

Love and Listening According to Miles Davis

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“Listen.” This is the first sentence of Miles Davis’ autobiography. It is how he sets up the retelling of perhaps the most crucial single night of his musical journey: the first time he heard Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker play together. Miles Davis was eighteen years old, had just graduated highschool, and was preparing to move to New York to attend Juilliard. He had already been a huge fan of Parker and Gillespie independently but that night was the first time he heard them together. He describes listening to them as “the greatest feeling I ever had in my life-with my clothes on.” It’s not until half way down the first page that he acknowledges that he was on the bandstand playing with them.

After that fateful night Miles Davis moved to New York and committed his life to playing jazz. As a burgeoning young musician he was musically raised by the pioneers of bebop—a genre defined by its virtuosic musicians, break-neck tempos, and maximalism. Davis describes Charlie Parker’s incredible ability to improvise in his autobiography: “See, when Bird went off like that on one of his incredible solos all the rhythm section had to do was to stay where they were and play some straight shit. Eventually Bird would come back to where the rhythm was, right on time. It was like he had planned it in his mind” (The Autobiography of Miles Davis, page 100). Charlie Parker had a truly genius mind and when he improvised he retreated into it. His rhythm section was meant to keep time as he abandoned them for his own sonic universe where he defined what was right and what was wrong.

Even though Charlie Parker was just one instrument among many he had the power to redefine the music in such a way that he could choose which beats and chords were dominant and which were merely supportive. Davis recalls another time when Parker’s playing subverted and disoriented the musical correctness of the band as a whole: “He used to turn the rhythm section around every night. Say we would be playing a blues. Bird would start on the eleventh bar. As the rhythm section stayed where they were, then Bird would play in such a way that it made the rhythm section sound like it was on 1 and 3 instead of 2 and 4” (The Autobiography of

Miles Davis, page 101). Charlie Parker was such an overwhelmingly dominant and talented musician that he held more musical power than the rest of the band combined.

Large portions of Charlie Parker's audience bought tickets because they wanted to behold the spectacle of not just his playing but also his personality. He was famously funny and charismatic— but he was also very known for being reckless and unpredictable. Davis vehemently disapproved of people letting Parker's reputation as a person overshadow his music at shows. And even when it came to music, Davis was always adverse to the concept of spectacle. He was certainly mesmerized and in awe of the virtuosity and athleticism of Parker's playing—but the thing which Davis most admired about him was his creativity and openness to possibility. Davis writes:

Bird never talked about music, except one time I heard him arguing with a classical musician friend of mine. He told the cat that you can do anything with chords. I disagreed, told him that you couldn't play D natural in the fifth bar of a B flat blues. He said you could. One night later on at Birdland, I heard Lester Young do it, but he bent the note. Bird was there when it happened and he just looked over at me with that "I told you so" look that he would lay on you when he had proved you wrong.

This moment sheds a lot of light onto who Parker was as a listener. Charlie Parker's listening was the vision of a visionary. He defined listening as an imaginative process which was open and free of dogma and rules. It was listening which paid equal attention to the self and the other; or rather listening which does not differentiate between the two.

After many years of playing bebop with Parker and Gillespie Miles Davis eventually became a leader of his own bands. Throughout the late forties and early fifties he pioneered a style of jazz known as cool jazz which culminated with his album *Birth of the Cool*. This was a reaction to bebop—it focused on slower tempos, darker tones, and unity of the soloist and the rhythm section. During this era Davis had an obsession with space. In his autobiography he writes "I wanted to hear space in the music. I was just starting to use the concept of space

breathing through the music-composition and arrangements” (page 186). This was the beginning of Davis’ lifelong choice to play less and listen more.

After Davis’ cool jazz era he put together the Miles Davis Quintet: the defining small jazz band of its time. The band had rotating members, but some of the most important names from the 1955-1959 era were Sonny Rollins, Paul Chambers, Philly Joe Jones and eventually John Coltrane. This band was hugely successful and critically acclaimed but was ultimately unsustainable. Each individual member was very popular and a visionary in their own right and eventually they split to make their own bands and records. In spring of 1963 Davis needed to put together a new band and after the huge success of his last quartet he could choose almost any musician he wanted. But he recruited some musicians who were almost entirely unknown at the time, but who are now known as some of the greatest jazz musicians of all time: Tony Williams, Ron Carter, and Herbie Hancock. The composition of this amazing band is a testament to Davis’ ears—he heard something amazing which no one else had picked up on in these unknown musicians. But perhaps the greatness of these musicians wasn’t there fully when Davis’ first heard them- maybe it was the act of Davis listening to them which made them great.

After a couple years of playing with this Quintet, Davis continued his journey as a listener with the creation of his album *Sorcerer* in 1967. The second track of the album is a song called “Pee Wee” in which Davis is entirely silent. In this track Davis’ role is solely as listener—and yet he still plays a crucial role. His presence is palpable and powerful. In many ways Davis’ listening is louder than his playing—it is radical and defiant especially in context of the bebop tradition which he came from.

Miles Davis passed down what he learned from Charlie Parker to the members of this quintet— particularly Parker’s philosophy that “you can do anything with chords”. In his autobiography, Herbie Hancock recalls a night in Stockholm, Sweden, in the mid 60s:

Miles starts playing, building up to his solo, and just as he’s about to really let loose, he takes a breath. And right then I play a chord that is just so wrong. I don’t even know where it came from—it’s the wrong chord, in the wrong place, and now it’s

hanging out there like a piece of rotten fruit. I think, Oh, shit. It's as if we've all been building this gorgeous house of sound, and I just accidentally put a match to it.

Miles pauses for a fraction of a second, and then he plays some notes that somehow, miraculously, make my chord sound right. In that moment I believe my mouth actually fell open. What kind of alchemy was this? And then Miles just took off from there, unleashing a solo that took the song in a new direction.

Davis taught Hancock the same lesson that Parker had taught him so long ago, but in his own style. Parker taught Miles through a triumphant glance— an “I told you so” attitude. When Miles taught Herbie he did so by compromising whatever he might have had in mind for his solo to make the band as a whole sound better. All of Parker's playing assumed that the rhythm section played their part correctly and if they didn't they were exposed for their incompetence. Davis' playing was all about serving the music as a whole.

The identity of servant is a very counterintuitive thing to prescribe to Miles Davis. Davis was very well known for being very socially conscious and for confrontationally standing up for himself when he was treated with disrespect. And yet, when he talks about his listening he uses language which implies surrender and relinquishing power. In an interview with Les Tompkins in 1969 Davis stated: “If I go to hear someone, I'm at their mercy. I'm listening, you know, but I don't go there and say: “Do something.” I'm trying to get whatever they put out. But I don't demand it, because things don't come like that” Miles on Miles (Musicians in Their Own Words) (p. 62).

Other musicians whom Davis played with often noticed his ability to relinquish his ego and play with contagious empathy. Pianist Keith Jarrett once told a story about this effect of Davis' playing:

“It was just . . . sounds . . . I thought the band was the most egocentric organization I had heard musically . . . except for Miles. Miles was still playing nice, beautiful things, but it sounded to me like the rest of the band was made up of people who were all in closets, playing their own ego trips and that it never had this wholeness except when Miles was playing. And the only reason it did then, is because Miles's playing was so beyond this

kind of closet thing. Just the sound of his horn brought out a different feeling” (Ian Carr, page 282).

Davis taught me that listening doesn’t judge or project, it surrenders. Listening is the freedom to let go of yourself and become something else. It is the loss of ego; and in the context of Davis’ music it was the key to creating a band, a single organism rather than scattered individuals. Davis also shows that listening can be contagious. It can be a beautifully gentle reminder (to those receptive to it) that it’s ok to embrace the freedom of letting go of your ego.

Every important beat of Miles Davis’ career was him following his disposition to listen. From his start in bebop, to his invention of cool jazz, to his fusion era, he always made decisions that honored his very keen listening. Whenever I hear *Bitches Brew*, or *Sorcerer*, or *Birth of the Cool*, I feel like I am hearing Davis’ listening more than his playing. Listening to Miles Davis listening has taught me a lot about how to pay attention. And it’s also taught me how to love.

When I was a child my parents were devout Christians and they took me to church every week. As a child I believed in Christianity with every ounce of my being. When I was old enough I began regularly attending my church's youth group and eventually enrolled into an all boys Catholic high school—which ended up making me really question my faith. In the last semester of my senior year of high school I saw Greta Gerwig’s 2017 film *Lady Bird*. I remember it as the most emotional experience I’ve ever had in theaters.

I felt an uncanny similarity to the film’s titular main character. Lady and I were both eighteen years old, trapped in suburbia in a gender segregated Catholic high school, and preparing to attend college in Greenwich Village. One moment from the film which I find myself pondering often is the scene where Sister Joan—a nun at Lady Bird’s school—talks to her about her college essay where Lady very vividly describes Sacramento. To Lady Bird’s surprise Sister Joan claims that Lady must love Sacramento. Sister Joan then makes the claim that attention and love are the same thing.

Love is abstract, magical, and different in every relationship and to every person. There are forms of love which don't involve attention; surely it's very possible to be loved by someone who doesn't pay close attention to you. Any definition of love is in danger of putting it into a box which is far too small for something of its great importance. And yet identifying traits of love is a very helpful step towards striving for it. This is where the concept of paying attention becomes very helpful. There may be ways of loving that go beyond paying attention, but I think that being attentive to someone is always an act of love.

Now I am very uncertain whether I actually believe in God but I still hold on to many of the lessons and ways of thinking which Christianity gave me. Of these lessons none is more perplexing or profound than the value of loving your enemy. I have rediscovered this idea through countless texts and media since being introduced to it in Sunday school as a child. In fact, all of my favorite art and memorable life experiences point to the idea that love is the cure to hatred. At this point in my life, love may be the only thing I can firmly say I believe in.

Love is never easy or simple –but loving the self, nature, and our neighbors is much more intuitive than loving our enemies. At the very least, we practice loving our enemies much less than loving anything else which is very understandable. Ideally, there would be no enemies to love. And yet, even if we don't personally have animosity with anyone, our lives are very much impacted by the acts of narcissistic politicians and dictators whose very existence makes the concept of loving your enemy seem impossible and unethical. How would it be possible to love Hitler without enabling him? To do so seems to contradict love for the self and for others. But I don't think all forms of love are sacrificial and directional.

I think Miles Davis is proof that loving someone inherently means relinquishing one's own power and dignity. He didn't necessarily live in a particularly saintly or loving way—but his life and music is a testament to the power of listening. He has taught me that listening is letting go of the self and becoming one with the music around us. And it is not passive—it is defiant and transformative. I'm not sure whether Davis looked at listening as being love, but I do.

I stopped being a Christian because I grew to resent the focus on human sacrifice. I look at Jesus' death as a horrific tragedy and I feel that all versions of Christianity inherently glorify it. Human sacrifice also baffles me because it puts the forms of love at odds against each other. Jesus' sacrifice was no doubt putting his love of his humanity and his enemies over his love of himself.

But maybe the story of Jesus isn't about human sacrifice; maybe it's about ego sacrifice. It represents an unachievable ideal where giving your literal life to save your enemies is an impossible extreme that points toward realistic things we can all do in our daily life. Things such as listening to each other. And even listening to our enemies.