MILES DAVIS

by Clive James*

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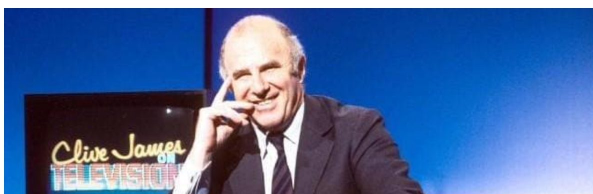
Miles Davis: his trumpet sounded as if it had been shrunk within to the diameter of a drinking straw…



**Clive James, who died in November, 2019, was the author of more than 40 books. As well as essays, he has published collections of literary and television criticism, travel writing, verse and novels, plus five volumes of autobiography. As a television performer he appeared regularly for both the BBC and ITV.*

Demanding to be heard but not always inclined to make the listening easy, the famous long, slow trumpet solos of Miles Davis (1926-1991) were a follow-on from bebop, the post-war musical development which tried to ensure that jazz would no longer be the spontaneous sound of joy. Whether any art-form can really develop is a permanent question, but there is a partial answer in the fact that some of its most adept exponents will often believe it should. A master of his instrument, Davis could play anything he wanted. What he wanted to play was sometimes immediately attractive — often enough to give him some of the all-time most successful jazz albums — but much of it was deliberately parsimonious and oblique, like the sound-track of a Noh play that had closed out of town.

Students of race relations in America are generally agreed that the exponents of post-war jazz were determined, with good reason, to present themselves as challenging artists rather than tame entertainers. Davis had the personality to fit that ambition. Preceding Bob Dylan in his readiness to ignore the audience if he felt like it, he differed in his capacity, when talking offstage, to say something both brief and funny at the same time. He could never be imagined laughing it up like Louis Armstrong. But he still had a cutting wit.

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If I don't like what they write, I get into
my Ferrari and I drive away.
MILES DAVIS (attrib.)

Miles Davis's yellow 1980 Ferrari 308GTS i: "I get into my Ferrari and I drive away"...

I have no source for this oft-quoted line except my memory, but it is probably written down somewhere. I first heard it from a jazz musician who held Miles Davis in awe, no doubt for excellent reasons. As a mere listener, I tried hard to feel the same way,

but somehow could never quite make it. Always a sucker for the sweet shout of the open horn, I never much liked even the most famous work of Davis, because his trumpet sounded as if it had been shrunk within to the diameter of a drinking straw. Scholarly devotees assured me that his long solos were bringing an art-form to its ascetic apex. I thought he was using a pipette as a kazoo. I couldn't see that it made much difference when he chose to sit playing away from the customers, because he had sounded as if he were doing that even when he played towards them.

This is a shot of one of Miles's wives Ciceley Tyson, with Miles and his road manager Jim Rose in the Ferrari... PHOTO FROM MILES'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

But if I had ever felt the necessity to say such things in print, I would have tried to remember the Ferrari. His wealth was his whip hand. The concept can be recommended to aspiring artists in all fields; it is the same principle that applies to feminism; if you are vulnerable economically, you are vulnerable all along the line. If you have pleased the public enough to have transferred some of its money into your own bank account, however, you can afford to ignore your detractors. Humphrey Bogart called it his 'fuck you' money: with enough in the bank, he wouldn't have to take a bad deal. The point ought to be obvious, although it is not often enough made when the question comes to a sad turn in an artist's career: he might have been forced into it by lack of the wherewithal to give Bogart's instructions to the proponents of a doomed project.

What I like about the way Davis put the axiom is the neatness of the illustration. The Ferrari says what matters: he's got one and his critics haven't. A similarly vivid illustration marks the standard anecdote about the Manchester United soccer star George Best. So brilliant that he was marked out of the game by opponents who had been specifically assigned to kick him in the ankles, Best might have taken to drink anyway, but it is more likely that he was simply a born alcoholic. To him the stuff was poison, and that's it.

In the sad aftermath of his glory he was a reliable sad-sack act on television talk shows: a wreck who thought he was a rascal. But he had a story up his sleeve that always gave him the victory even if he looked as if he had fallen into the chair he was threatening to fall out of. It is doubtful if he made the story up all by himself: it is too

well crafted, and Best's talent, though enormous, was never for words. But one way or another the story got written, and its hero got to recite it. The story is about a room-service waiter in a luxury hotel who pushes a trolley laden with caviar and lobster into Best's VIP suite, only to find Best in bed with Miss World and a bottle of Bollinger. The waiter says: 'George, George, where did it all go wrong?'

Soccer star George Best (right) and (left) pictured with Miss World Mary Stavin: George, George, where did it all go wrong?...

On closer examination, Miles Davis and George Best were not saying quite the same thing. Davis was talking about the invulnerability conferred by his money. Best, by that stage, had no money. But he had the right to imply that his remembered glory ensured he would still do better than a waiter. A wise artist, however, will be careful to bank his windfalls, because any glory he acquires will soon be compromised if the cash runs out. Money buys control over your career. Without money, your career will control you.

But money can't buy you a career in the first place, and inheriting wealth is almost invariably a bad way to start one. Among the screen stars, Jan Sterling and Cliff Robertson were both born rich, but neither would have got anywhere without talent. Jan Sterling, indeed, didn't get as far as she should have, and is nowadays forgotten: later on, Grace Kelly found it easier to be a Lady in Hollywood. The poet James Merrill, who had Merrill Lynch behind him for a rainy day, was free to write exactly as he liked. His poetry might have been less demanding, and more in demand, if he had had to establish himself in an open market. The point can't be pushed too far, of course: Carly Simon, who was brought up as a privileged child in a publishing family of enormous wealth, nevertheless deserved her hit songs, and no doubt took genuine satisfaction out of making money by herself.

Carly Simon: brought up as a privileged child in a publishing family of enormous wealth...

But if too much money is made on the job, it can be almost as dangerous as an inheritance. When popular musicians turn to self-indulgence, it is because they can at last afford to do what they would have done anyway. Their early hits, written under the constrictions of compulsory crowd-pleasing, are usually seen in retrospect to be their best work, and often the most adventurous as well. (With the singers, it is always a very bad sign when they start to talk instead of sing. Diana Ross's recorded speeches became the litany of Tamla-Motown in its downhill phase. She was proving that she no longer needed to please the public: a point all too easily made.)

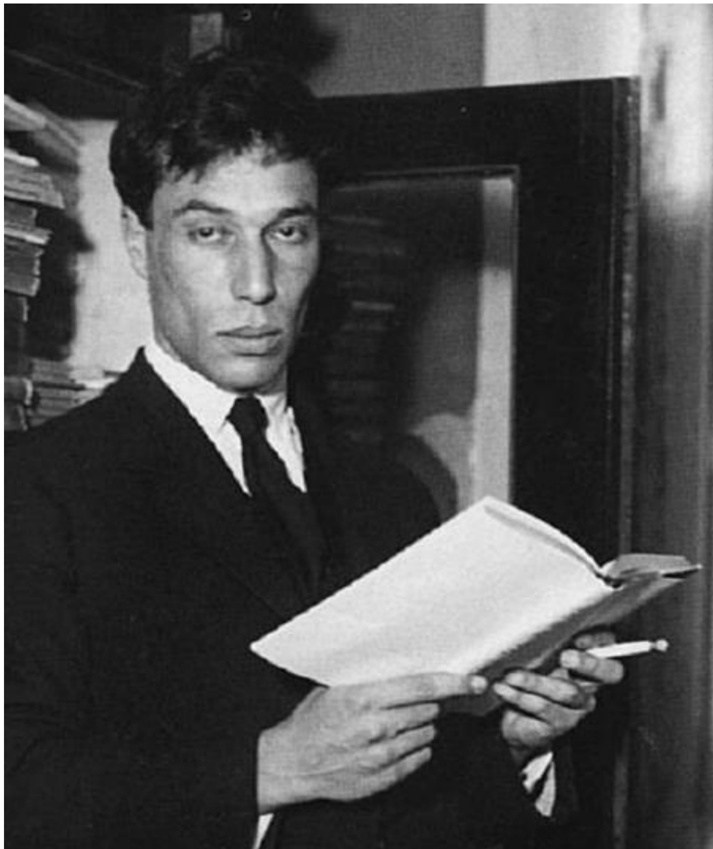
Higher up the scale, serious artists are too often exempt from enquiries about the role of money. Tom Stoppard was refreshingly candid when, after the successful premiere of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, he was asked what the play was about: 'It's about to make me a lot of money.' Those of us who attend upon artists with our scholarship, criticism and admiration are apt to forget that the gifted people who give us a glimpse of the sublime are not immune from mundane cares, which, by no paradox except the deviltry of economics, can multiply with success. Mainly because of the glamour involved and the ever present temptations, the arts in all fields seem exactly designed to vaporize even the most exalted practitioner's

stipend as fast as he earns it, and the larger the faster. The mere cost of having your money professionally looked after, for example, instantly becomes an overhead. In his *Paris Review* interview, S J Perelman enjoyed showing how hard-headed he was about the writing business. The trick in Hollywood, he said, wasn't to make the loot, but to get it out. He said that the 'fairy money' they paid you had a way of evaporating as you headed east. Books about the finances of the painters are often written, because the money involved is big if the painter becomes fashionable — especially, strangely enough, if the painter belonged to the anti-bourgeois avant-garde before he clicked with the buyers. Painters have to buy materials and pay a large percentage to their galleries, so they are rarely as rich as we tend to think, but when they do break through, they break through on an industrial scale.

American humorist and screenwriter S J Perelman: he enjoyed showing how hard-headed he was about the writing business….

For writers the financial rewards are comparatively small-time, but a good book dedicated to nothing except the money would be very useful. It might help to explain behaviour that is puzzled over on the metaphysical level when there are concrete explanations that have not been considered. When Nazi Germany cancelled the distribution of Hollywood movies, MGM faced a loss of only a small proportion of its income. Thomas Mann, when he finally realized the necessity of cutting himself off from publication in his homeland, faced the loss of nearly all of his, because although

he was internationally famous, his central audience was in Germany. In the Soviet Union, royalties existed only in the form of privileges — an apartment, a dacha, the chance to be published at all — but the privileges were decisive. The threat of their being withdrawn was enough to make almost anyone think twice about speaking against the state. Without this point in mind it is fruitless to go on speculating about why Pasternak, for example, was so slow to dissent in public, and was so equivocating when he did.



Boris Pasternak in 1928: slow to dissent in public, and was so equivocating when he did...

Lovers of the arts should be slow to despise the cash nexus on the artist's behalf: the niggling difficulties of securing and handling one's personal finances are nothing beside the pressures of state patronage. Going to hell in your own way has everything over being sent there at a bureaucrat's whim. Was Miles Davis speaking for black America? Yes, of course, although he shrugged off the black man's burden: he wasn't Martin Luther King Jr. But Martin Luther King couldn't have recorded *Kind of Blue*. Davis had his real trouble not with acceptance as such, but with drugs. In the past — the immediate past, let's not forget — black musicians were robbed blind by white businessmen as a matter of course. Davis robbed himself, incidentally showing us the difference between a weakness and a vice. He had a weakness for women, but nobody has ever proved that he played worse for his prodigious sexual appetite. His appetite for drugs was another matter, and it would be a brave defender who claimed that drugs never affected his playing.

Charlie Parker was explicit on the subject: 'Anyone who says he is playing better either on tea, the needle, or when he is juiced, is a plain, straight liar.' Sadder than a falling phrase from *My Old Flame*, the line is quoted on page 379 of *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*. Edited by Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro, it is a book as rich in precepts as in anecdotes, and one which should never be allowed to go out of print. Students in all fields of creative endeavour need a copy of it nearby, to instruct them in the unyielding nature of bedrock.

Charlie Parker: 'Anyone who says he is playing better either on tea, the needle, or when he is juiced, is a plain, straight liar.'

Not long ago I heard a man playing the most beautiful tenor sax. I could tell he had absorbed everything Ben Webster and Lester Young had to teach, but his gift for assembling his phrases into a long legato line was all his own. He was terrific. But he was playing at the bottom of the escalators in Tottenham Court Road tube station. No Ferrari for him.