What would Miles Davis do?

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What if we tried to find a different story to tell about police violence and the Civil Rights movement? If we did, we might discover a new way of seeing history and understanding resistance to police brutality. However, to find new insights, first we must ask a new question: What would Miles Davis do?

One night in August 1959, jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, then thirty-three years old, was smoking a cigarette outside of the New York City nightclub Birdland. He had just walked a pretty, white woman named Judy out to catch a cab (Nisenson 163). It was at that moment that a policeman told Davis to move along. Davis refused. After all, he was working in the club. His name was up on the marquee. He had just finished recording a live show for Armed Forces Day to be broadcast by Voice of America (Davis 238-239). He was famous for his bestselling albums *Birth of the Cool* (1957) and *Kind of Blue* (1959). Plus, at that moment, he was doing nothing more than smoking on the curb (“Police Club Davis for Chivalry”).

The cop repeated the order and reached for his nightstick. Rather than leave or argue, Davis looked the man straight in the eye and stepped in closer. Probably this was the first time a black man ever made eye contact with the officer because Davis frightened him so badly that the policeman fell backwards (Davis 238-239).

If this had happened in 21st-century America, all the bystanders would have taken out their smartphones and filmed the mêlée. Likewise, if this had happened recently it is possible that the police would not have taken out their nightsticks but instead have shot Davis. As it happened, the policeman began to beat Davis with the nightstick. Then more cops showed up. Soon they were all beating him.

Across the street, according to historian John Szwed, a group of musicians was rehearsing in the Music Unlimited Studio. The noise outside had grown so loud, because the Birdland audience was now out into the street yelling at the police, that they couldn’t hear themselves rehearse. So, the studio musicians moved their microphones out on a boom to record the beating. The tape suggests that the crowd continued to grow in size and in volume. Quickly, the corner outside Birdland became a soundscape of urban violence, citizen voices, sirens, horns, and the policemen’s chant of “okay, break it up, move along, it’s all over” (Szwed 179-181).

The next day, the press was on Davis’s side. Dorothy Kilgallen, the gossipy columnist for the Hearst newspapers, who had been in the crowd and followed Davis to the police station, led the media castigation of the police force. Ultimately, the police charged Davis with refusing to
move when ordered and for trying to grab the nightstick. They also took his cabaret card, a kind of work permit, which meant he could not play anywhere in the city. His bail was set at $1,000. Eventually, the magistrate dismissed the case (Szwed 179-181).

Surely, if the police had beaten Davis today the press would have blamed black “thug” culture (Sundquist 40) and they would have quickly reported how volatile Davis was (Purcell 139). In fact, he had entered a dark period in his life defined by drug use (Davis 231, 405, 410) professional rage (Davis 236-237), and violence against women (Davis 228, 402). Also, the modern press would bring up how he thought of himself as a genius jazz trumpeter and composer, but that his playing cracked. They would use words like “temperamental” and “cold” and his repeated critical statements about his white audience to discredit him as a victim (Walser 18). The fact that the press did not attempt to vilify Davis at the time, or suppose that the police had good reason for beating a man standing on the street armed with nothing more than a cigarette, is to their credit.[1]

That night, Miles Davis became a revolution of one. Though unintended, Davis’s actions suggest a shift in resistance strategies among young African Americans. It would be simplistic to understand this shift as existing somewhere on a spectrum between Dr. King and Malcolm X. In the real world, where ideas had to be put into practice, the young resisters holding the famed lunch counter sit-ins, throughout the Midwest and the South, kept their faces impassive, refused to move, and were using the same direct-action tactic as Miles Davis that crucial night in New York City (Bynum 95-97).

Moreover, the kids at the sit-ins were asking the same questions that jazz musicians of that era asked: Why play in an accepted way? Why are we tied to a harmonic structure? Why live prescribed lives? Why reify Western traditions? (Nisenson 15).[2]

What if scholars gave attention to Davis’s beating? Would they see the Civil Rights Movement as though it were jazz? If they reframed the history so that the culture creators and the activists intersected, then the NAACP, with DuBois’s intellectual leadership and Thurgood Marshall’s litigation, would be the spectrum of jazz dominated by Ellington, who bridged early jazz with the Black urban experience, and Armstrong, who stridently walked the line of racial divisions so well he was able to critique white supremacy right to the face of his white audience. Dr. King, the bus boycott, and the idea of fellowship through protest would be Parker and Gillespie. If the youth movement in the late 50s and early 60s were jazz, then it would sound like Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ahmad Jamal, and Max Roach.[3]

Yes, there were still elements of Ellington and Parker in Davis’s recordings, just as there were elements of Dubois and King in the actions of black youth at the start of the 1960s, but there was also something new because of the youth’s denial of the importance of harmony and progression. Just as Davis was remaking jazz so as to drive it further from American music traditions, the youth in the sit-ins were delving into uncharted territory.[4] Likewise, the composers of today know that innovation is necessary to continued momentum.[5]
Maybe Stuart Hall explained it best. He said Miles Davis’s music represented “the sound of what cannot be” and his intellectual life was a constant quest “against all odds, to make ‘what cannot be’ alive in the imagination” (Eley 318). What was not “alive” in 1959? Simply put, Davis was making real the idea of freedom.

So, what would Miles Davis do? He would step in closer.

NOTES

1. The newspaper coverage was extensive. The Amsterdam News declared, “It Was Police Brutality,” The Pittsburgh Courier called the incident a “head-beating” and that “the New York police to date have not been able to give a plausible reason for cracking the jazz trumpeter’s skull,” and The Afro-American reported the charges against Davis as being “disorderly conduct” and “simple assault upon a police officer.” “Eye Witnesses Say: It was Police Brutality,” The New York Amsterdam News, August 29, 1959, 1; George E. Pitts, “Miles Ahead or Miles’ Head Is the Issue,” The Pittsburgh Courier, Nov 7, 1959, 23; “Miles Davis Beats Disorderly Charge,” The Afro-American, October 24, 1959, 1. The white press ran similar articles that condemned the police and questioned the safety of the city. Their argument was a continuation of criticism of the New York City police that summer after a near-riot July 13, 1959. 122,000 people crowded into an area of less than a square mile in Harlem to protest what they believed was the wrongful arrest of a woman. Two police were wounded, by their own bullets. Furthermore, the police had to worry about vigilante violence. Less than two weeks after Davis’s arrest, a group of five or six white men had shot and wounded, in the groin, a Black man whom they believed had raped a white woman. Also, there was the ever-present fear of “gang violence.” In late August 1959, as a school dance was letting out, there was a street shooting. The police speculated it occurred over territorial competition between gangs. At the time, Chief of Police Kennedy ordered extra police details into the various African American neighborhoods in New York City and doubled police emergency crews. He also called the Black precincts crime rate “shocking” and remarked that a race riot threatened greater destruction to the city than an atom bomb would. His use of hyperbole demonstrated his fear and the distance between his view of crime and that of the NAACP who demanded that “trigger happy” police offers caused the rise in neighborhood tensions. The police chief was quick to remind the public of the twenty murder and manslaughter causes in Harlem during the first six months of the year, 454 felonious assaults, 34 rapes, 118 robberies, and 156 burglaries. The Chief maintained that the police were to keep the peace. So, Kennedy ordered them to keep the sidewalks clear, which is part of the reason Davis fell into their snare. “New York’s Harlem Far of Race Riot,” US News and World Report, vol 47, 27 July 1959; “Bad Cops,” Time, vol 73, March 16 1959; “New York’s Harlem Far of Race Riot,” US News and World Report, vol 47, 27 July 1959; “Negro Hurt in Mistaken N.Y. Attack,” Seattle Times, 26 August 1959, 9; “Boy, 14, Shot; Youth-Gang War Suspected,” Seattle Times, 26 August 1959; Harold H. Martin, “New York’s Police, Their Greatest Ordeal,” Saturday Evening Post, vol 233, 10 December 1960. 19-21.


4. It is important to note that I am framing this argument prior to Amiri Baraka’s 1965 conceptualization of a Black Arts Movement. Miles Davis’s experience and art could lead us to a larger understanding of the choices artists were making in the 1950s. By re-centering our understanding of this history, through combining Davis with Civil Rights Activists and Stuart Hall’s experience with Black music at the same time, we would see a much earlier emergence of this kind of Black intellectual endeavor. A re-reading of Baraka’s, writing as LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* suggests that Baraka would not have been entirely opposed to including Davis in the BAM pantheon. He points out that Davis is the “post-bop” innovator that all the white musicians tried to copy. Therefore, Davis, like Black music in general, was co-opted by white culture, but Davis always remained Davis. Or, at least he did, Baraka pointed out, once he figured out who he was, namely that he was not Dizzy Gillespie. I contend that 1959 is that moment. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America And the Music that Developed From It*. Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1958. 118-120.


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