fiercely self-important turns out to be someone you'd give your right arm to be able to hang out with.



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Lauryn Hill's success has been almost as fast as it has been dramatic. Five years ago her band the Fugees released an excellent album, *Blunted on Reality*, that didn't really catch the world's ear. Their next album, *The Score*, sold over 17m copies, making it the biggest-selling rap album of all time, and her solo debut *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* was last year's most high-profile album, collecting rave reviews and awards like bugs on a windshield.

Now everyone wants a piece of Lauryn. When she isn't being a mother, activist or charity worker, she is touring with a 15-piece band, sponsored by Levi's (who have designed her stage clothes) and Emporio Armani scents and recording new songs in a mobile studio on the road. A film career is well under way too (she's reported to be in discussions with Joel Schumacher over a role in a Supremes biopic). She has no one but herself to blame for an agenda that makes Maggie Thatcher - in her prime - look like an idle layabout.

"Awards are like whipped cream, man," she says of her most recent Grammy success (ten nominations, 5 awards). "It's incredible, but it doesn't change the essence of who I am. I'm still not convinced that I'm a success. I'm still like one day something might happen, and I'll have to get another career. I kinda fell into this business, because I loved it, did it, but always stayed in school, always had other jobs, made sure that the bills were paid and the grades were good, just in case it didn't work out."

Her modesty is as refreshing as it is surprising, and belies the enormous kudos she is given for forging an inimitable musical fusion of sounds rooted in the music of her childhood.

"This album wasn't supposed to happen, according to some, and I felt very blessed to be able to make something like that and release it. To me, the fact that people have received it the way that they have, that's just the cherry on top. It's like I had a wonderful meal, a wonderful dessert already, and the way people responded to it is just extra, it's sauce, cherries and chocolate chips and sprinkles and all that stuff. It's just beautiful."

The title of the album Lauryn is so rightly proud of was inspired by Carter G Woodson's book *The Miseducation of The Negro*, that her parents always had in the home, and a film called *The Education Of Sonny Carson*, in which a young kid growing up in Brooklyn learns from his violent mistakes and revolutionises his life. In Lauryn's mouth, the term "miseducation" means those lessons learned outside of academia.

"The title of the album was meant to discuss those life lessons," she says, "those things that you don't get in any text book, things that we go through that force us to mature. Hopefully we learn. Some people get stuck. They say that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and these are some really powerful lessons that changed the course and direction of my life."

In the music Lauryn writes and produces, she fuses a fat organic sound out of elements of classic reggae and soul, with the big-bottomed beat of rap and

the roughness of blues and gospel. But many have been wowed by the lyrics, unfurling stories so personal that, although they started out as songs for other people, they simply had to become a solo album. No solo project was planned, but Lauryn began to feel she was giving away pieces or chapters of a book about herself, and decided to keep them.

"I think the piece as a whole communicates my personality, it is the culmination of my experiences, the sum total of what I had gone through at a certain point in my life. It might have been a little scary at first," she remembers, "because whether I sink or swim, it was all on me. But it was liberating because it was very personal, it allowed me to talk about things that were very Lauryn, that didn't have anything to do with anyone else. I could speak about the birth of my son, and the disappointment in the relationship, because it didn't cramp anybody else's style. To me it's like driving in a storm, it's hard to see where you're going. You're just praying to get out of it. But once you get out of it, you can look back and say; 'Oh man, thank god!' Give thanks, 'cos that's what I came out of. That's what that album feels like to me."

Some of the lyrics on *Miseducation* are said to refer to a romance gone sour between Hill and bandmate Wyclef, but neither will confirm that this relationship ever existed. Hill likes to keep her private life very private, and it was a while after the birth of her son Zion David before anyone knew that his father was Rohan Marley, son of reggae legend Bob Marley and a former football player with the University of Miami. When *Miseducation* was released in August, Hill was seven-months pregnant with her second child by Marley, a daughter named Selah Louise, who was born in November. Now that this is public knowledge, the pair plans to find a window in their busy schedules to get married before the year is up.

The decision to have her first child was one of the major change's in 24-year-old Hill's life. Many in the music industry advised her to have an abortion, but Hill resisted the pressure. It was a choice she never regretted, and a quandary she details in the song *To Zion*.

"That song," she says, "is about the revelation that my son was to me. I had always made decisions for other people, making everybody else happy, and once I had him that was really the first decision that was unpopular for me. It was one that was based on my happiness and not what other people wanted for me or for themselves. And it was the best decision that I could have ever made, because I'm the happiest and healthiest that I have ever been. It also revealed to me which relationships were right, which ones were sincere, and which ones were based on exploiting and hurting me. It was a godsend all the way round - 360 degrees of that whole situation were nothing but a blessing. And I'm so happy that I made the choice that I did."

A press release around the time of the first Fugees album, suggesting that the three band members were from Haiti, may have been a little liberal with the truth. The group name was short for Refugees, and there were Caribbean elements to their sound, but Wyclef Jean was the only one born in Haiti. Pras was born in Jersey, but his parents were from Haiti, while Lauryn was born in New Jersey of American parents. The guys call her "Haitian by association".

The daughter of an English teacher mother and computer consultant father, Hill grew up on the edge of suburbia, right on the border of Newark. Stability at home gave her a platform for scholastic achievement, and she was president of her class each year at South Orange middle school. She wrote poetry, shone at basketball, founded the school's gospel choir and made a name for herself in television and films, playing characters that were her

polar opposite, learning her lines during cheerleading practice. At 13, she already had the front to win over the notoriously brutal audience at the Harlem Apollo's amateur night.

Her childhood was fairly idyllic, if not entirely sheltered, and much of the charity work she now undertakes stems from a desire to see others get the chances she had. A homecoming queen and cheerleader who ran track and starred in the film *Sister Act 2* during her senior year, her frantic schedule and devastating self-confidence never overruled her compassion or blinded her to the needs of others. She started a "breakfast club" for the kids who came to school without any breakfast, and would stop on her way to school every day and pick up two or three dozen bagels and some orange juice.

"I know that I was blessed to grow up the way that I grew up. We didn't have everything, but we had a whole lotta love and a whole lotta family, and I was exposed to different things. I knew that there was opportunity and different careers and different directions that I could live my life. Some people grow up with very few options, or at least knowing about very few options. So, to me, it's always about letting people know what their options and possibilities are."

After graduation, Hill didn't go Hollywood, as many predicted. Instead, she went to Columbia University, where she studied classical music as part of her humanities course, while cutting the first Fugees album and majoring in history.

There was always music in the family home, and when she was seven years old, looking for discs small enough to play on her kiddie record player, she found a 500-strong collection of 7" singles in the basement, music from the 50s to the mid-70s. While other kids were listening to New Edition, she was listening to Gladys Knight and Marvin Gaye, listening to messages in music, and harps and string sections, not just what was on the radio right then and there. When she came to cook up a sound of her own, by trial and error, she sandwiched a variety of influences between the drums and bass of hip hop/reggae and the lyricism of the classic soul tradition, seasoning the whole with a crackling live production. There isn't yet a name for her sound.

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"It's pretty, but it's raw," Lauryn offers, "and that's the way I like it. I think a large part of my personality spills over into my music. No matter how pretty it gets, it's never too pretty. There's always gotta be something in there that's rough. I think that's me. No matter how high a note I sing, it's always gonna be scratchy, just by virtue of my voice. I never record vocals with compression, because I want it to sound old, to sound rough, and I want you to hear everything that I intended you to hear. I don't want anything cleaned up off the track. I love the human element of real instruments, as opposed to keyboards and modules. I love Hammond B3 organs and Wurlitzers, even when they're out of tune sometimes. To me that presents what's human about those instruments. Hip hop is the backbone, but I just love expanding those parameters."

Purist fans may be horrified to hear that young Lauryn was an avid consumer of "Eighties Euromusic", exposed to the likes of Malcolm McLaren, Duran Duran and Men At Work by Carlos de Jesus on his Saturday morning video show Hot Tracks. "I think that we all grow up listening and appreciating different things about different groups and different sounds," she says. "You know, Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode and all those different bands. I was real happy with the way I grew up with different stuff, 'cos it made my appreciation of sound very broad."

This hardly explains how Carlos Santana came to play guitar on To Zion. "Oh my goodness!" she laughs. "That totally came from my parents' record collection. I remember finding Abraxas in the basement, and looking at the cover going: 'Wow! This is real. What's this?'. It had all this stuff going on, all this beautiful artwork on the cover. And then I remember putting on the record and wanting to cry. I put on this one song, Samba Pa Ti, and it just gave me chills. I used to write my first songs to other people's music, and this particular album had this beautiful, soulful guitar, and it was instrumental, so I was in heaven. From that time - Oye Como Va, Black Magic Woman - all those songs just really touched me, and gave me an appreciation for guitar and for the Latin African rhythms. I was just in my own world, very, very happy, at a very young age."

Lauryn's first musical steps involved singing at "talent shows, gatherings, all types of things", often accompanied by a pianist, but she didn't start rapping until she got involved with The Fugees. "I used to write poems," she recalls, "and I was real sensitive about my poems. I remember Clef and Pras hearing my poems and going, 'Yo, you should write some rhymes!'. So I tried writing some rhymes, reluctantly, and at first they were very hard on my MCing. They were like, 'That's wack. Write that over!' So, once again, I was challenged by the boys, and I sought to be better and really started taking rap seriously, more seriously even than singing at that time, because I felt I could say more, and what I could say would be taken more seriously as an MC."

That she wasn't intimidated by the boys has much to do with her upbringing. "I was a very crazy kid, off the hook. I was very dramatic, everything was a big drama, just a huge undertaking. I was a tomboy, kinda rough. I loved to do what the boys did. And I'm very happy that I grew up that way, 'cos I never had respect for social lines of what women should do and what men should do. I thought it was like 'let me do it all', and that has helped to shape my philosophy of life now. I'm not one of those people who has a fear just because women are only supposed to do some things. I don't let that limit me."

When the Fugees first album came out, the critical light its songs shone on the black community signalled the arrival of a new exponent of the refreshing rap genre forged by groups like Arrested Development and Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, who were turning rap clichés on their heads with songs of tolerance and introspection. You wouldn't call them anything as horrible as PC, but their rejection of misogyny, homophobia, racism and gangsta posturing spoke volumes to the liberal middle classes, black and white, turned off by the stance of so many other acts. They were rebellious, but in an articulate, upmarket way that insured healthy sales across every demographic going. In the case of the Fugees, it didn't hurt that Lauryn Hill was perceived as the group's leader, a beautiful woman bossing the two guys around.

"I think there were probably two co-bosses," she insists, looking puzzled by this analysis. "Me and Clef were co-captains, and then you have Pras and Jerry Te Bass. Duplessis, who is the bass player in Refugee Camp was also

influential in the Fugee sound. The boss, as in 'Hey, you do this!?' Nah!"

It is twenty years now since the Sugarhill Gang released Rappers' Delight, and in the last decade of that history there has always seemed to be a segment of the scene that is pretty hostile to women. Rap can't be the easiest genre in which to start out as a woman.

"It wasn't hard to me," Lauryn shrugs, "because I grew up as a tomboy, and none of that stuff ever really phased me. I knew who I was, and I knew that I wasn't any of the women that they ever talked about. Also, I find it hard to just criticise hip hop music, because music is a microcosm of the world. Better we discuss the issues in the community and the greater world that affect the kids who make the music, 'cos they're just the voice of people. Also I'm not confused because I understand that a lot of people who make rap music are very young when they start. They're 16, 17, and they don't really know any better, they're just figuring out the world for themselves. I'm not very judgmental, because I try to be part of the solution rather than the problem, so I provide the type of message in my music that I do, to communicate the other side of the story."

Beyond hip hop, in the wider music business, Lauryn has got ahead incredibly quickly, not only performing, but writing and producing for herself and others - Aretha Franklin, Mary J. Blige, Santana. The Score had made her star, but it's still amazing that, with almost no track record, she was able to produce her own major label debut. It can't have been easy selling that idea to the corporation, when a star producer would provide a so much safer pair of hands.

"No," she agrees, "and it's still not easy. Believe it or not, people still think there's some man behind the scenes, pulling the strings and manipulating what you say. And they're always looking for that person so, rather than give you the respect for having the knowledge to know what you want and do it, they're always looking for whoever that guy is who controls you. It's silly, but... whatever. It is what it is, and I don't really allow those things to stop me. I just continue, and let the music speak for itself."

Control is a subliminal theme running through the work of a woman who has grabbed the reigns of power in every discipline going, musical and otherwise. Most artists are happy to have no more to do with their videos than turning up on shoot days. Lauryn has insisted on directing some, including Aretha Franklin's A Rose Is Not A Rose.

"I don't know if I'm a control freak," she sighs, "or if I just find it really hard to delegate authority, but I really like to be involved, because the music means so much to me. Why give it away to somebody else who might not understand all the nuances of it? You might as well work together, and make sure that you guys are all on the same page? We've had some shaky experiences, but we learn from them and try to do better next time. I really enjoyed Fugee-La, the first single off The Score, because it was just a raw, inexpensive video that we did in Jamaica, Port Antonio. It was very early, when the energy was just right, and we worked hard, running through the bush in Jamaica for hours until we were exhausted and beat down. But I was real happy with the outcome. I also enjoyed Doo Wop. That was a fun video to do. I was six months pregnant, and trying to hide it in a zebra print dress, but it was a lot of fun."

All these creative interventions must presumably serve an overall artistic vision that she is trying to communicate. But summing that up is a beast of a request to fulfil.

"All I can hope to do," she says, "is to continue to not be afraid and to follow where the inspiration leads me. I've always been that kid in high school who had on the funny-looking sneakers, and they used to go; 'Those are some funny-looking sneakers, Lauryn!', and I'd say; 'They're not funny-looking, these are hot!', and they'd say 'Alright, they're hot, but only you can wear them.' and six months later they have on the same funny-looking sneakers. So I've always done things a little crazy a little earlier. I'm not embarrassed or afraid to be the person that I am, neither personally nor musically - whatever that means."

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Lauryn Hill's success symbolises, among other things, the improvement in race relations within the music industry in recent years. I don't mean to suggest that the record business has never got behind black music before, or that things are perfect today, but the changes in the past 15 years have been dramatic. You could always find a lot of great albums by black artists in the cupboards at record companies, but they weren't usually the releases that got any support. It would not be overly cynical to suggest that the Grammys are more about the record industry's priorities than anything else, and in 1998 there wasn't a single album more obviously and enthusiastically supported by a label than *The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill*.

"Well, don't sleep," Lauryn cautions, insisting that her good fortune is not representative of across-the-board treatment in the business. "I think with this particular album I was very blessed to get involved with a lot of people who felt what I was trying to do. It wasn't like I was the pop favourite, but people saw my work ethic, saw that I worked really hard and that I appreciated all the hard work that anyone put out there for me. So that matters, when it comes to whether people go home at five, or stay on at work making sure your album gets out there to the people. And I really appreciate that I've been able to work with some people who really care about the project."

With success like hers comes pressure, not least of all to use your good fortune to benefit others. Lauryn runs a non-profit organisation called the Refugee Project that organizes charity concerts, registers voters and sends kids to camp. For the past three years they have had Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas parties for homeless children. "It's all about sharing what you have," she says, "making the hip hop community be a little more responsible, just to think community-oriented. In the beginning it was literally three friends of mine, my mother, my father and my brother. That was the organisation. But now I have people who work there, an Executive Director, a Board of Trustees, a Board of Directors, so now it's about making this honest, innocent energy turn into an institution, so that after I'm no longer on the radio, it still exists."

Is there an obligation to be a mouthpiece for the hopes and dreams of your community?

"I don't think I feel a responsibility, that's just who I am. It's not a role that I

try on. Just by virtue of who I am, I make music that communicates issues that aren't always on top of the agenda, for people who aren't always spoken for. To me it's not political, because there's nothing partisan about what I do. I'm not a democrat or a republican, I'm just a musician who speaks for people who, no matter what they vote, still don't have that much of a voice."

With the varied and hectic work schedule she has let herself in for, it seems amazing that Lauryn has time at all for the major demands of motherhood, but that's exactly what she cites as her most burning ambition. "Everybody asks me 'What's your next move?', and right now my focus is just being a good mother. If I could do that properly, I'd be really, really happy. If I could be half the parent that my parents were to me, then I'd be very happy. Like any woman on the planet who decides to have children, that's an extremely important role. You have these empty vessels that you have to fill with all the information, and all the knowledge and all the proper tools for them to end up being happy, healthy, compassionate, caring people. That's really crucial to me. So I love music, and I always put my 100% into making music, but now I have to put 200% into being a mother."

The portrayal of motherhood in various Lauryn Hill songs is always of a blissful, idyllic state, one that doesn't sound entirely realistic. Surely there must be times when she, like other chronically sleep-deprived new parents, feels like taking her son back to the shop and exchanging him for a model that works? "No way!" she laughs. "I'm not going to say that they're always angels, and that motherhood doesn't require a lot of effort, but the rewards so outweigh any of that. My kids travel with me on the road, and we have a load of family and an extended support structure, so they have a great time, and I am pretty much always happy."

Touring for women is never quite the same as for men, and Lauryn insists that, rather than sex drugs and rock'n'roll, it is the presence of her children on the road that ward off misery and boredom. Once she became so ill on tour, with a three-digit fever, that her mother was called to her hospital bedside. Another time, at the height of the Fugees' popularity, they were in France, and a kid jumped on stage and "attacked" Lauryn. "He like kissed me right on the mouth," she remembers, "and it was crazy, because the whole band jumped on him and clobbered him. And even after all that he was very happy. I was a little confused by that."

That's the French for you. But there must be some juicy sexual escapades to be fondly recalled? Apparently not. "It's very lonely on the road for women," she insists. "At least for the type of woman that I am. The male groupie phenomenon is something totally different. Guys can do that. I wouldn't be interested in that anyway, and I have a family, so that's not my thing. But when I was single and on the road it was kinda weird, because there were only two types of guys that I would meet, and they were the kinds that were so intimidated that they would never speak to me. Either they thought I had a boyfriend, or they were totally crazy, they were lunatics, they were nuts, like 'I can control the world if...!'. It was just crazy, crazy people, so for me it was really do the show and, after the venue, go to the hotel."

For many, the end of the Fugees was very weird. One minute they'd made the best-selling album in the history of rap, *The Score*, and won Grammys. Then, suddenly, the band didn't exist anymore, without there even being an explanatory announcement. And it wasn't as if they just wanted to sit at home spending their riches. Apart from Lauryn's smash album, about every third rap record released in 98 seemed to boast the involvement of one of the three Fugees. The unexpected answer is, of course, that they never split.

"I think it would be a lot louder if we did choose to split," chortles Lauryn. "We're on hiatus. It's a long holiday. There has never been any discussion of break-ups so, unless they've decided to go off and do something without telling me.... I'm unaware of it. It's so funny, because the last time we were in the studio, I was two children less and sort of a different person. So I think the next time we do sit down and create it's going to be interesting."

It certainly will be interesting, as the now much-anticipated return of the Fugees (studio work unlikely to happen this year) will see the guys getting back in the studio with a woman whose incredible interim success has made her a global superstar. Not all male egos cope with that kind of imbalance graciously. "I hope not!" Lauryn says, looking deadly serious at my suggestion of tension to come. "I hope that we all come with the same respect that we've always had, and make good music. That's the only way I see it working, if we come with the same energy that we've always had in the studio, because anything else.... it wouldn't be worth it."

Apart from her own new single, 'Everything Is Everything', Lauryn has recorded a song with inspirational soul legend Curtis Mayfield on the Mod Squad soundtrack - "I'm just rhyming a vocal over a Curtis song" - and a duet with Bob Marley.

"Yeah, everybody raises an eye when I say that," she laughs. "I just recorded a duet of Turn Your Lights Down Low, which is a song Bob Marley recorded in 78 or 79. Steve Marley took Bob's original vocals and put them together with mine, and I love the song. That's coming out soon."

One of the more unfortunate offshoots of success is envy, and the fashionability and commercial activity surrounding Lauryn Hill have already provoked accusations of naked capitalism not levelled at far more deserving targets, artists who started out with far less intrinsic integrity. But even her devotees would wish to see her human weaknesses. "I snore," she volunteers gamely when asked, in a shamelessly fishing manner, if there are any embarrassing personal details she'd like to share. And struggling young mothers sickened by Hill's apparent hyper-competence may be pleased to know that she isn't good at everything.

"I'm a bad skier," she confesses with a grin. "Whooooo! Horrible. Horrible. I am not meant to be on anybody's slopes. It looks fun to me, and I like the gear and I like the outfits, but I'm just horrible at it. I tried it once, with a foolish friend of mine who told me not to go to ski school, and it was the worst! We were in this real cheesy resort in upstate New York, and I had on all this amazing gear, and just spent the whole day on my face in the snow. I went off course into a snow drift and got stuck, with my skis in the air, and the only way out was to pull myself out holding onto this dinky little Charlie Brown Christmas tree. I was very cold and very unhappy. One day I think I'll try it again, but I'll go with someone who has some sense."

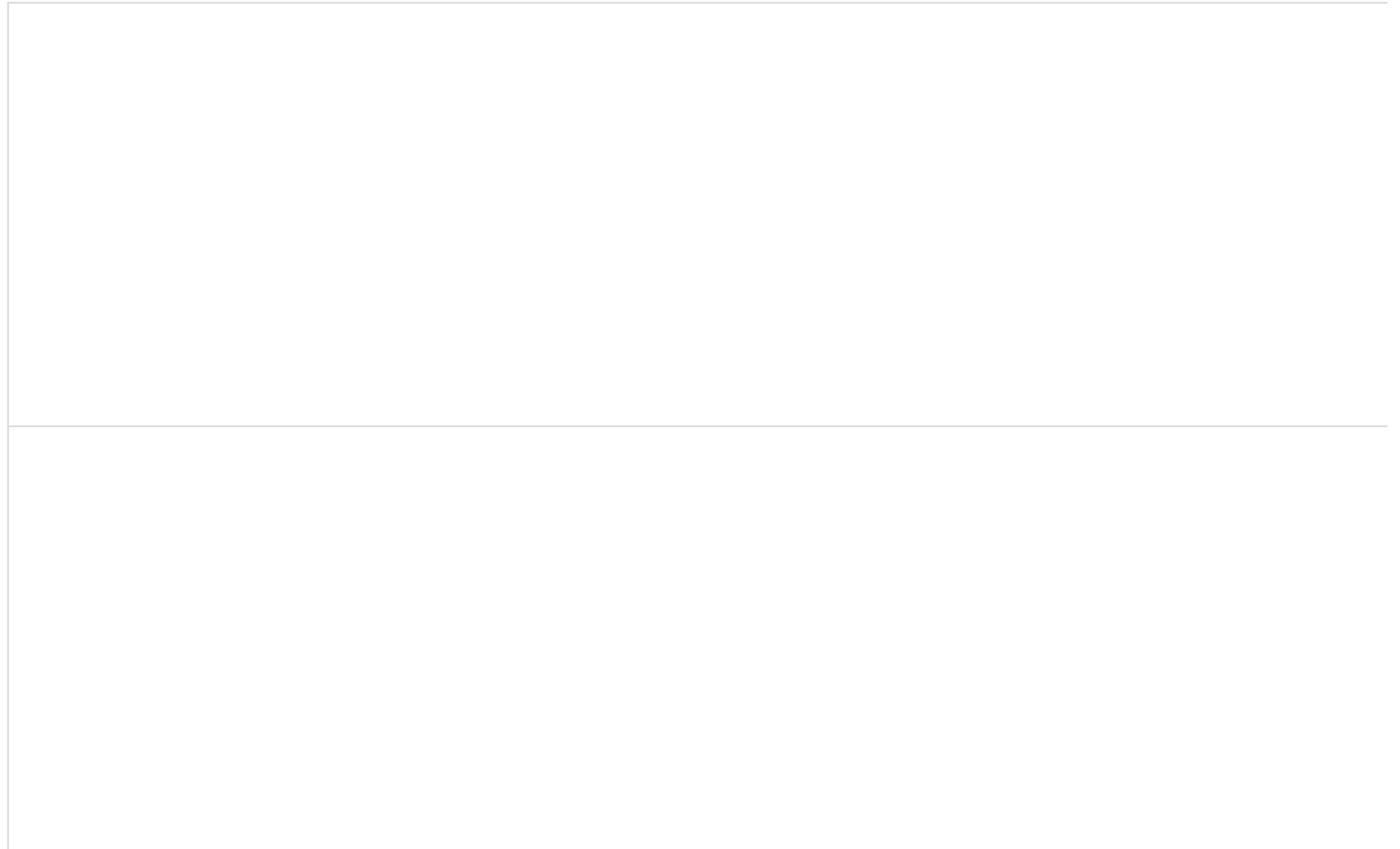
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# THE PLAYBOY PANEL: JAZZ—TODAY AND TOMORROW

one of a series of provocative conversations about subjects of interest on the contemporary scene

## PANELISTS

**JULIAN "CANNONBALL" ADDERLEY** is an urbane alto saxophonist and leader who has achieved sizable popular success during the past five years. He is also a recording director and has helped many musicians get their first chance at national exposure. Adderley has termed his music "modern traditional," indicating his knowledge and respect for the jazz past as well as his interest in continuing to add to the music. Through his lucid, witty introductions at concerts, festivals and night clubs, Adderley has become a model of how to make an audience feel closer to the jazz experience.

**DAVE BRUBECK**, the rugged, candid pianist, leader and composer, has won an unusually large audience to the extent of even having had a number of hit single records. Instead of coasting in a familiar groove, however, he has continued to experiment; in recent years he has turned to time signatures comparatively new to jazz. Although Brubeck is characteristically friendly and guileless, he is a fierce defender of his musical position and does not suffer critics casually.

**JOHN "DIZZY" GILLESPIE** is now recognized throughout the world as the most prodigious trumpet player in modern jazz. He is also the leading humorist in jazz and he has demonstrated that a jazz musician can be a brilliant entertainer without sacrificing any of his musical integrity. He is now leading one of the most stimulating groups of his career, and is also engaged in several ambitious recording projects.

**RALPH J. GLEASON**, one of the few jazz critics widely respected by musicians, is a syndicated columnist who is based at the *San Francisco Chronicle* (in our October issue, we erroneously placed him on the *Examiner* staff). He has edited the book *Jam Session*; has contributed to a wide variety of periodicals, in America and abroad; and is in charge of *Jazz Casual*, an unprecedentedly superior series of jazz television shows, distributed by the National Educational Television Network. As a critic, Gleason is clear, sometimes blunt, and passionately involved with the music.

**STAN KENTON** is a leader of extraordinary stamina and determination. He has created a distinctive orchestral style and, in the process, has given many composers and arrangers an opportunity to experiment with ideas and devices which very

few other band leaders would have permitted. The list of Kenton alumni is long and distinguished. In a period during which the band business has been erratic at best, Kenton is proving again that a forceful personality and unmistakably individual sound and style can draw enthusiastic audiences.

**CHARLES MINGUS**, a virtuoso bassist, is one of the most original and emotionally compelling composers in jazz history. His groups create a surging excitement in producing some of the most startling experiences jazz has to offer. He is also an author, and has completed a long, explosive autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*. An uncommonly open man, Mingus invariably says what he feels and continuously looks for, but seldom finds, equal honesty in the society around him.

**GERRY MULLIGAN** has proved to be one of the most durable figures in modern jazz. In addition to his supple playing of the baritone saxophone, he has led a series of intriguingly inventive quartets and sextets as well as a large orchestra which is one of the most refreshing and resourceful units in contemporary jazz. Mulligan also has acted in films and is now writing a Broadway musical. He has a quality of natural leadership which is manifested not only in the way all of his groups clearly reflect his musical personality, but also in the fact that whenever jam sessions begin at jazz festivals, Mulligan is usually in charge.

**GEORGE RUSSELL** has emerged during the past decade as a jazz composer of exceptional imagination and originality. He has recorded a series of albums with his own group, and these represent one of the most impressive bodies of work in modern jazz. He is also a teacher, and among his students in New York are a number of renowned jazzmen. A pipe-smoking, soft-voiced inhabitant of Greenwich Village, Russell is not one of the more prosperous jazzmen, despite his stature among musicians, but he refuses to compromise his music in any way.

**GUNTHER SCHULLER** is a major force in contemporary music—both classical and jazz. He is one of the most frequently performed American composers, has been awarded many commissions here and abroad (his most recent honor, a Guggenheim fellowship), and is also an accomplished conductor. For ten years, Schuller was first French horn with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, but now



**KENTON:** *So much of today's jazz is full of negative emotions and ugly feelings. People just don't want to subject themselves to these terrible experiences.*



**ADDERLEY:** *Too many of the new players are interested in just being different. I don't think it's necessary to be different so much as to be right—to be felt.*



**GLEASON:** *Crow Jim describes the feeling of some fans who will pay attention only to Negro jazz musicians and won't listen to white musicians.*



**BRUBECK:** *Early in my career, I realized I could reach my audience with one thing only, and that was "music." This is something most groups have forgotten.*



**GILLESPIE:** *Improvisation is the meat of jazz. Rhythm is the bone. The jazz composer's ideas have always come from the instrumentalist.*



**RUSSELL:** *The last refuge of the untalented is the avant-garde. But as the standards of the new jazz become clearer these people will be weeded out.*



**SCHULLER:** *One thing concerns me about our sending jazz overseas. The countries where most musicians have been sent have been hipper than our State Department.*



**MINGUS:** *Aren't you white people asking too much when you ask me to stop saying this is my music? Especially when you don't give me anything else.*



**MULLIGAN:** *I don't give a damn if a man is green or blue. If he can blow, let him blow. If he can't blow, let him do something else.*

devotes his full time to composing, conducting and writing about music. He has had extensive experience in jazz and is largely responsible for the concept of "third-stream music." He is currently working on an analytical musical history of jazz for Oxford University Press. A man of seemingly limitless energy, Schuller is expert in many areas of music as well as in literature and several of the other arts.

**PLAYBOY:** There appears to be a paradox in the current jazz situation. The international stature of the music has never been higher, and jazz is receiving more and more attention in print. Yet musicians are complaining that work is becoming harder and harder to find. Is jazz declining economically, and if it is, how do you reconcile that decline with all the publicity it is receiving?

**BRUBECK:** I don't think there's much of a connection between how much is written in newspapers and magazines about jazz and the growth of its audience. After all, if this were important, classical music would have a much larger audience than pop music. Yet you can't compare the record sales of even the most popular classical artists, such as Leonard Bernstein with those of Johnny Mathis. Now let's carry this over to jazz; certainly there's more being written today about jazz musicians, but I don't think it will affect the popularity of the jazz musician much, or his record sales, or the amount of work he gets.

As for work being harder and harder to find, I think this is true. Not true for the accepted jazz musicians, the ones who have been around for a while. I'd say the pianists I feel are my contemporaries — Erroll Garner, George Shearing, Oscar Peterson — are certainly working as much as they want to work. I am, too. You couldn't say we're complaining. But a young pianist coming up today might have a harder time than we did.

**GLEASON:** While it is true that several night clubs have gone out of business — night clubs that have been associated with jazz over the years — I don't think jazz is in any economic decline. The sales of jazz records and the presence of jazz singles on the hit parade indicate it isn't. The box-office grosses of the Newport Jazz Festival and the Monterey Jazz Festival indicate it isn't. The proven drawing ability of groups like those led by Miles Davis, Count Basie, John Coltrane — and from this panel, Brubeck, Dizzy and Cannonball Adderley — show that there is a very substantial market for jazz in this country.

But there is *not* a market for second-rate jazz, and at certain times in the past, we have had an economy that has supported second-rate jazz as well as first-rate jazz. I think that those fringe groups are now finding work difficult to get. On the other hand, all the jazz night clubs complain consistently that it's hard to

find top-caliber acts to fill out a 52-week-a-year schedule. Jazz is, of course, receiving a great deal of publicity these days, in **PLAYBOY** as well as elsewhere, but I don't think this fact is related to anything at all except the growing awareness on the part of the American public that jazz is something worthy of its interest.

**MULLIGAN:** I think this all has to be seen in perspective. During the big upsurge of jazz in the early 1950s, we saw a tremendous increase in the number of clubs. Now we start wailing the blues and we say, look how terrible times are when these clubs start to close. But we forget that what has happened is that the business has settled back to normal. I'd imagine that there are probably more jazz clubs today than there were in the 1930s. I think you'd find that there were many fewer units in the Thirties and probably none of them was making the money that even some relatively unknown groups are making today.

**RUSSELL:** I can't agree with the optimism that has been expressed so far. I think economic conditions are bad for all but the established groups, and the reason goes to the basic structure of American life. During the swing era, anti-Negro prejudice was at a vicious level. So the young Negro rebels, intellectuals and gang members alike, shared a reverence for jazz because it expressed the feelings of revolt that they needed. It seemed that they had to feel that at least something in their culture was a dynamic, growing thing. The creative jazz musician was one of the most respected members of the Negro community. Then bop came along and was generally accepted by the culturally unbiased dissidents and rejected by those committed to status goals — in either case, irrespective of race.

Another conflict was added to jazz which also transcended race — between the innovator who creates the art (seeking what he can give to it), and the imitator who dilutes and who is mostly interested in what art can give to him.

There is, to be sure, a revolution going on in America. People want an equal chance to compete for status goals that compromise rather than enhance a meaningful life. What I would like to see is a renaissance. Shouldn't a social revolution be armed with a violent drive not only to elevate the individual, but to elevate and enrich the culture as well? If we continue to cater to the tyranny of the majority, we shall all be clapping our hands to *Dixie* on one and three.

**MINGUS:** You have to go further than that. No matter how many places jazz is written up, the fact is that the musicians themselves don't have any power. Tastes are *created* by the business interests. How else can you explain the popularity of an Al Hirt? But it's the musicians' fault for having allowed the booking agents to get this power. It's the musicians' fault

for having allowed themselves to be discriminated against.

**SCHULLER:** I'll go along with George and Charles that there are serious economic problems in jazz today, but the basic answer is very simple. It's not a comforting answer economically, but I believe that jazz in its most advanced stages has now arrived precisely at the point where classical European music arrived between 1915 and 1920. At that time, classical music moved into an area of what we can roughly call total freedom, which is marked by such things as atonality, or free rhythm, or new forms, new kinds of continuity, all these things. So the audience was suddenly left without a tradition, without specific style, without, in other words, the specifics of a language which they thought they knew very well. By also moving into this area—and I believe the move was inevitable—jazz has removed itself from its audience.

**ADDERLEY:** I don't know about that. There is an audience out there now, a sizable audience. But you have to play for it. When we go to work, we play for that audience because the audience is the reason we're able to be there. Of course, we play what we want to and in the way we want to, but the music is directed at the audience. We don't play for ourselves and ignore the people. I don't think that's the proper approach, and I've discovered that most of the guys who are making a buck play for audiences. One way or another.

**PLAYBOY:** Can you be more specific?

**ADDERLEY:** Well, I think the audience feels quite detached from most jazz groups. And it works the other way around, too. Jazz musicians have a tendency to keep themselves detached from the audience. But I speak to the audience. I don't see that it's harmful to advise an audience that you're going to play such and such a thing and tell them something about it. Nor is it harmful to tell something about the man you're going to feature and something about why his sound is different. Or, if somebody requests a song we've recorded with some measure of success, we'll program it.

**GILLESPIE:** Yes, I think some jazz artists are forgetting that jazz is entertainment, too. If you don't take your audience into consideration and put on some kind of a show, they'd just as soon sit at home and listen to your records instead of coming to see you in person.

**PLAYBOY:** A number of musicians—Erroll Garner, the Modern Jazz Quartet and Dave Brubeck here, among them—have either stopped playing night clubs entirely or are curtailing their night-club engagements drastically. Do you think the future of jazz lies largely in the concert field rather than in night clubs? And, trends aside, do you prefer to play the clubs or at a concert?

**KENTON:** For big bands, there does seem to be a trend away from the clubs, be-

cause so many of the clubs have had such problems trying to keep alive. We might finally be left with only concert halls—where you can book spotty dates. But personally, I really don't see a lot of difference between clubs and concerts so long as you can play jazz for listening. I don't think most of us mind whether people are drinking while they listen or whether they're just sitting in a concert hall. I'd just as soon play in either context.

**GLEASON:** I don't think the future of jazz lies largely in the concert field. I think that it lies *partially* in the concert field and *partially* in the night clubs. The fact that Brubeck and Erroll Garner and the Modern Jazz Quartet have all reached a level of economic independence where they can function outside the night club most of the time is an indication of their success, not necessarily an indication of the future of jazz.

All the jazz groups I've ever heard have something different to offer when they're in night clubs than they do when they're on the concert stage. I recently heard the Brubeck quartet, for instance, play the first night-club engagement on the West Coast that it's played in probably six or seven years. I came to that night-club engagement after having heard them in two concert appearances, and the thing that happened in the night club was much more interesting and much more exciting than it was in the concert hall. And all four musicians commented on how great they felt and how well the group played in the night-club appearance.

**MINGUS:** I wish I'd *never* have to play in night clubs again. I don't mind the drinking, but the night-club environment is such that it doesn't call for a musician to even care whether he's communicating. Most customers, by the time the musicians reach the second set, are to some extent inebriated. They don't care what you play anyway. So the environment in a night club is not conducive to good creation. It's conducive to *re-creation*, to the playing of what they're used to. In a club, you could never elevate to free form as well as the way you could, say, in a concert hall.

**BRUBECK:** I can understand that feeling. The reason we got away from night clubs has nothing to do with the people who go to night clubs, or night clubs themselves, or night-club operators. It has to do with the way people *behave* in night clubs. The same person who will be very attentive at a concert will often not be so attentive in a night club. But I must also say that there are some types of jazz I've played in groups which would not come across well in a concert-stage atmosphere. And to tell you the truth, I'm usually happiest playing jazz in a dance hall, because there I don't feel I'm imposing my music and

myself on my audience. They can stand up close to the bandstand and listen to us, or they can dance, or they can be way in the back of the hall holding a conversation.

**GILLESPIE:** Maybe so, but for myself, the atmosphere in a night club lends itself to more creativity on the part of the audience as well as the musician. One reason is that the musician has closer contact with the people and, therefore, can build better rapport. On the other hand, I also like the idea of concerts, because, for one thing: the kids who aren't allowed into night clubs can hear you at concerts and can then buy your records. But to return to the advantages of clubs, when you're on the road a lot, the club—at least one where you can stay a comparatively long period of time,—does give you a kind of simulated home atmosphere. There's a place for both clubs and concerts.

**ADDERLEY:** Yes, I like to play them both, too. And I like festivals. I like television shows—any kind of way we get a chance to play consistently. I like to *do*. But unlike Charles, a joint has my favorite atmosphere. It's true that some people can get noisy, but that's part of it. It seems to me that I feel a little better when people seem to be having a good time before you even begin. And it gives me something to play on. In a concert, sometimes, we don't have enough time to warm up and if the first number is a little bit below our standards, we never quite recover. At least in a club you have sets, and if one set doesn't go well, you have a chance to review what you've done and approach it another way the second time around.

My own preferences aside, however, I think that the night-club business in general is on an unfortunate decline. In a short while, the night club will be a relic, because night clubs are too expensive for most people to really support in the way they should be supported. Just recently, I was talking to a guy who has a club in Columbus, Ohio. Several years ago, he played Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Horace Silver, Miles Davis, Kai Winding, the Oscar Peterson Trio, and my band. He said he didn't pay over \$2200 a week for anybody. But now groups that used to cost him \$1250 cost \$2500, and the same way up the line. But he has no more seats than he had before, and the people are unwilling to pay double for drinks even though the bands cost the owner double. Yet, at the same time, the musicians' cost of living has also gone up. It's a rough circle to break.

**PLAYBOY:** Are you saying then, that the future of jazz is going to be largely in the concert hall?

**ADDERLEY:** Not particularly. I think there'll be other things. There'll be theaters. I think festivals are going to

come back in a different way. The George Wein type of festival of today stands a good chance. In the purest sense, his are not jazz festivals the way Newport was in the beginning. But if Wein presents somebody like Gloria Lynne at a festival today, whether or not she is a jazz singer isn't the point. The fact is she is going to draw a certain number of people. So Wein, thereby, can also present Roland Kirk and he can call it a jazz festival. Most people are not going to quibble over whether Gloria Lynne is a jazz singer; they'll come to hear her at a jazz festival.

**MULLIGAN:** Well, I want to try whatever outlets for playing we have. I don't want to do the same thing all the time. As for clubs, at any given time, there are maybe only three to five clubs in the country that I really enjoy playing. And when you figure two to three weeks in each of five clubs, about 15 weeks of the year are already taken care of. Fortunately, in New York, there is more than one club in which we can work, so that we can stay there longer. We need that time, because otherwise we'd never get any new material.

There are advantages and disadvantages on both sides. I find clubs very wearying in a way in which concerts aren't. The hours themselves—working from nine to two or nine to four, whatever it is. It plays hell with your days. I know guys who are able to get work done in the daytime when they're playing clubs. Maybe they're better disciplined than I am, but I find I'm drained by clubs. So that's what concerts can mean to me—a chance to work during the day. But I also need clubs because we need that kind of atmosphere for the band—an atmosphere in which you just play and play and play. The hard work of it—playing hour after hour, night after night, in the same circumstances—is good for a band. Concerts, however, are also good for the big band, because they allow me to do a greater variety of things. And economically, there are very few clubs into which I can take the big band—because of transportation costs and the problems of working out some kind of consecutive tour. So, I have to think in terms of both concerts and clubs. So far as I'm concerned, I don't see my future as exclusively in one or the other direction.

**MINGUS:** I'll tell you where I'd like more of my future work to be. I'd like some Governmental agency to let me take my band out in the streets during the summer so that I could play in the parks or on the backs of trucks for kids, old people, anyone. In delinquent neighborhoods in the North. All through the South. Anywhere. I'd like to see the Government pay me and other bands who'd like to play for the people. I'm not concerned with the promoters who

want to make money for themselves out of jazz. I'd much rather play for kids.

**PLAYBOY:** Perhaps more important than the question of where jazz is going to be played is that of *what* will be played. We seem to be in a period similar to the early 1940s—when Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and others began to change the jazz language. In other words, a new generation of young musicians is insisting on greater freedom—melodically, harmonically and rhythmically. Do you think that it is indeed time for another expansion of the jazz language? Has the music of the established players become too predictable, too "safe"?

**SCHULLER:** It's not entirely accurate to relate what's happening now to what took place in the 1940s. The language of "bop" at that time remained largely tonal, and even a comparative novice could connect it with what had gone before in jazz. This is no longer true. The music of the jazz avant-garde has gone across that borderline which is the same borderline which the music of Schoenberg passed in 1908 and 1909. At that time, it was the most radical step in some 700 years of classical music. In jazz, nothing so radical as what has been going on during the past five years took place in the previous 40 or 50 years of jazz history. Everything previously, even the bop "revolution," was more of a step-by-step evolution. What's happening now is a giant step, a radical step. Because of the radical nature of the advance, there is a much greater gap between player and audience now than there was in the 1940s.

**KENTON:** I agree about the gap, but I also feel that a lot of the modern experimenters are taking jazz too fast. Sometimes they're doing things just to gain attention—being different for the sake of being different. They're also running the risk of losing their audience entirely. After all, if a music doesn't communicate to the public, I don't care how sophisticated a listener may be, eventually he'll lose interest and walk off if there's no communication. The listener might kid himself for a while if he thinks there's something new and different in the music, but if there's no validity to the music, I'm afraid the jazz artist might lose the listener entirely.

**GLEASON:** First of all, I don't think that the jazz of the established players has become too predictable or too safe. What's predictable or safe about the way Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie play, or John Coltrane? Secondly, jazz musicians are by nature experimental. Every new generation of jazz musicians will try to do something new. And in trying to do something new, they may do a lot of foolish things and a lot of dull things. They may do a lot of things that will have no interest for other musicians,

now or in the future. But this won't stop them from experimenting.

**BRUBECK:** We are certainly in a period during which musicians are starting to branch out into very individualistic directions, and that's very healthy. It's also healthy because we're not codified. It doesn't all have to be bop or swing or New Orleans or Chicago style. We can all be working at the same time in our own individual ways. We are now in the healthiest period in the history of jazz. As for the new generation of young musicians insisting on greater freedom—melodically, harmonically and rhythmically—they certainly should. This is their role—to expand, to create new things. But it's also their role to build on the old, on the past; and when you have all these new, wild things going on, there are some of the wild experimenters who aren't qualified yet. They haven't the roots to shoot out the new branches. They will die.

**GILLESPIE:** That's right. You have to know what's gone before. And another thing, I don't agree that the established players have become too "safe." It takes you 20 to 25 years to find out what *not* to play, to find out what's in bad taste. Taste is something—like wine—that requires aging. But I'd also agree that jazz, like any art form, is constantly evolving. It has to if it's a dynamic art. And unfortunately, many artists do not evolve and thus remain static. As for me, I'm stimulated by experimentation and unpredictability. Jazz shouldn't be boxed in. If it were, it would become decadent.

**MINGUS:** Any musician who comes up and tries changing the *whole* pattern is taking too much in his hands if he thinks he can cut Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, King Oliver and Dizzy all in one "new thing." You see, there's a danger of those experimenters getting boxed in themselves in their own devices. As for now, I don't hear any great change in jazz. Twenty years ago, I was playing simple music that was involved with a lot of things these musicians are doing now. And I'm still playing the same simple music. I haven't even begun to play what I call way-out music. I have some music that will make these cats sound like babies, but this is not the time to play that kind of music.

**ADDERLEY:** I'd agree with what the question implies—we've had a certain amount of lethargy in recent years. Everybody knew how to do the same thing. So, I'd like to say thank God for Ornette Coleman and such players because, whether or not you're an Ornette Coleman fan, his stimulus has done much for all of us. I know it caused me to develop. It caused Coltrane to develop even further, because he felt he had exhausted chord patterns and so forth. However, there has also been a focusing on another area—one Dizzy

mentioned. I heard a new record by Illinois Jacquet the other day and it made me realize again that as certain guys get older, they develop a tendency to get more out of less. Illinois gets more out of his sound, more out of a little vibrato in the right place than he used to. Therefore, don't discount the maturity that has come with experience and discipline. As I say, many of us have been stimulated by what's going on, but we're also aware that often emotion is missing in all this emphasis on freedom. Too many of the newer players are interested in just being different. I don't think it's necessary to be different so much as to be right. To be felt. To be beautiful.

**MULLIGAN:** Yes, the concept of freedom has been overworked a great deal. In the course of "freeing" themselves, as Mingus said, a lot of the guys have become even more rigidly entrenched in a stylized approach.

**PLAYBOY:** In regard to the casting off of old jazz forms, what is your reaction to the concept of "third stream" music—a music which will draw from both jazz and classical heritages but which is intended to have an identity of its own?

**GLEASON:** My reaction? Hooray! Let's have third-stream music and fourth-stream music and fifth-stream music and sixth stream and whatever. Let's just have more music. There's nothing inherently good or bad in the idea of a new kind of music which will draw from various musical heritages. This may turn out to be a very good thing. Some of it has already turned out to be quite interesting.

**KENTON:** I'd agree that music is music, but as for "third stream," I think it's just a kind of merchandising idea. I've been interested in the development, but I don't think there's anything new there.

**ADDERLEY:** Well, I'm the last person to discourage anyone's interest in trying to do something different. However, as much as I respect and admire the willingness of the third-stream people to work hard, their music misses me most of the time. I listen to a lot of classical music, and it seems to me that most of what they're doing with the "third stream" has already been developed further by the more venturesome classical composers. Besides, Duke Ellington has shown us how to develop jazz from *within* to do practically anything. On the other hand, we know how ridiculous Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* is.

**MULLIGAN:** As Dizzy said, we already use certain devices that can be traced to some kind of classical influence. But this idea of an autonomous music—separate from both jazz and classical music—I don't see any need for it. That's not to say I wouldn't like to write things for, or play with, a symphony, but whether a "third stream" should come along and

have its own niche is something else. It seems to me it's going to have to be absorbed into one or the other main stream.

**RUSSELL:** A third stream isn't necessary. In fact, jazz itself may be the main stream of music to come. I mean that, to me, jazz is an evolving classical music. In my own work, I don't draw that heavily on traditional classical standards. I have been influenced by composers like Bartók, Stravinsky and Berg, but if those influences go into my music, it's unconscious. A *conscious* attempt to combine the two is not my way of doing things. You see, I think jazz itself is the classical music of America, and eventually it will transcend even that role and become, in every profound musical sense, an international classical music.

**BRUBECK:** When *wasn't* jazz what you describe as third-stream music? Melodically, from the beginning, jazz has been mostly European. Harmonically, it's been mostly European. The forms used have been mostly European. In fact, the first written jazz form was the rag and that was a copy of the European march. I think it's time we realize that we couldn't have had jazz without the merging of the African culture with the European culture. But in the beginning it was primarily a European music transformed to fulfill the expression of the American Negro. Once having acknowledged that, we ought to forget about who did what and when and we ought to forget whether jazz is African or European. Jazz now is an *American* art form and it's being played all over the world.

**PLAYBOY:** To get back to the idea of the "third stream," Gunther, as the man most closely identified with the concept, do you still think it is a viable approach?

**SCHULLER:** Absolutely, and this is confirmed for me almost every day of my life—especially this past summer at Tanglewood, where I was very much in touch with what you could call a cross section of the young American musical generation. Tanglewood draws its 200 students from all over the country; and even in this citadel of nonjazz music, at least 30 to 40 percent of the young musicians there were in some sense involved with jazz or could play it. And some of them played it extremely well. Now, these musicians epitomized what I feel about third-stream music, and that is the elimination of a radical barrier or difference between jazz and classical music. To the kids, there is no such big difference. It's all either good or not-so-good music. And the question of jazz style or nonjazz style is not a fundamental issue with them. They deal with much more fundamental musical criteria—is a piece, in whatever style, good or bad? This means that the third-stream movement, whether the critics or certain musicians happen to like it or not,

is developing by itself—without any special efforts on anybody's part.

**ADDERLEY:** My feeling, though, is that when you deal with something like third stream, which mixes jazz with classical music, you're going to weaken the basic identity of jazz.

**SCHULLER:** It's true that many people worry about the guts being taken out of jazz as it evolves. They worry about it becoming "whitened." However, jazz has indeed basically changed into something different from what it started as. It started as folk music, as a very earthy, almost plainly social expression of a downtrodden people. It then became a dance music, an entertainment music—still with roots in the very essence and heart of life. It was not an art music. Now, as it becomes an art music—and there's no question that it already has in the hands of certain people—it will change its character. The process is inevitable.

**PLAYBOY:** In some of your statements so far, the term "art music" has been used in connection with jazz. The French critic André Hodeir would agree that jazz is becoming more and more of an art music. He also says, however, that jazz was never really a popular music anyway—although jazz-influenced bands did draw large audiences in the 1930s. In any case, he claims that now, as jazz is inevitably evolving into an art music, its audiences are going to be small and select—similar, in a way, to the audiences for chamber music and poetry. Do you agree?

**KENTON:** Yes. Jazz, to start with, is not a popular music at all. It's true that a lot of the bands in the Golden Era of bands were kind of jazz oriented and did quite well playing dance music and swing, but real jazz has no greater following throughout the world today than has classical music. I think we might as well make up our minds that that's the way it's going to be.

**GLEASON:** I don't agree that jazz audiences are going to become smaller and more select. If Count Basie's band and Duke Ellington's band weren't jazz bands, and aren't jazz bands, then I don't know what are. Woody Herman's also. And these bands at various times have had very large audiences. Benny Goodman's biggest successes were scored with bands that were really jazz bands, not just jazz-influenced bands.

**BRUBECK:** That's right. In the late 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, I saw some tremendous jazz bands with some very large audiences in the interior of California, a place called Stockton, where I was going to college. It's pretty much off the beaten path, so if you could draw large audiences there at that time, you could draw large audiences anyplace in the United States. Duke Ellington was there for a week

and he had a full house every night. Jimmie Lunceford was there. Stan Kenton came through. Woody Herman. Count Basie. Now, I wouldn't call those bands jazz influenced. They were *influencing* jazz. I think Hodeir is referring to some other bands that may have been more popular, but I hardly think they were that much more popular. The bands then were set up to be more entertaining than we are today—but they were also playing great music. I do agree with Hodeir that jazz is becoming much more of an art music. In other words, we aren't putting on a show and good jazz at the same time. We're each of us putting on our own individual brand of jazz, and it's not meant to be entertaining in the sense that it's a show. But it's entertaining in the sense that it's good music, sincere music that we hope reaches an audience. Maybe this absence of a "show" does put jazz into the art-music category, but I for one wouldn't mind seeing jazz go back to the days of the 1930s when you had more entertaining bands, such as Ellington's. And don't forget that Ellington, while he was entertaining, was also able to create a *Black, Brown and Beige*.

**SCHULLER:** But jazz is not going to go back to the 1930s. And I maintain that, to the extent that jazz ever has been a really popular music, it has been the result of a certain commercialization of jazz elements. Even with the best of the jazz bands, like Fletcher Henderson's, their style wasn't popular. What became popular was a certain simplification of that style as it was used by Benny Goodman.

**ADDERLEY:** I don't agree with Hodeir. I don't think jazz ever will cease to be important to the layman, simply because the layman has always looked to jazz for some kind of escape from the crap in popular culture. Anybody who ever heard the original form of *Stardust* can hardly believe what has happened to it through the efforts primarily of jazz musicians. Listen to the music on television. Even guys who think in terms of Delius and Ravel and orchestrate for television shows draw from jazz. The jazz audience has always existed, and it always will.

**RUSSELL:** I think there'll be a schism in the forms of jazz. There definitely will be an art jazz and a popular jazz. As a matter of fact, that situation exists today.

**GILLESPIE:** I'm optimistic. Yes, the audience will become select, but it won't be small. Let me put it another way: The audience will become larger but it will be more selective in what it likes.

**SCHULLER:** I don't see how. The people who are going to become involved with jazz, as it's developing now, are going to become *very much* involved. You just can't take it passively as you could, for instance, the dance music of the bands in

the 1930s. You could be comparatively passive about them. But if you're going to be involved with Ornette Coleman at all, you've got to be involved very deeply, or else it goes right past you.

We must expect a smaller audience from now on, and there's nothing wrong in that. A sensitive audience is a good audience. Because of what's happened to the music, we can no longer expect the kind of mass appeal that certain very simplified traditions of jazz were able to garner for a while.

**MINGUS:** None of you has dealt with another aspect of this. This talk of small, select audiences will just continue the brainwashing of jazz musicians. I think of Cecil Taylor, who is a great musician. He told me one time, "Charlie, I don't want to make any money. I don't expect to. I'm an artist." Who told people that artists aren't supposed to feed their families beans and greens? I mean, just because somebody didn't make money hundreds of years ago because he was an artist doesn't mean that a musician should not be able to make money today and still be an artist. Sure, when you sell yourself as a whore in your music you can make a lot of money. But there are some honest ears left out there. If musicians could get some economic power, they could make money and be artists at the same time.

**PLAYBOY:** Let's discuss the changing jazz horizons even further. You, Dizzy, Miles Davis and John Coltrane, among others, have been studying folk cultures of other parts of the world—North Africa, India, Spain, etc.—and have been incorporating some of these idioms into jazz. Is there any limitation to the variety of materials which can be included in jazz without jazz losing its own identity?

**ADDERLEY:** No, I don't think so. I think that you can play practically anything so long as your concept is one of bringing it *into* jazz. We have some Japanese folk music in our repertory which Yusef Lateef has reorganized, and we're working on a suite of Japanese folk themes.

**GLEASON:** There's no limitation to the variety of materials which can be included in jazz without jazz losing its own identity—provided the player is a good jazz musician. We've already had the example of all sorts of Latin and African rhythms brought into jazz. We have bossa nova, which is an amalgam of jazz and Afro-Brazilian music, and we will have others. In fact, I think that the bringing into jazz music of elements of the musical heritage of other cultures is a very good thing, and something that should be encouraged.

**MINGUS:** It's not that easy. Sure, you can pick up on the gimmick things. But I don't think they can take the true essence of the folk music they borrow from, add to it, and then say it's sincere. I'm skeptical, because what they prob-

ably borrow are the simple things they hear on top. Like the first thing a guy will borrow from Max Roach is a particular rhythmic device, but that's not what Max Roach is *saying* from his heart. His heart plays another pulse. What I'm trying to say is that you can bring in all these folk elements, but I think it's going to sound affected.

**BRUBECK:** I don't agree that it necessarily has to sound that way. This is something that has concerned me for a long time. About 15 years ago, I wrote an article for *Down Beat*—the first article I ever did—and I said jazz was like a sponge. It would absorb the music of the world. And I've been working in this area. In 1958, I did an album, *Jazz Impressions of Eurasia*, in which I used Indian music, Middle Eastern music, and music influenced by certain countries in Europe. I certainly think jazz will become a universal musical language. It's the only music that has that capability, because it is so close to the folk music of the world—the folk music of any country.

**RUSSELL:** I still have my doubts about this approach. When I say I think jazz can become a universal kind of music, I mean it in the sense of pure classical music. I don't mean by consciously melting the music of one culture with another. I mean that jazz through its own kind of melodic and harmonic and rhythmic growth will become a universal music. Furthermore, I find that American folk music in itself is rich enough to be utilized in terms of this new way of thinking. But as for going into Indian or Near Eastern cultures, it's not necessary for me. Oh, I can see its value as a hypnotic device—you know, inducing a sort of hypnotic effect upon an audience. But many times that doesn't really measure up musically. It doesn't produce a music of lasting universal value. And I think jazz is capable of producing a music that is as universal and as artistic as Bach's.

**GILLESPIE:** I'm with Ralph Gleason on this. So long as you have a creative jazz musician doing the incorporating of other cultures, it can work. Jazz is so robust and has such boundless energy that it can completely absorb many different cultures, and what will come out will be jazz.

**PLAYBOY:** We're beginning to hear the language of jazz spoken in many tongues; more and more jazzmen of ability are making themselves heard all over the world—Russia, Japan, Thailand, almost everywhere. John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet claims that it will soon no longer be the rule that all important jazz innovations—and innovators—start in America. Instead, the most influential jazz player of the next decade may suddenly arise in Hong Kong. Do you think this prediction is accurate,



or will a jazzman still need seasoning in America before he has the capacity to contribute importantly to the music?

**GILLESPIE:** The prediction may be true, but as of now, jazz is still inherently American. It comes out of an American experience. It's possible that jazzmen of other cultures can use jazz through a vicarious knowledge of its roots here or maybe they can improvise their native themes and their own emotional experiences in the context of jazz. It's also possible that one day American jazz will become really, fundamentally, international. In fact, I think that the cultural integration of all national art forms is inevitable for the future. And when that happens, a new type of jazz will emerge. But it hasn't happened yet.

**KENTON:** I think it's altogether possible. And it would be very good for the American ego if an outstanding player did come from left field somewhere.

**ADDERLEY:** I don't think there ever will be an important, serious jazz musician from anywhere but the United States, if only because jazz musicians themselves are not going to allow jazz to escape from where it was developed. I'm talking about real jazz.

**SCHULLER:** No, I don't agree. It's not at all inconceivable that in the next five or ten years, an innovator could come from Europe. Of course, it depends on where you choose to draw your limitations as to what jazz is. If you mean Cannonball's kind of jazz, which is certainly in the main stream of jazz development, then I'd agree with you. But jazz can no longer be defined in only that way. Jazz has grown in such a way as to include what even ten years ago would have been considered outside of jazz or very much on its periphery. The music has grown to such an extent that these things are now part of the world of jazz; and as jazz reaches out and expands and goes farther into these outer areas, jazz will of necessity include players who do not have this main stream kind of orientation. So that, in this larger sense—and I know this is the sense in which John Lewis' statement is to be taken—it's entirely possible to have important innovations come from outside this country. A genius can crop up anywhere.

**RUSSELL:** Perhaps, but there has not been a precedent yet for any major contributor coming from any but our country, or more specifically, from any other city but New York. I mean, he's had to have worked in New York at one time or another. I suppose the reason for the importance of New York is the interchange that goes on among musicians in this city, even when they're not in contact. Also, there's a feeling of panic and urgency in New York which provides the trial by fire that seems to make it happen. In New York, you al-

ways get a nucleus of people who haven't settled into a formula, who haven't yet sold out for comfort or for other reasons. The nucleus of that kind of musician seems to gather here, and they inspire one another.

**MULLIGAN:** There's a catch in the question. When you say "important innovation," that implies something different from talking about a great player who will be influential on his instrument. After all, guys have already come out of other countries who have influenced people here. Django Reinhardt is a perfect example. As Gunther says, there's no telling where genius is going to come from. But whether any major innovations in jazz are going to come from abroad—something which will radically change what went before—George is probably right, though I don't know about the New York part of what he says. What seems important to me—and I've noticed this often—is that the biggest problem jazz musicians from other countries have is that they have grown up in an entirely different kind of musical background. Most of us in this country are raised with not only jazz, but all the popular music of whatever particular time we're growing up in. But foreign players don't have that kind of ingrown background. Yet, it's also a little more complicated than that. The reason I wouldn't be surprised to see great players coming out of other countries, and conceivably creating something different on their instruments, is that fellows who don't speak English wind up phrasing differently. Many times, I hear players who speak Swedish or French imitate the phrasing of an American jazz player, but it's not quite right, because the very phrasing of an American jazz player reflects his mode of speech, the accent of his language, even his regional accents. Perhaps, when foreign horn men begin reflecting *their* natural phrasing, we will get significantly different approaches.

**KENTON:** What we have to remember is that while it's true that a foreign player has to be exposed to American jazz before he can grasp the dimension and the character of the music, that doesn't mean he can't eventually contribute without even visiting the States. American jazz musicians now are traveling so much around the world that foreign players can stay at home and be exposed to enough American jazz so that they can become part of the music.

**MINGUS:** I don't see it that way. Not the way the world and this country is now. Jazz is still an ethnic music, fundamentally. Duke Ellington used to explain that this was a Negro music. He told that to me and Max Roach, as a matter of fact, and we felt good. When the society is straight, when people really are integrated, when they *feel* integrated,

maybe you can have innovations coming from someplace else. But as of now, jazz is still our music, and we're still the ones who make the major changes in it.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you believe there is any political gain in the flow of jazz "ambassadors" overseas, or are we conning ourselves when we think the enthusiastic acceptance of a jazz unit in a foreign country is a political advantage for us?

**GILLESPIE:** Well, mine was the first band that the State Department sent in an ambassadorial role, and I have no doubts that jazz can be an enormous political plus. When a jazz group goes abroad to entertain, it represents a culture and creates an atmosphere for pleasure, asking nothing in return but attentiveness, appreciation and acceptance—with no strings attached. Obviously, this has to be a political advantage.

**GLEASON:** I'm in favor of sending more jazz musicians overseas everywhere. Now, whether this turns out to be a political gain or not, I don't know. I do think it's a humanitarian and an artistic gain. I don't think we are totally conning ourselves as the United States of America when we consider the enthusiastic reception of a jazz unit in a foreign country to be a political plus. As Tony Lopes, the president of the Hong Kong Jazz Club, remarked recently, "You can't be anti-American and like jazz." But I don't think that any amount of jazz exported to Portugal, for instance, will ever make the attitude of the American Government toward the government of Portugal accepted by the Portuguese people as a good thing. Same thing for Spain and the rest of the world. But no one has yet seen a sign: AMERICAN JAZZMAN, GO HOME!

**ADDERLEY:** Sure, I think having a jazz musician travel under the auspices of the State Department is a good thing. It can signify to the audience for which it is intended that the United States Government thinks that jazz is our thing, we're happy with it, and we want you to hear some of it because we think it's beautiful.

**RUSSELL:** But there's an element of hypocrisy there. The very people who send jazz overseas are not really fans of jazz, and the country in whose name jazz is traveling as an "ambassador" completely ignores its own art form at home. It's not going to hurt the musician who goes, however, because music traditionally is known for its ability to unite at least some of the people. At least, the people in power do recognize the capacity jazz has to unite people.

**ADDERLEY:** Yes, it can unite people, but politically, I don't think jazz does a damn thing. I don't think it influences anybody that way. I think the Benny Goodman tour had nothing to do with helping create a democratic attitude in a Communist country.

**BRUBECK:** There are other kinds of political effects. I certainly think that when the Moiseyev Dancers were here, there was kind of a friendship toward Russia which was communicated through almost every TV set tuned to those people. The effect was like saying, "Well, the Russians can't be too bad if they've got great, happy people like these dancers, singers and entertainers. They must be very much like us. In fact, they might be better dancers." And communication from jazz groups going overseas is the same thing in reverse. After all, when we were in India during the Little Rock crisis, it made the headlines in the Indian newspapers seem maybe not quite so believable to an Indian audience that had just seen us. Our group was integrated, and the headlines were making it sound as if integration was impossible in the United States. But right before their eyes, they saw four Americans who seemed to have no problems on that score. And I think there *are* other assets as well.

**SCHULLER:** I was able to get an idea of the impact of jazz in Poland and Yugoslavia a few months ago. It's hard for anyone who hasn't been there to realize the extent to which people abroad, especially in Iron Curtain countries now, admire jazz and what it stands for. I mean the freedom and individuality it represents. However, in many cases, they don't even think of it as a particularly American product. They regard it simply as the music of the young or the music of freedom.

One thing that does concern me about sending jazz overseas is the occasional lack of care in selecting the musicians who go. The countries where many of these musicians have been sent have been much more hip than our State Department.

**MINGUS:** I wish the Government was more hip at home. They send jazz all over the world as an art, but why doesn't the Government give us employment here? Why don't they subsidize jazz the way Russia has subsidized its native arts? As I said before, rather than go on a State Department tour overseas, I'd prefer to play for people here. The working people. The kids.

**PLAYBOY:** Whether abroad or at home, has the scope of jazz widened to the point at which the term "jazz" itself is too confining?

**KENTON:** I feel the same way about the word jazz as some other musicians do. The word has been abused. I think it was Duke Ellington who said a couple of years ago that we should do away with the word completely, but if you do, another word will take its place. I don't think the situation would be changed at all.

**BRUBECK:** Yes, Duke has spoken of dropping the word jazz. I agree with him.

Just call it contemporary American music, and I'd be very happy. But if you keep calling it jazz, it doesn't make me unhappy.

**ADDERLEY:** The word doesn't bug me in the least. In fact, I'm very happy to associate myself with the term, because I think it has a very definite meaning to most people. It means something different, something unique. Furthermore, I like to be identified with all that "jazz" represents. All the evil and all the good. All the drinking, loose women, the narcotics, everything they like to drop on us. Why? Because when I get before people, I talk to them and they get to know how I feel about life and they can ascertain that there is some warmth or maybe some morality in the music that they never knew existed.

**RUSSELL:** The term isn't at all burdensome to me. I like to accept the challenge of what "jazz" means in terms of the language we inherited and in terms of trying to broaden it. The word and what it connotes play a part in my musical thinking. It forces me sometimes to restrict an idea so that it will come out with more rhythmic vitality. In other words, occasionally I'll sacrifice tonal beauty for rhythmic vitality.

**GLEASON:** Once again, I'm not sure what the question means. In one sense, jazz covers the whole spectrum of popular music in the country. There are aspects of jazz in rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, Van Alexander's dance band, the Three Suns. So I don't know whether it can expand too far or not. Everybody means what *he* means when he says jazz. He doesn't always mean what you or I mean. And I don't think there's any reason to sit around looking for a new word, because we're not going to *invent* a new word. When the time comes — if it ever does — for a new word, it will arrive. *Down Beat* conducted a rather silly contest some years ago to select a new word for jazz, and came up with "crew-cut." That word had a vogue which lasted for precisely one issue of *Down Beat*.

**MINGUS:** Well, the word jazz bothers *me*. It bothers me because, as long as I've been publicly identified with it, I've made less money and had more trouble than when I wasn't. Years ago, I had a very good job in California writing for Dinah Washington and several blues singers, and I also had a lot of record dates. Then by some chance I got a write-up in a "jazz" magazine, and my name got into one of those "jazz" books. As I started watching my "jazz" reputation grow, my pocketbook got emptier. I got more write-ups and came to New York to stay. So I was really in "jazz," and I found it carries you anywhere from a nut house to poverty. And the people think you're making it because you get write-ups. And you sit and starve

and try to be independent of the crooked managers and agencies. You try to make it by yourself. No, I don't get any good feeling from the word jazz.

**PLAYBOY:** Some critics have remarked on the scarcity of significant jazz singers in recent years. Is this a correct assumption, or have the critics too narrowly defined what they consider "authentic" jazz singing? Do you feel there will be an important place for singing in the jazz of the future, and what changes are we likely to have in the concept of jazz singing?

**KENTON:** Well, I don't know as we've ever had a great raft of jazz singers. There have been singers who border on jazz and whose styles have a jazz flavor, but there haven't been many out-and-out jazz singers. I mean somebody like Billie Holiday who was 100 percent jazz. You could even hear it in her speaking voice. No, I don't think we're any shorter of *that* kind of jazz singer than we were 20 years ago.

**GLEASON:** Agreed. There has always been a scarcity of significant jazz singers. And there will always be an important place for singing in jazz. I don't see any changes, however, that we're likely to have in the concept of jazz singing. The things that were done by Ran Blake and Jeanne Lee seem to me to have almost nothing to do with the possibilities of expanding the scope of jazz singing. Carmen McRae is the best jazz singer alive today and what she's doing is really simple, in one sense. And because of that simplicity, it's exquisitely difficult.

**ADDERLEY:** The question is a hard one for me, because I don't know just what a jazz singer is. What does the term mean? We've had our Billie Holidays, Ella Fitzgeralds, and Mildred Baileys and Sarah Vaughans, but they've been largely jazz *oriented* and jazz *associated*. Any real creative jazz innovation has been done by an instrumentalist. In other words, to me jazz is instrumental music, so that, although I'll go along with a term like jazz oriented, I don't recognize a jazz singer as such.

**MULLIGAN:** I agree with that. I've always thought of jazz as instrumental music. To be sure, there have been singers who were influenced by the horn players — and a lot of them wound up being excellent singers who learned things about phrasing that they would never have learned otherwise. But fundamentally, the whole thing of improvising with a rhythm on a song, or improvising on a progression, is instrumental. It always bugs me when I hear singers trying to do the *same* things the horns do. The voice is so much more flexible than the horn, it seems unnecessary for a singer to try to restrict himself and make himself as rigid in his motion as a horn. To an-

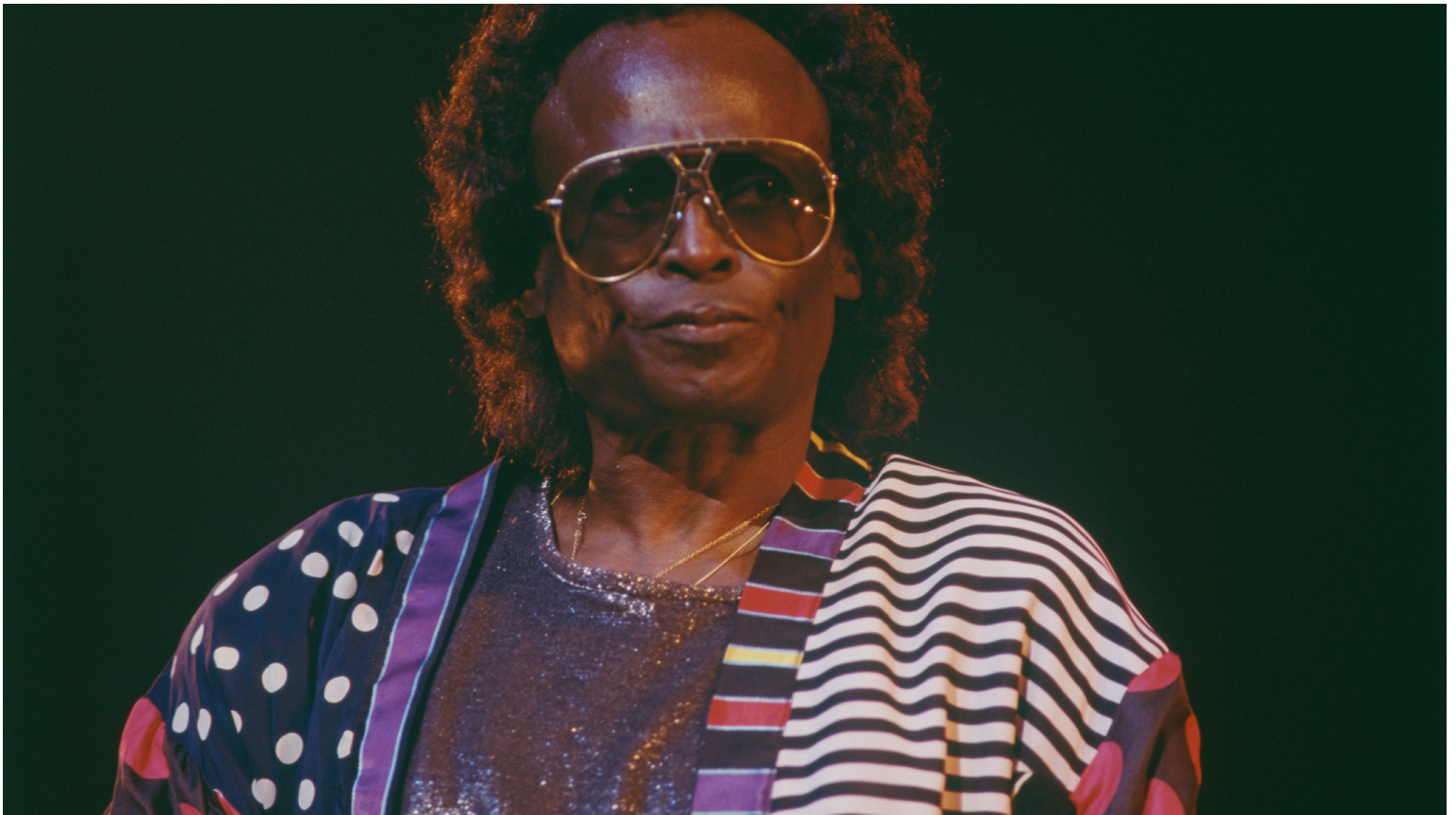
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1990S

# Last Miles: Our 1991 Miles Davis Interview

Written by SPIN Staff | May 26, 2021 - 3:07 pm



Prominent jazz trumpeter Miles Davis performs at the Zenith Concert Hall in Paris. (Photo by THIERRY ORBAN/Sygma via Getty Images)

*This article originally appeared in the December 1991 issue of SPIN. We've republished it on what would have been Miles Davis' 95th birthday.*

**I loved watching Harry Reasoner's expression on *60 Minutes*** when Miles told him he felt there was nothing wrong with being a pimp: "Women liked me," rasped the controversial, iconoclastic, horn-playing genius. Oh, Miles! I could hear women gasping from coast to coast! This man did speak his mind. I decided I finally had to get in touch with this gravelly-voiced musical messenger and get him to talk to me, even though the word was he wasn't talking to anybody (not even to promote his just-released autobiography, *Miles*, for Simon and Schuster). And he is oh so difficult—authentic and stubborn. Good enough for me; I had to try.

**Miles Davis** was born on May 25, 1926, in Alton, Illinois. He grew up in East St. Louis where, at the age of 13, he began blowing his trumpet. But it was hearing Dizzy Gillespie's trumpet and Charlie Parker's saxophone that made Miles decide to be a musician. Arriving in New York in 1944 to study at Juilliard and to find Dizzy and Bird, Miles soon found that "the shit they was talking about was too 'white' for me." He began hanging out on "the Street"—Fifty-second Street—the Three Deuces, the Onyx, and Kelly's Stable, where a heavy jazz scene was happening and all points converged. He finally found Bird and Dizzy and the other legends of his musical bebop tribe. He quit school and began playing with Charlie Parker's quintet. But soon Miles took his own direction, and, with musicians like Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan, and Lee Konitz, a new, more complex style called cool jazz emerged.

Restless and searching, Miles moved again, this time away from cool jazz to proclaim the arrival of hard bop, recording with musicians such as Sonny Rollins and Thelonious Monk. With *Kind of Blue* in 1959, Miles moved on to modal jazz, which would become the conclusive style of the '60s. His coterie for this decade included Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams. Miles added electronic instruments and ended up with a haunting, aggressive sound—improvisational, but rooted in rhythm. The musicians who worked with Miles during this period went on to form innovative rock groups such as the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Tony Williams's Lifetime, **Chick Corea's** Return to Forever, and Weather Report. In the '70s, he used Indian table drums and sitar—he had replaced melody and harmony with a funky melange of rhythm and electronics.

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In 1975 ill health forced Miles into a five-year retirement and led to a drug abuse relapse. When he returned in 1981, critics said he had become a “business.” One thing is certain, the human sound of Miles’s trumpet and his angry, innovative style is a permanent legacy to the music of America. His final appearance was at the Hollywood Bowl at the JVC Jazz Festival on August 25, 1991. He died in Santa Monica, California, a month later, on September 29. This interview, Thanksgiving 1989, was his last.

When I first called the Essex House, the hotel in New York’s Central Park where Miles lived, the operators were definitely on the job. “Yes, Jennifer Lee. You see, I met Mr. Davis, actually it was ten years ago with my ex-husband, Richard Pryor. He had had an operation.” I was put on hold for several moments. Suddenly I heard the famous rasping voice (after a throat operation he yelled too soon at someone, resulting in badly damaged vocal chords). Somehow it struck me how perfect that voice was. One had to lean into it, listening closely, attentively. Sexy yet chilling, it conjured up scenes of Regan in *The Exorcist*, swiveling on the bed giving her speeches from hell. And he spoke deliberately as well, slow, measured.

**Miles Davis:** Yeah?

**SPIN:** Miles, you probably don’t remember but Richard and I came to visit you. I think you had just had a gall bladder operation.

**Davis:** Could’ve been. They’ve taken so much out of me. Hang on a minute. [*Silence for several moments.*] Yeah.

**SPIN:** Miles, you were a very chic patient as I recall. Roaming around in your huge suite at New York Hospital in a stunning navy blue silk robe. You said the best thing to Richard.

**Davis:** What’d I say?

**SPIN:** [*In my best imitation of the voice from hell:*] “Richard, she’s fine. Are you going to marry the bitch?”

**Davis:** [*The voice from hell laughs.*] And did you?

**SPIN:** Yeah, I did. We did.

**Davis:** How was it?

**SPIN:** Divorce, heartbreak, Miles.

**Davis:** Hang on one minute.

**SPIN:** Miles, I read an excerpt from your book in *Vanity Fair*.

**Davis:** Writers are funny, man. [*Perhaps a reference to Quincy Troupe, with whom he coauthored his autobiography.*]

**SPIN:** Why?

**Davis:** If you say, “I don’t give a shit,” they have to say, “I don’t give a damn.”

**SPIN:** Well, Miles, I don’t think it’s easy to mess with your truth too much; it’s really strong stuff.

**Davis:** Yeah—you think so?

**SPIN:** Yeah, I do. Like that story of your cocaine dealer who couldn’t give you the dope without you paying her.

**Davis:** Well, she gave it to me, didn’t she?

**SPIN:** Yeah, after you pulled your cock out and her boyfriend was on the way up. . . *Whew!*

**Davis:** You’re funny. Are you in the lobby?

**SPIN:** I’m funny? No, I’m at home. Listen, Miles, before you say no, just think about it. What about a conversation, an interview? I’ll let you go. Just give it a thought.

**Davis:** When are you going to call again?

**SPIN:** Tomorrow night, same time.

**I called back the following evening** and Miles asked me to come meet him. “And bring something to drink if you drink. I don’t,” he said.

A couple of hours later, I rang the doorbell to Miles’s suite. After a few moments, he opened the door and studied me for a few seconds before asking me in. My first thought was, “transcendent.” The father of hip, the original cool cat. And predatory as hell.

He was a striking man. I was amazed at his youthful appearance. This man was over 60, yet his face held no time. He had on a pair of black and white tweed jodhpurs, a black and white sweater and a pair of black socks with little red dots. There was an immediate energy between us. He began by showing me around his suite. Then he pointed to a canvas on the floor. It was a large rectangular canvas with modern images dancing the length and width of it. Miles walked me slowly through the two large rooms with walls covered in art. His own, many framed, as well as many other works by up-and-coming artists which ran along the lines of ethnic folk art. Immediately I sensed his isolation amidst all this creativity. Here was a man who lived on and in his bed. With a TV in each room. The one in his sleeping area, I sensed, was always on, as it was this evening, nestled between some musical instruments and other electronic equipment. The vivid colors of all the low chairs and couches and tables, the wall-to-wall mirrors and the lighting, could easily be called “modern.” The tone of this environment felt early ’60s. Yet there was a naiveté to it as well. Piles of things all around. Exercise apparatus stood like weird pieces of sculpture, neglected and dusty. We settled in his

sleeping area. He sat in his low-rider white chair and stared at the television; I sat on the edge of his low platform king-size bed.

**Davis:** How's Richard?

**SPIN:** Not good.

**Davis:** Whadya mean?

**SPIN:** He's sick.

**Davis:** With what?

**SPIN:** I'd rather not say.

**Davis:** What? Come on, tell me?

**SPIN:** Well, it's not AIDS.

**Davis:** Is it palsy?

**SPIN:** MS.

**Davis:** Richard never calls me. I told him, "You don't have to call me every day, just once a month." It's been three years.

**SPIN:** You know I worked with your wife, Cicely [Tyson], once, on *Bustin' Loose*.

**Davis:** Ex-wife.... [*They were divorced in 1987.*]

**SPIN:** Miles, I know you don't like to give interviews. I heard Simon and Schuster is mad at you for not promoting the book.

**Davis:** They are? You know why I don't do interviews? Because more than one person shows up, they snoop around and ask stupid questions. That's why. But Jennifer, I like you, that's different.

**SPIN:** Thanks.

**Davis:** When do you want to do it?



**SPIN:** This weekend?

**Davis:** You should read my book.

**SPIN:** I've got to get it.

**Davis:** It's in the other room; walk straight back, you'll find it.

**I returned with a copy of *Miles*. I opened the book and saw a picture of his mother. He pointed to the picture and tapping it several times said, “Good woman.”**

“Did you enjoy doing this?” I said. “The book?” He shrugged. “No.”

His private portable phone rang. He picked it up and listened without speaking for several minutes and then handed it to me. I listened to someone playing saxophone at the other end, oblivious. “It’s one of my musicians,” he said, then took back the phone, listened for a few more moments, and without speaking placed the phone back into its holder. At this point the energy between us was translating into attraction.

“Well, I’ve got some research to do,” I said.

“How ’bout some soup?”

“Fine.”

With that Miles went into the kitchen, poured soup into two mugs, stuck them into a microwave, hit a few buttons, and, leaving, said, “You get ‘em.”

I stood staring at the neon digits click down, and while I’m no Julia Child, I suspected this was too long for soup to be nuked. I opened the door and took out the mugs. The broth had disappeared and the only thing left were the vegetables sitting at the bottom getting ready to burn. I took them in anyway and we ate the brothless soup. I was struck by the sweetness of this.

**SPIN:** Miles, what is that scar on your lip? Is it from the horn?

**Davis:** It’s from making love for so many years.

**SPIN:** What?

**Davis:** I’m kidding. It’s from the horn. Come here, let me show you. [*He put his lips to mine and, using his tongue very lightly, acted as if he were blowing his horn.*]

**Davis:** My embouchure.

**SPIN:** Oh, I see.

**Davis:** Can I ask you something?

**SPIN:** Sure.

**Davis:** May I touch your hair? [*I leaned over and my short hair fell forward.*] This is the most beautiful part of a woman [*touching the back of my neck. I sat up, feeling a bit awkward.*]

**SPIN:** [*Noticing a small red medal on his sweater:*] What's this, Miles?

**Davis:** The Knights of Malta. They gave it to me.

**SPIN:** For what?

**Davis:** For my artistic contribution. 'Cause I'm a genius. Jennifer, can I ask you something?

**SPIN:** What?

**Davis:** See this cream? Would you massage my feet for a while with it? They're cramping, they hurt.

**I did this for a few minutes.** The cream was expensive and smelled wonderful, his feet were cold and gnarled. "What happened?" I asked.

"Car accident, broke my ankles. My Lamborghini."

I decided it was time to go. I gave him a kiss goodbye, and he asked me to call him the following afternoon. I left carrying with me some emotion and thinking the entire evening was just like jazz.

I called the following afternoon.

**SPIN:** How you doing, Miles?

**Davis:** I don't feel okay today. I got a lot of aches.

**SPIN:** Do you have the flu?

**Davis:** What?

**SPIN:** Miles, I haven't read your book yet. What are you doing over the weekend? Friday?

**Davis:** I don't know what I'm doing Friday. *[Pause.]* What are you doing now?

**SPIN:** Well, Miles, I haven't read your book. I did get a copy of your *Playboy* interview, the one you did in 1962. They think that's one of the best they've ever done.

**Davis:** I requested Alex Haley. They wanted to send me a white writer. I wouldn't do it. I got him two thousand dollars for that. They messed with that, trying to make me sound angrier.

**SPIN:** What are you doing? **Davis:** Do you want to come over?

**SPIN:** You see your book—

**Davis:** I don't want to force you. I'm hungry.

**SPIN:** I'll see you in a little while.

**Davis:** Bring some food. Italian. Clam sauce.

**I arrived in a bubble of garlic. Miles looked** dashing and seemed glad to see me. I began to unpack the food—eggplant parmigiana, linguine with clam sauce, fettuccine, and Beaujolais. Miles stood watching me until the doorbell rang. It was his road manager, dropping off some movies. Miles pretended he couldn't remember my name.

“Uh, let me see—Renée, right?”

I wasn't laughing. “I'm Jennifer Lee, hello.” I turned my back and prepared our plates. They disappeared into the other room and I was mildly pissed. After a few moments, the roadie announced he was leaving. He turned at the door and said, smirking, “Nice meeting you, Renée.”

Under my breath, I said, “Goodbye, asshole.” Miles heard it.

“Oh, Jennifer, he’s a nice guy.”

“A little rude, Miles.”

“When we all went to Prince’s New Year’s Eve party, his girlfriend just sat and cried, ’cause he couldn’t dance.”

I just looked at him. I was still thinking about being called Renée.

“Don’t you think he’s funny?”

“Guess you had to be there.”

“Let’s eat in the other room.”

We sat at a little round table. I felt as if I were on a date. A large framed painting Miles had done stared at us.

**SPIN:** You know, your painting is like your music.

**Davis:** I know. I just figured that out. That’s my girlfriend. *[He points to a striking-looking face in a painting.]*

**SPIN:** She’s beautiful. What’s her name?

**Davis:** Bridget. She taught me how to draw a nude. I missed you last night. *[Taking a pencil, he drew an abstract figure of a woman on a napkin and handed it to me. After dinner, we moved to the bright blue couch. Miles stretched out and put his head on my lap.]*

**SPIN:** I thought of you, too *[touching his very thick, long black hair]*.

**Davis:** Careful with my hair—it’s a weave so it hurts when you touch it. *[I moved away.]* Let’s watch a movie. *[He put a tape into the VCR and immediately we were watching some weird B-movie takeoff of The Exorcist.]*

**SPIN:** Miles, I don’t like to watch this kind of stuff. I hate it. *[Especially in the presence of Miles’s voice.]* It’s too dark.

**Davis:** You know, Jennifer, you are brilliant, obviously. But you have to be careful, because you’re very open. You get it all—the good and the bad.

**SPIN:** Are you the receiver?

**Davis:** Yeah. You know, someone told me, you can go so far, but you better not cross a certain line. Did you know more people die at night?

**SPIN:** You know once when Richard was on freebase, he saw himself as the embodiment of the Devil, half nude, walk through a wall.

**Davis:** Freebase...

**SPIN:** Bad stuff.

**Davis:** What the fuck do you know about it?

**SPIN:** For starters, I used it.

**Davis:** How did you kick?

**SPIN:** No problem. One day, I came home and found Richard freebasing at the kitchen counter with the new housekeeper. I moved out. I wrote a song, "Your Woman Is Freebase."

**Miles just stared at me, and I wondered** why. At this point in the movie we were watching, a priest's head fell off and worms began crawling out of his neck. I asked Miles to change it, and he put in another tape, this time an old B movie starring Ryan O'Neal. Almost as scary.

**SPIN:** Miles, I want to ask you a sensitive question.

**Davis:** What?

**SPIN:** Do you have AIDS?

**Davis:** Why are you asking me?

**SPIN:** Well, it's a heavy rumor about you—and what if I wanted to sleep with you someday?

**Davis:** My ex-wife started this rumor. She called up women and told them. [*In his book, he says it began when he was in the hospital in Santa Monica with pneumonia.*] Would you have left if I said yes?

**SPIN:** No. You've had an extraordinary amount of health problems.

**Davis:** Yeah, Cicely helped me a lot. My hand was so gnarled up. She got me acupuncture [*indicating where the needles were placed*], and it straightened out. At first they thought it was honeymoon arm. I couldn't feel a thing.

**SPIN:** What's a honeymoon arm?

**Davis:** When you lean on your arm in bed, 'cause you're having a lot of sex.

**SPIN:** Sounds as if you had a heart attack.

**Davis:** That acupuncture fixed me right up. Then I went to La Prairie in Switzerland.

**SPIN:** For the sleep cure?

**Davis:** Sleep? The doctor asked me if I sleep. I told him, "No, I only wake up." I went for those injections. Unborn sheep fetus.

**SPIN:** They say those are a little dangerous. It's for rejuvenation, right?

**Davis:** To build you up. They made me float. I just rose off the bed. The doctor there discovered I was missing a third vertebra in my neck.

**SPIN:** Maybe it's from playing the horn. **Davis:** I never thought of that. I have trouble with sex.



**SPIN:** What do you mean? Having it? [*He nods.*] Miles, do you got out much?

**Davis:** No, but if I put on my medals, all over my chest, no one knows who I am. [*He got up, showing me more Maltese medals along with a rather large medal the French bestowed on him, for his international artistic contribution.*]

**By this point the video was** over and we were watching television. Liza Minnelli came on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in a dated, distressed outfit singing songs from her new album produced by the **Pet Shop Boys**. I groaned, and Miles

seemed agitated suddenly.

“I like her,” Miles said, defensively.

“I don’t,” I said; then, “That song’s a hit in Europe.”

The air was filled with palpable hostility. Clearly I was witnessing a mood swing. Maybe, on some level, Miles felt threatened. I figured I’d better make tracks. I walked over to the window and looked out. It was snowing. It was beautiful. It was Thanksgiving.

**SPIN:** Have you heard that song of Joan Baez’s [“Speaking of Dreams”]?

**Davis:** She looked like my mother.

**SPIN:** “Playing the Gipsy Kings, after the rain and taking tea at the Ritz in / Boots and jeans / ... And I am vintage wine, we come from two different worlds / Like every other couple on the Rue de Rivoli.”

**Davis:** Do you want to spend the night? You can stay here if you want and go where you need to tomorrow.

**SPIN:** No, thank you. I want to walk my dogs in the snow. Miles, why did you get hostile with me?

**Davis:** Oh, bitch, don’t pull that “white” shit on me.

**SPIN:** Excuse me?

**Davis:** You heard me.

**SPIN:** [*Putting on my coat.*] Well, Miles, if it gets really poetic out there, I’ll give you a call.

**Davis:** Do you need cab fare?

**SPIN:** I’ve got it.

**Davis:** Will you call me when you get home?

**SPIN:** Probably not. [*At the door.*] Miles, that remark—

**Davis:** What remark?

**SPIN:** That I was being “white”—that was out of line, don’t you think?

**Davis:** *[Yelling] Bitch! You are acting "white"!*

**I marched out the door, letting it** slam shut behind me. All the way down the hall I heard Miles playing with the locks. The napkin with his drawing on it was crumpled up in my angry fist. I was also hurt. I also didn't know what was particularly white about my question; that made as much sense to me as if I had told him he was acting black. I took a long walk in the snow with my dogs and thought of Richard. He could manage to tap into some genetic memory of mine where a hidden residue of collective white guilt lingered. The next few days I read Miles's book and listened to

some early Miles with Charlie Parker—"Koko"—and "Boplicity"; then his later *Kind of Blue* and *Miles Smiles*. I listened to the magic without him. No one could take that magic—genius—from him, no matter how nasty the man got. I called him a few days later. I had finished the book.

**Davis:** You read the whole thing?

**SPIN:** Yep.

**Davis:** Are you mad at me? For what I said about white folks? It's all true, that's how I see it. I just said it.

**SPIN:** I guess you saw some bad things, Miles. You were there when the "whites only" signs were all over.

**Davis:** Yeah, you tell me about my book.

**SPIN:** Miles, chill. I'm trying to show some respect. [*Silence.*] It was actually quite sexist, too!

**Davis:** What are you doing?

**SPIN:** I was thinking maybe I could see you later and ask you a few more questions.

**It was a couple hours later when I** arrived at the Essex House. I rang the bell of his suite three times and there was no answer. I figured he was angry or stoned. The next time I tried to contact him, he was in Malibu. I would have loved to ask Miles some more questions, particularly about his prejudice toward white people and his sexism. In his book he says one condition the Knights of Malta have when they make you a member is that you are not prejudiced against any person. There are entire sections of the book where his wrath against white people makes Miles seem like a victim. That's the last thing I thought he was.

“White people in America get all up in your face because they think they're God's gift to the whole fucking world. It's sickening and pitiful the way they think. How backward, stupid and disrespectful many of them are. They think they

can come right up to you and get right into your business, because they're white and you're not.”

In his book Miles is angry, honest, impatient, and says what he feels. There is purity in this kind of direct, spontaneous communication—like jazz itself. But within it, there's some destruction, the same way jazz destroys form. I'd like to ask him about his music, his love life, and his drug addiction. There are wonderful passages in his book about Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday I'd like to ask him about. I wonder if his long bout and continued fight with heroin addiction helped contribute to his anger. Anger can be motivation until it becomes bitterness. I'd like to ask him about that. I'd like to ask him if he has become the beast he was fighting. Then again, maybe I had all the answers I needed.

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**SPIN Staff**

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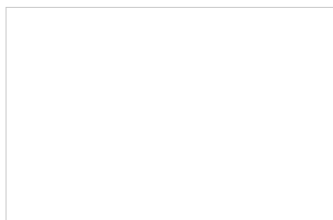
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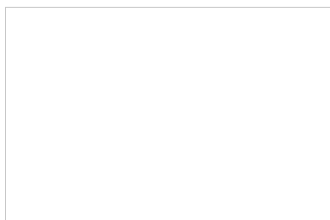
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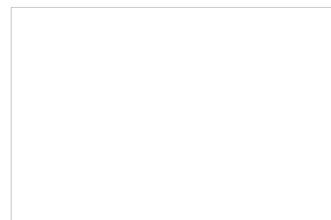
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