

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



So What

John Szwed

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About the Book

Miles Davis remains one of the jazz greats, a crucial influence on the development of jazz over the last five decades, and perhaps the most remarkably original of any musician in the genre.

John Szwed's remarkable 'life' explores Miles both in terms of his impact on jazz and as one of the great Black Americans, as political figure, icon and archetypal cool dude. *So What* fills in the gaps left by myth-making about Miles' life, telling the story of his childhood, his depressions and his relationship with heroin as well as his remarkable musical career.

About the Author

John Szwed is Musser Professor of Anthropology, African-American Studies, American Studies and Music at Yale University, and the author of *Space is the Place*, an acclaimed biography of the jazz musician Sun Ra.

Also by John Szwed

Jazz 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz
Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra

So What

THE LIFE OF MILES DAVIS



JOHN SZWED



arrow books

To
Roger D. Abrahams
Dan Rose
Robert Farris Thompson

Vamp



Put that down.¹ Put it all down. And listen, don't you try to make me into a nice guy.

MILES DAVIS

ONE NIGHT WHILE I was having a drink with a friend in a SoHo bar in New York City, an acquaintance of his joined us, and I was introduced to him as someone who was thinking of writing a biography of Miles Davis. He immediately launched into a Miles story, one that was hysterically funny, but one that also seemed highly improbable. When I asked where he had heard the story, he threw up his hands in mock horror: "You want attribution? This is *Miles* I'm talking about—he belongs to everyone!" It was only the first of many such encounters, every one of which reiterated a basic lesson about writing about Miles Davis: stories about him are legion, many of them dramatic, and all of them accompanied by strong emotions. That's the good news. The bad news is that many of them never happened. All of which is to say that his life is now, as it was when he was alive, in the realm of legend.

Part of his legendary status, of course, stems from his unwillingness to be forthcoming about himself throughout most of his life; in fact, that reticence was central to his mystique. Davis claimed not to be able to remember much of his youth, and in the name of change, chose to forget

many of his past accomplishments. Writers, as well as the public, looked for some kind of revelation in the few crimped and guarded interviews he did choose to give. But Davis was difficult to approach, quick to anger, and often oblique or contradictory in what he did say. It is no wonder that the interviews that were published nearly always quoted other interviews. Yet in the effort to piece together a full portrait of the man, they sometimes unwittingly repeated errors in the process. Some sense of the dimension of these problems can be grasped when Miles denied the truth of some of the stories presented in early interviews with him. When he was not asked further about these denials, the information he claimed to be false continued to be repeated, and so seemed to be confirmed in everything written about him.

Miles' life as a whole is not easy to grasp, and the meaning of it, with or without his help, is resistant to quick interpretations. This is not to say that any life is easy to fathom and render into words. Novelist Martin Amis put it this way: "The trouble with life² ... is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The dialogue is poor, or at least violently uneven. The twists are either predictable or sensationalist. And it's always the same beginning; and the same ending." What makes the problem worse in our own time is that celebrity biographies serve the function once served by novels, their authors bent on creating organic, convincing narratives that explain everything their subjects have ever done or said, even if it means reading their minds to explain their behavior—he wondered, she thought—with speculation taking over where there are no facts to help, leaping across the gaps, forgetting that no life is ever led the way a biographer's story line is written. In biographical writing, the urge to fill in the blanks, thicken the story line, provide missing

motivation, and heat up the significance is hard to resist, and it has turned more than one biographer into a novelist.

A word, then, about the intentions of this book. There already exist several biographies of Miles Davis, as well as his autobiography and a memoir from his collaborator. I found all of them interesting and useful, drew on them in my writing, and strongly recommend them to anyone seriously interested in Miles' life and work. Why then am I writing yet another Davis biography? One answer is that there is still more to be known and a number of misunderstandings to be corrected. To do this, I have gone back to the transcripts of Davis' interviews conducted by his autobiographer, Quincy Troupe (housed in the Schomburg Library in New York City), in search of material not used in *Miles: The Autobiography*, or looking to highlight what was used in the autobiography in different ways. (Although I was not able to quote directly from those interviews, I have paraphrased their contents.) I have also examined and drawn on Alex Haley's extensive notes (also at the Schomburg) for his *Playboy* interview with Miles, as well as on the Teo Macero Collection at the New York Public Library of Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. Numerous people were also interviewed for this book, especially those family members—like Davis' brother, Vernon, common-law wife, Irene, and son, Gregory—and fellow musicians, such as Allen Eager and Stan Levey, who had not been spoken to for previous publications. In addition, I've drawn freely (and with thanks) on Davis' published interviews, especially some of those not so well known or in other languages than English. I hope that readers will find here some new information on Davis' youth, his stay at Juilliard, his time in Detroit, his lovers, his music, his business affairs, and the man himself.

A second answer to why another biography on Miles Davis is that this is not a biography in the contemporary sense, as it does not attempt to track down every event or person in his life. Nor is it strictly a musical study, especially because not all of his music is discussed. (I have, however, attempted to make the case for some of Davis' early recordings with Charlie Parker, which are often passed over, as well as for some of his mid-1970s recordings, which even his biographers don't like.) What I am attempting to do in this book might better be described as a meditation on Miles Davis' life, one that looks at the variety of meanings that were (and continue to be) projected onto him. Davis embodied a large array of such meanings, many of them apparently contradictory, and he created a public self that was at times even larger and more complex than that of the private person.

Those are my reasons, and readers will be the judge of whether this book is worthwhile. But for certain, mine is not the last word, and I would be surprised, even distressed, if what I have done or not done doesn't spark yet another Davis biography. After all, it is now eleven years since his death, and Miles seems omnipresent. We speak of him in the present tense, his first name used not so much to demonstrate personal familiarity as it is to acknowledge the pervasiveness of his influence. He is a haunting specter at jazz festivals: Miles Davis tributes outdraw newer musicians' performances, and such acolytes as Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, John McLaughlin, and Joe Zawinul are now the stars of the music. Trumpet players copy his playing. Musicians and fans lapse into his vocal rasp to make a point. A Mercedes-Benz TV ad portrays a string of animals and people lined up to board Noah's ark, each carrying some important piece of Western culture to preserve—a painting by van Gogh, a musical score by Mozart, a computer—and Miles' *Birth of the Cool*. The entire side of a twenty-story building in New

York City is covered with a sulking black-and-white portrait of Miles with Apple Computer colloquially urging its market to “Think Different.” Jack Nicholson dedicates his Academy Award to him. The president and CEO of one the largest banks tells his executives that he wants the bank to function like Davis’ quintet and emblazons Miles’ picture against the cool night blue of its credit cards.

His music continues to express hipness (as on the soundtracks to films like *Lenny* and even in the anachronistic posters and albums that dot the screen in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), and just as often it signals a certain delicacy and romanticism (albeit a *white* delicacy and romanticism, given the films in which his music is used: *Pleasantville*, *Jerry Maguire*, *Runaway Bride*). And his records do better than when he was alive—*Kind of Blue* sells over 5,000 copies a week in the United States alone. His life has inspired fictions such as Walter Ellis’ *Prince of Darkness*, Herbert Simmons’ *Man Walking on Eggshells*, as well as Leo Penn’s 1966 film *A Man Called Adam* and Robert Lepage’s 1991 theater piece *Needles and Opium*, which pairs Jean Cocteau’s and Miles’ careers in the arts and drugs.

As they once said of his mentor, Charlie Parker: Miles lives.

CHAPTER ONE



And to see the cool way of that nigger—why he wouldn't give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way.

MARK TWAIN, *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

HE WAS BORN on May 26, 1926, in Alton, Illinois, on the Mississippi River. This single stroke of fate was enough to augur greatness for Miles Dewey Davis III, for the history books say that this is the artery along which the blood of the jazz ancestors flowed north from New Orleans to Chicago. Never mind that the river flows nowhere near Chicago, for in the mythic geography of jazz, the Mississippi is its Liffey or its Styx, its Thames or its Seine, the line that bisects the land into West and East Coasts, the pendulum that passes over the heartland. For black folks, it was the nexus between the North and the South, a means of escape, and often in song, a symbol of a mighty race. For white folks, too, the river was emblematically black. Mark Twain spoke of its "mulatto complexion," and for T. S. Eliot, himself born in St. Louis, the Mississippi was sometimes a "strong, brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable"; at other times, just a "river with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows and chicken coops."

Davis' father, Miles II,¹ was born in 1900 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, into a family of six sons and three daughters. His grandfather Miles Davis I had come from Georgia and married Mary Frances from Arkansas, and later a second wife, Ivy, who was the grandmother Miles knew as he was growing up. His grandfather was an accountant and a farmer whose land was in Noble Lake, Arkansas, southwest of the Mississippi delta, where he raised crops of sugarcane, watermelon, and corn. It was on this farm that young Miles III spent summers visiting his grandparents, playing with two stepuncles (Ed and John, children from his grandmother's previous marriage, who were only a year older and a year younger than he was), and riding a horse that his grandfather gave him when he was seven. Like many other African American children, Miles first experienced southern culture with his grandparents, helping with chores, listening to folk songs and blues played by his cousins and their neighbors, hearing the collective moans coming from backwoods houses of worship, or moving through groves of trees that local folk said were inhabited by the spirits of the dead.

Though Miles' father had not gone to high school, he passed an equivalency test and then entered Arkansas Baptist College and graduated with honors. He enrolled in Lincoln University for pre-dentistry training and went on to Northwestern University's School of Dentistry, where he was one of only four black students, and earned a D.D.S. with honors. While he attended Arkansas Baptist, he met Miles' mother, Cleota H. Henry. She was the only child of Leon and Hattie Henry, born in 1901 and raised in North Little Rock. They were married after he completed his dental training.

The plan had been for Miles' father to open an office in Belleville, Illinois, after graduation, but Alton had a greater need for a black dentist, and once Dr. Davis visited the town, he decided to settle there. The river was a constant

presence in Alton, even though much of it was hidden by levees. At highwater levels, nearby fields were flooded, and the dense trees that grew at the river's edge peeked up through water; it was the kind of place where Huckleberry Finn and Jim could have hidden their skiff. Alton was a town of grand houses rising up on the hills and bluffs on the north side, which the poorer families could see from their homes in the gullies below. It was a center of river commerce, of old families, and culture, but it was also a town in which farmers in coveralls, straw hats, and brogans moved sullenly through the streets when they came to town on Saturdays. Alton was the site of the last Lincoln-Douglas debate in 1858 and a stop on the Underground Railway. Yet it was also the place where Elijah P. Lovejoy, the abolitionist editor of the *Alton Observer*, was lynched in 1837.

The Davises' first child, Dorothy Mae, was born in Alton in 1924, two years before Miles III. Three years later, his father saw a chance to expand his practice into a specialization in oral surgery, and the Davis family moved downriver twenty-three miles to East St. Louis, Illinois, a much larger town with only one black dentist. The opportunities were real enough, but East St. Louis was a city with a troubled history that would doom it to fighting for its survival for years to come.

East St. Louis had begun with promise in the late eighteenth century as a ferry point to Missouri, and the sheer volume of activity in the area made it possible for St. Louis to become known as the Gateway to the West. East St. Louis lay in a floodplain, below the water level of the Mississippi, but its critical location close to river traffic and the major coal mines nearby made it a midwestern commercial and railroad center by the mid-1800s. After Chicago, it was the site of the second largest stockyard and railroad yard in the United States, where meat-packing

companies like Hunter's, Swift, and Armour were based, along with a number of chemical and manufacturing companies. But most of the industrial and commercial development occurred outside the city limits, with some of the companies even being incorporated as their own cities. The result was a weak tax base that by 1920 made East St. Louis one of the poorest cities in America.

There was a southern feel to the wide streets, the large houses, and the many shotgun shacks. The areas in which black folks lived were divided into distinct neighborhoods, such as Rush City in the southwest, beyond the tracks, where the people were rural, kept farm animals, and still used oil lamps; the more sophisticated Polack Town in the Northeast; Goose Hill, next to the stockyard; and South End. Still, East St. Louis² was a country town, filled with Arkansippians. "Upcountry," some called it, hip country. After 1900, the businesses around East St. Louis demanded new laborers as the city developed rapidly, and recruitment of foreign workers and black people in the South changed the profile of the population. Railroads brought great numbers of black people to town, sometimes to stay, sometimes to move on to Chicago or Detroit. Since local businesses at times used the new black workers as strikebreakers, racial tensions increased, and by 1917 had reached the point that skirmishes broke out between whites and blacks. Then, beginning in the evening of May 28, 1917, antiblack riots erupted; by the time they ended in July, hundreds of people had been wounded or injured, at least nine whites and thirty-nine blacks were dead, and hundreds of buildings had been burned. Many blacks escaped across city lines, hid in the basement of the post office, or fled across the bridge to St. Louis. Thousands of other black folks left the city, never to return. Outrage over the event³ sent shock waves across the United States, with state and federal investigations following. Black leaders

such as W. E. B. DuBois, Madame C. J. Walker, Marcus Garvey, and Ida B. Wells became involved in the fallout.

With the Great Depression, many businesses moved away from the town or shut down. But demand for military production in World War II brought East St. Louis back to life, a new influx of cheap labor filling the town, raising its population to a peak of 80,000 in 1945, one-third of whom were black.

When they first moved to East St. Louis, the Davises lived in three rooms behind the dental office on the second floor of a brick building at 3 North Fifteenth Street at Broadway, over Daut's Drugstore. Fifteenth and Broadway was the black business and social center of the city, and within a few doors either way was the Ringside pool room, the Jolly Corner lounge, and the offices of a physician, Dr. John Eubanks. Across the street was the Peppermint Lounge and Restaurant. (On Friday and Saturday nights, young Miles could sit in his window and hear music of all sorts rising up from the street.) A service station was on one corner, a grocery on another, a hat shop next door to it. St. Augustine's Catholic School was just down the street, as was the Broadway Theater, a Greek restaurant, and the Southern, the only hotel in town for blacks. Within a few blocks south were more nightclubs and churches, the John Robinson School, the Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary School, and O'Connor's hardware store. If you kept walking south, there were people who still raised chickens, hogs, and horses in their backyards.

Fifteenth and Broadway may have been the focus of black life in East St. Louis, but it was not entirely African American. There was also a large Armenian population that owned dry-cleaning shops, liquor stores, bars, and restaurants. A number of their stores and homes were located on the same block as Dr. Davis' office. A scattering

of Germans and Greeks also lived in the neighborhood. The south side of town below nearby Missouri Avenue was largely black, and north of it was white.

In 1929, only two years after they'd moved to East St. Louis, the Depression hit, the same year that Miles' brother, Vernon, was born on November 3. Almost immediately, Dr. Davis' income fell when his working-class patients, black and white, were laid off and unable to pay him in cash. "They used to pay my father in script, the pink relief slips the government provided the out-of-work, or with stolen hams and cheese from the packing houses," Vernon Davis said. "We got so sick of ham and cheese: ham-and-cheese sandwiches, ham-and-cheese casseroles, ham-and-cheese what-have-you. But Father didn't make any real money until World War II." Paid in cash or not, Dr. Davis worked six days a week, seldom finishing with his patients before nine o'clock, just before the children were ready for bed.

The Davises were upper-middle-class people, even if they were not wealthy in the beginning, and they maintained certain standards in their home. They employed both a maid and a cook, and Dr. Davis insisted that all cooking be done from scratch—he had come from a family in which everyone cooked (his sister Josephine was head cook at a Works Progress Administration center during the Depression). And he himself always cooked his specialties—spaghetti and meatballs, oxtail stew, chili—on Saturdays, the night when he came home early. The Davises dressed in the latest fashions, Dr. Davis always in suits with a waistcoat, Mrs. Davis in furs and hats she designed and had made for her. The children were just as fashionable. Miles years later remembered the clothing his father bought him when he first began to wear long pants—Thom McCann boots, a yellow striped shirt, a tie, a gray double-breasted jacket, a cap, and a leather change purse. Vernon claimed that Miles' sense of fashion came from his mother:

“He always dressed sharp, in vicuña coats, sharkskin suits, nothing but the best.”

There were fifteen or so families with whom the Davises had close ties, people like the Hancocks (a physician and his family), the Summers (a lawyer’s family), the Quinns (Mr. Quinn was a former principal of Lincoln High School), the Millers (Mr. Miller was then the current principal of Lincoln High School), the Smiths, and the Eubanks. On holidays like the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and New Year’s, they took turns spending time at different houses. Dr. and Mrs. Davis were members of various social groups such as the Charleston Club, and they were active in community and church affairs. Sundays were family days, with services at St. Paul’s Baptist Church (where Nat Turner’s granddaughter Fanny was the organist), followed by ice-cream sundaes together at the drugstore downstairs. Some evenings they took the children to the Opera House in Kiel Auditorium, where they had season tickets, to see Vladimir Golschmann conduct the St. Louis Symphony and to hear soloists such as Rachmaninoff, Horowitz, and Prokofiev.

Dorothy and Miles started in Catholic schools when they moved from Alton, but then went on to public schools—first John Robinson Elementary School, then Attucks Elementary School and Lincoln High School. The black schools in East St. Louis were underfunded, in disrepair, always short of books and teachers, and for the rest of his life Miles recalled the condition of the toilets in the schools as a bitter emblem of life in his hometown. Though the schools had been legally desegregated in Illinois for many years, in practice most remained racially separate, so all three Davis children attended black schools. Yet “we weren’t fooled,”⁴ Vernon said. “Keeping white and black people separate was a joke. There were people in East St. Louis who came up from the South who weren’t white there, but they became white here. There were students in school who were blue-

eyed, with light skin and blonde hair, but they were black because they had people in their families who were black.”

The Davises felt more comfortable with the Armenians they lived among, because they saw them as less prejudiced than other whites they knew. Miles’ first best friend was an Armenian boy named Leo, who died in a fire when he was six. Both Miles and Vernon started school speaking some Armenian, but the teachers stopped them because most of what they knew were curse words. All three Davis children had white friends through high school. Among their other white neighbors was Mr. Blanke, a Jewish shopkeeper who impressed the Davis children with his worldliness and the fact that he could speak seven languages, which, he explained to them, he needed in order to survive in different countries.

Miles had been the baby of the family for three years, and he later complained that when Vernon was born, they dressed and cared for him “like a baby” until he was four, “his feet never touching the floor” as he was passed from mother to sister to grandmother and his mother’s friends. Dorothy and her friends played with Vernon as if he were their doll, Miles said, bathing him and dressing him. He especially resented his maternal grandmother’s attention to Vernon, and when Miles teased him, his grandmother hit him with a switch. Many times he wished that his grandmother would die (and when she did, he said he was terrified that he had caused it). Miles was determined that they were not going to raise him the same way—like a girl. And he made an effort to teach Vernon manly things like baseball and cursing—all in vain, he said.

The three children were close when they were young, talking and playing together, and entertaining each other. Several nights a week they staged a talent show for themselves, with Vernon and Dorothy singing pop songs

and working up new routines based on dances like the Suzy-Q or the Snake Hips. Miles sat in front of them and acted as director, judge, and audience. When the children were a little older, their parents asked them to perform for their guests, Dorothy playing piano and Miles the trumpet, while Vernon danced or twirled the baton.

Miles felt that his parents were too strict with them as they grew up, not allowing them to hang out on the corner or go near pool halls and bars. He suffered the most: "I couldn't fool around.⁵ I knew that whatever I did, if it wasn't good, my father was going to strangle me." Yet it was his mother who did most of the punishing.

My mother would whip⁶ the shit out of me at the drop of a hat. She was into whipping so much that one time, when she couldn't do it because she was sick or something, she told my father to do it. He took me into a room, closed the door, and told me to scream like he was beating me. "Make some noise, like you're getting beat," I remember him saying. And then me screaming at the top of my lungs and him sitting there looking at me all steely-eyed. That was some funny shit, man. But now that I think about it, I would have almost preferred his whipping me to the way he used to look right through me like I was nothing. When he did that, he made me *feel* like I was nothing. That feeling was worse than a whipping could ever have been.

When Miles wrote in his autobiography that it was he who got the brunt of his mother's punishment, Vernon disagreed:

I don't know what Miles was talking about in his book: all three of us children were disciplined.

Sometimes all together. We'd hide under the bed when Mother came after us to switch us, and then we got it again when our father came home. Miles may have been jealous, maybe because he sometimes had to baby-sit me, but he never showed it when he was living at home. Miles always wanted to be a tough guy.

Whatever else Miles might have said about it, Vernon added, Miles and his mother were always very close, as were they all. "He and I were like *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*—the radio program we listened to every day after school. We were raised properly, with good manners and speech and respect. Miles wasn't always the way he appeared later." Even when he and Miles were apart in later years, Vernon said that he knew what his brother was thinking.

A few years after they came to East St. Louis, the Davises moved several blocks away from the office, to the corner of Seventeenth Street and Kansas Avenue. There, in a white thirteen-room house with red awnings, a garage, a large yard, a garden, and hedges, the children had the second floor to themselves. Diagonally across from them was a baseball diamond where Miles played, and a few blocks down was Lincoln Park, one of the few city parks open to black people, with clay tennis courts, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, and summer jazz concerts played by local bands.

Miles was a skinny little child, quiet and shy, who kept his head down, avoiding eye contact, but a good boy who did well at school and enjoyed sports, strolling by the shops on Broadway, playing in the railroad yards, or wandering along the river and watching the barges and riverboats. He was seldom in trouble, though he and another boy, Millard Curtis, played hooky from school a few times, bringing a

bag of biscuits and syrup or potted ham and crackers along with them, the two then climbing up to the catwalk at the bottom of a billboard. Miles once managed to climb a water tower and fell in, but got out by himself, and he and Vernon never told their parents. When he was twelve, he started his father's new Lincoln Zephyr when no one was home and backed it out of the garage—into a telephone pole.

At age thirteen, Miles proudly began a paper route, delivering the *Chicago Defender*, the premier African American newspaper in the nation. It was the only day job he ever had, and later in life it was the only part of his youth that he enjoyed talking about. He told tales of close escapes from dogs, of meeting new people, and of the freedom it gave him to explore the town (though he managed to stay away from the rougher areas, like Goose Hill). He spent his earnings on candy, barbecue, and phonograph records.

As he moved into his teen years, he played stickball and baseball, and like other boys his age in East St. Louis, he began to be drawn to boxing. Though he and his friends did not train or enter the ring—never going beyond wrestling or playful punches to the chest—it occupied their thoughts and shaped their images of themselves. Boxing was popular in East St. Louis among black men, though to most it did not represent a possible means of economic and social mobility. Nor was it a metaphor for a kind of art or intellectual activity. Rather, it was a stance, a way of moving in your clothes, a way of being a man. This was important to Miles, because his size and color made him the object of a certain kind of abuse. Like many other people in black communities of the time, he had several nicknames, both positive and negative. His parents called him Junior, his friends called him Little Davis or Little Doc Davis, and some people called him Buckwheat, a name that stuck to him even when he returned home for visits after he became nationally known.

Miles remembered his mother as beautiful and stylish and described her as looking “East Indian.” (Vernon said that one promoter recommended billing Miles himself as an Indian, and another thought he was Mexican.) She was beautiful not only physically, but in attitude. “Mother was a *lady*,” Miles would say, in every sense of that word, especially as it was denied black women in the South. Yet she was also cold and distant, “blank-faced ... no expression,” he said, and could withdraw from being touched. His father was dignified and imposing, and a man who moved easily in high society. He was a decent golfer, and Miles caddied for him when he played tournaments in St. Louis with other black professionals and visiting stars such as Joe Louis. Most impressive to Miles was the way in which his father dealt with the law. Once when he was stopped by white police on the highway, his father pulled out his honorary sheriff’s badge and said, “I’ve got one of those, too.² What do you want?”

Behind the family’s social manners and affluent surface, however, were volatility and deep antagonism. Their mother and father fought openly for years. Much of their lives were spent apart, Dr. Davis’ long hours of work, his many interests, and his involvement with local political affairs keeping him away from home; and when they were together, anything could set them off—dressing for a party, a visit from relatives, dinnertime. Once in a fit of anger, his mother threw an iron at his father, just missing his head. Following an argument on another occasion, she locked him out of the house, and he punched through the glass door that separated them and broke her teeth. Miles recalled being upset by this, and crying out that now they would have to spend even more time together while his father fixed her teeth.

Dr. Davis was a gambler and had lost as much as \$250,000 according to Mrs. Davis. This was a source of constant friction. They also fought over Miles. “When I was

eleven,"⁸ Miles remembered, "my mother said, 'Spank Miles,' and my father would say, 'For what?' She'd say, 'He's crazy'; he'd say, 'Remember that.'" Miles often found himself having to stand between them to prevent violence. Their verbal combativeness spread to the children: "Miles, Vernon, and Dorothy Mae⁹ all cursed like sailors," a girlfriend said. "Miles, especially, was an expert on profanity even though he used it as descriptive terms, as adjectives." (Miles said that the first thing his father said when he got up every morning was "Shit!")

It was in their teens that Dorothy noticed that Vernon was often seen with a group of gay men in town and told Miles. The two of them kept it a secret as best they could, but when their mother and father eventually found out, their marriage developed yet another line of fracture.

The precarious civility within the family was not helped by the move of Dr. Davis' sister Corrine to East St. Louis. While she was working in Chicago as a bank teller, she had developed an interest in fortune-telling and clairvoyance and decided to open up shop as a psychic and palm reader downstate. Once she was set up in East St. Louis, with a sign outside her shop reading "Dr. Corrine, Reader, Healer" and her diploma in metaphysics hanging on the wall, she did well, with both white and black clients who came to her for readings. She was popular with the Davis children, since she entertained them and read their personalities (Miles, she said, was connected to infinity, and as a Gemini was the kind of person who was "flighty and changed his mood quickly"). But Aunt Corrine didn't like Mrs. Davis and once, exercising her spiritual powers, told Dr. Davis that Dorothy was not his child (Miles and Vernon scoffed at this, saying that Dorothy was the only member of his family who really looked like their father). This, added to rumors that Dr. Davis was a ladies' man, was unsettling.

The breaking point for them came just before the war, when Cleota accused her husband of having an affair with a woman in his office. They separated, with Dr. Davis moving over to St. Louis, the children staying with their mother. When their parents divorced a short time later, Miles took it badly, arguing with his mother, chafing at her efforts to advise him, and once even slapping her. Some might have said that he seemed to be assuming his father's role, and Vernon said that "sometimes Miles would say something to me, and I'd say, 'My god, you sound just like Daddy!'" But he believed that Miles was more complex than that: "Parts of Mother and Father were mixed in Miles. That was his Gemini quality." Though Miles sometimes blamed his mother more than his father, he also understood his father's failings. Years later, while commenting to an interviewer on why he never wanted to go into dentistry after he worked in his father's office, he homed in on what caused the divorce:

That's when I said, ¹⁰ never again. Because you don't do anything. You just sit there, people come in, you fix their teeth or you operate on them and that's it. You go to the office and do the same thing. I'm not like that. I have to be finding out things. And it's so weird, to say you're a doctor in a black community. Women say, shit, my daughter's going out with such and such a person and his father's a doctor. What does that mean? That means that he's gonna be in an office all day, he's gonna make love to his secretary. I seen my father.

A few years later, Dr. Davis bought a farm of 160 acres in the rolling hills of Millstadt, eight miles south of East St. Louis, which he named Mary Frances Manor after his mother. There, he bred Landrace hogs—an English breed—

and Chester White swine, keeping cows and as many as fifteen horses (which he and other horsemen rode as entertainment at halftime at local football games). Whether driving his luxury cars or sitting on the porch of his white colonial house with its gardens and guesthouse overlooking a lake, he was the consummate gentleman farmer. As the first black person in a largely German American farm community, Dr. Davis faced harassing phone calls and stones thrown at the house in the dark. But eventually the community¹¹ accepted him, at least tacitly, by his resistance to the threats and by the success of his farm. Soon he was buying prize animals, including a boar from the farms of Winston Churchill, or holding annual auctions on the farm that drew breeders from across the country. Dr. Davis became involved in local politics, and while he was fighting for a fire department to be established in Millstadt, he made an unsuccessful run for state representative of Illinois. Miles also recalled him as being a Garveyite, or at least sympathetic to the separatist cause of Marcus Garvey and opposed to the integrationist ideology of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (though Vernon said that he had never heard his father mention Garvey).

Miles loved the farm. He had his own horse there and loved to spend days riding across the fields, walking among the livestock, or hearing his trumpet ring out across the lake. (In later years, musicians often dropped by the farm to see him. Charlie Parker once came by, and Vernon remembered him wearing a suit as he walked through the pig pens and the barn, then looking at Miles and saying, “So *this* is why you’re like you are.”)

The battling between the Davises didn't cease after the separation. Any contact between husband and wife seemed to set them off. And later, when Mrs. Davis' cousin died and left her money, giving her some independence, things seemed to grow even worse. (At one point, Dr. Davis became so angry with his wife that he stopped giving her the money they had agreed on, cutting it in half. When he refused to pay more than half of Dorothy's tuition to Fisk University, Miles, then sixteen years old, paid the rest from his music earnings.) The only thing that could bring his parents together, according to Vernon, was Miles' drug addiction in later years.

The Davises were aggressive about their children's success, though Miles said his father urged him to do whatever he wanted as long as he succeeded, while his mother was more focused in her aspirations. Dr. Davis encouraged Miles and Vernon in the arts, and once they began to show some interest in drawing, even gave them a few lessons. But their mother wanted both of the boys to be dentists ("Artists don't make money," Vernon recalled her telling them again and again), and Dorothy to be a teacher, which she later became, in the Chicago school system. "But my mother was never impressed with Miles' music. Even years later when I'd say, 'That's your son on the radio,' she'd say, 'Is it?' and keep right on dusting. We finally got mother to go to a nightclub to hear Miles play. He played so well, but she just sat there and listened and said nothing."

From age nine on, Miles wanted to play the trumpet because he liked the way men looked playing it. But his mother thought the violin, an instrument she had played, was a better choice. Yet the trumpet was destined to win out because the St. Louis area was famous for its trumpet players, who had learned their instrument in the marching bands of the black fraternities and social clubs and had gone on to become professionals in concert and dance halls, on riverboats and in nightclubs. When Miles was ten,

Dr. John Eubanks gave him his first horn, a cornet, which seemed to fit his small hands and short arms better than the longer trumpet, and it was Eubanks' uncle, Horace, who gave Miles his first instruction on the horn, at the end of his paper route every day. Although the lessons were informal, they were enough to allow him to learn "Stardust," the Hoagy Carmichael hit that every dance band trumpet player had mastered by the late 1930s, and by the time summer came, he was made bugler at Boy Scout camp.

Miles became consumed by music, listening late at night in bed to live radio broadcasts from across the country, often not getting to sleep until five in the morning, then trying to hear the fifteen-minute *Harlem Rhythms* program at 8:45 in the morning and still get to school by 9:00. He spent afternoons practicing, ordering music through the mail, teaching himself harmony from George A. Gibbs'¹² *Modern Chord Construction and Analysis*, or shopping for used jukebox phonograph records for a dime apiece. (Among the records¹³ he recalled buying were Coleman Hawkins' "Woody 'n' You," Jay McShann's "Hootie Blues" and "Swingmatism," Lester Young's "Sometimes I'm Happy," Art Tatum's "Get Happy," Duke Ellington's "J. B. Blues," and others by Albert Ammons, Billy Eckstine, Dizzy Gillespie, Jimmie Lunceford, Boyd Raeburn, and Charlie Christian with Benny Goodman. His brother remembered Miles also looking for records with Buddy Rich on drums¹⁴ and those with Helen Forrest singing¹⁵ with Benny Goodman.)

He began formal music lessons in the sixth grade at the Attucks Grade School with Elwood C. Buchanan, Sr., a professional musician who visited each elementary school one day a week to give instruction. It was Buchanan who urged Miles' father to buy him his own horn, and on Miles' thirteenth birthday his gift was a new trumpet.