



MAD AT MILES

I thought I wasn't going to be able to write this piece at all. I had been avoiding it for a month. Trying to think of something else to say. Something funny. After all, we are gathered here to celebrate our creative genius. Not to talk about men beating women and five-a-day domestic murders and all that "sexist shit."

That wasn't the reason I almost didn't do the piece, though. I almost didn't do the piece because I thought Miles Davis had put a hex on me. I thought somehow he had found out that I was writing a piece suggesting that *he is guilty of self-confessed violent crimes against women such that we should break his albums, burn his tapes and scratch up his CDs until he acknowledges and apologizes and agrees to rethink his position on The Woman Question.*

That sounds terrible doesn't it? Breaking Miles Davis records? Because of a few mistakes in his personal life? Next thing you know, I'll be fussing about 2 Live Crew just because they don't know the difference between rape and reciprocity . . .

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I hadn't even written the

piece yet. I was just thinking about it. Well, I was a little closer than that. I was sitting down to write it, but I needed to have the records. The albums in my own collection that would provide my personal connection to the subject. I needed to hear the music playing beside me in order to remember why I had been avoiding this question so energetically. And why I was so mad at Miles.

I remembered distinctly, one evening, several months ago when I was feeling particularly well organized, I pulled out the five Miles Davis records that I own and put them aside until it was time to write. But when I needed them back, I couldn't find them anywhere. I looked in all the places where they should have been. Nothing.

Finally on my third trip down to the basement for one last look, a thought popped into my mind that made my blood run cold. He knows! Miles Davis made my records disappear because somebody told him I was going to write a piece that said *he is guilty of self-confessed violent crimes against women such that we should break his albums, burn his tapes and scratch up his CDs until he acknowledges and apologizes and agrees to rethink his position on The Woman Question.*

Didn't sound quite as bad that time, did it? The idea of it, I mean. Just the idea that we could hold a black man responsible for crimes against black women. It's still a pretty heady thought, though, and not necessarily one I thought Miles would endorse, especially since he is the one I'm so mad at.

But there's a reason for that! He's the one who admitted to it. Almost bragged about it. He's the one who confessed in print and then proudly signed his name. Nobody was ever able to show me where David Ruffin admitted to hitting Tammi Terrell in the head with a hammer, even though on the West Side of Detroit where I grew up we had all heard it from somebody who said it like they had the inside line on such things.

And nobody was able to provide me with a quote from Bill Withers describing how he beat up Denise Nicholas when their marriage was grinding to a painfully public close although people tell me *Jet* covered the whole episode in great and gory detail.

But Miles . . . well, I'll let the brother speak for himself. This is an excerpt from *Miles: The Autobiography* by Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe:

Cicely was especially jealous of a woman taking her place in my life, but after a while she didn't have no place in my life, even though she turned down a lot of movie offers just to stay around me. Cicely's like two different women, one nice, the other one totally fucked up. For example, she used to bring her friends around anytime she wanted, but she didn't want my friends coming around. And she had some friends who I couldn't stand. One time we argued about one friend in particular, and I just slapped the shit out of her. She called the cops and went down into the basement and was hiding there. When the police came, they asked me where she was. I said, "She's around here someplace. Look down in the basement." The cop looked in the basement and came back and said, "Miles, nobody's down there but a woman, and she won't talk to me. She won't say nothing."

So I said, "That's her, and she's doing the greatest acting job ever." Then the cop said he understood—she didn't look like she was hurt or nothing. I said, "Well, she ain't hurt bad; I just slapped her once."

The cop said, "Well, Miles, you know when we get these calls we have to investigate."

"Well, if she's beating my ass you gonna come with your guns ready, too?" I asked him.

"They just laughed and left. Then I went down and told Cicely, "I told you to tell your friend not to call over here no more. Now if you don't tell him, I'm gonna tell him." She ran to the phone and called him up and told him, "Miles don't want me talking to you anymore." Before I knew it, I had slapped her again. So she never did pull that kind of shit on me again.

The truth is, this is all my friend A.B.'s fault. It was winter-time. My train got into D.C. early and I caught the Metro out to his house. By the time I got there, there was a fire in the fireplace, his wife Karen was up drinking coffee and the kids were wandering around in their nightgowns, demanding breakfast.

Karen and A.B.'s house used to be a nun's dormitory and they still have a built-in receptacle for Holy Water in the room where A.B. keeps his records, which is only fitting since A.B. has the most *divine* records of anybody I have ever known. Most of them are so rare and hard to find that you can't even think about stealing them because when he spots them at your house later, you'd have to say something lame and unconvincing like: "Yeah, man, I was really lucky to find that record of the Brazilian drummers. I know! Just like that one you used to have before you lost it." You wouldn't have a chance.

And A.B. doesn't just have a lot of records, he knows a lot about music, most especially about jazz. Which is why I asked him to suggest something that might help me understand about trumpets. I didn't make it any more specific than that because it wasn't any more specific than that. I wanted to understand as much about trumpets as I had learned about saxophones from talking to A.B. about John Coltrane.

I was an innocent. He could have given me anybody. But he gave me Miles Davis. *Kind of Blue*. And he didn't even

warn me that *Miles was guilty of self-confessed violent crimes against women such that we ought to break his records, burn his tapes and scratch up his CDs until he acknowledges and apologizes and agrees to rethink his position on The Woman Question.*

(It gets easier to say the more you say it. It's starting to sound almost legitimate, isn't it?)

I know I was late, the album having been recorded in March of 1959 when I was only eleven years old and if Smokey Robinson wasn't singing it, there was no way I was going to hear it, and this being the late seventies and all, but I didn't care. I was amazed by the music. I loved it, listened to it, couldn't get enough. A.B. was pleased that his choice had been the right one and he taped the record for me before I left so I could listen to it on the train.

Which is, of course, what I did. I spent the night curled up in my tiny roomette watching America roll by outside my window and listening to Miles Davis play me into the next phase of my life.

The Bohemian Woman Phase. The single again after a decade of married phase. The last time I had a date I was eighteen and oh, god, now I'm thirty phase. The in need of a current vision of who and what and why I am phase. The cool me out quick cause I'm hanging by a thread phase.

For this frantic phase, Miles was perfect. Restrained, but hip. Passionate, but cool. He became a permanent part of the seduction ritual. Chill the wine. Light the candles. Put on a little early Miles. Give the gentleman caller an immediate understanding of what kind of woman he was dealing with. This was not a woman whose listening was confined to the vagaries of the Top 40. This was a woman with the *possibility* of an interesting past, and the *probability* of an interesting future.

This was the woman I was learning to be, and I will confess that I spent many memorable evenings sending messages of

great personal passion through the intricate improvisations of *Kind of Blue* when blue was the furthest thing from my mind and Miles, like I said, was perfect.

But I didn't know then that *he was guilty of self-confessed violent crimes against women such that we ought to break his records, burn his tapes and scratch up his CDs until he acknowledges and apologizes and agrees to rethink his position on The Woman Question.*

Still sounds pretty scary, doesn't it? Scratching up CDs and burning cassettes. Pretty right-wing stuff, I know, but what are we going to do? Either we think it's a crime to hit us or we don't. Either we think our brothers have to take responsibility for stopping the war against us, or we don't.

And if we do, can we keep giving our money to Miles Davis so that he can buy a Malibu beach house and terrorize our sisters in it?

Can we make love to the rhythms of "a little early Miles" when he may have spent the morning of the day he recorded the music slapping one of our sisters in the mouth?

Can we continue to celebrate the genius in the face of the monster?

When I asked a musician friend of mine if he had read the letter in a national magazine from a woman who said Miles had settled out of court with her in a suit charging him with extreme physical and mental cruelty during the course of their lengthy professional friendship and subsequent love affair, my friend the musician said, "*Is that the one he beat up at the airport?*"

As opposed, I guess, to the one he beat up in her apartment, or in the backseat of his limo. Or, well, you can see how complicated the problem gets . . .

I tried to just forget about it. But that didn't work. I kept thinking about Cicely Tyson hiding in the basement of her house while the police were upstairs laughing with Miles. I

wondered what she was thinking about, crouched down there in the darkness. I wondered if thinking about his genius made her less frightened and humiliated.

I wondered if his genius made it possible for her to forgive him for *self-confessed violent crimes against women such that we ought to break his records, burn his tapes and scratch up his CDs until he acknowledges and apologizes and agrees to rethink his position on The Woman Question.*

(Didn't sound bad at all that time, did it?)

I wondered if she tried to remember the last time she had known a brother whose genius was not in the way he played a horn, or made a living or ran a city, but in the way he loved her.

The danger is that we have gone so long without asking the question that we have forgotten the answer.

The danger is that we have gone so long taking what we can get that we have forgotten what we wanted.

But I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop wondering what we would do if the violence was against black men instead of black women. Would we forgive the perpetrator so quickly and allow him into our private time; our spiritual moments; our sweet surrenders?

I can't stop wondering what our reaction would be if, say, Kenny G—a resourceful, crossover white male who is selling well enough in our community these days to tie with Anita Baker and Luther Vandross as the seduction music of choice for black urban professionals between the ages of twenty and forty-five . . .

. . . What if Kenny G was revealed to be kicking black men's asses all over the country in between concert appearances and recording sessions?

What if Kenny G wrote a book saying that sometimes he had to slap black men around a little just to make them cool

out and leave him the fuck alone so he could get some peace and quiet?

What if Kenny G said this black man who saved his life and rescued his work and restored his mind pissed him off so bad one day he had to slap the shit out of him? *Twice.*

Would Kenny G be the music we would play to center and calm ourselves?

Would Kenny G be the music we would play to relax and focus the person we love on romance?

Would Kenny G be the music we would play when our black male friends came to call?

And if we did and they questioned us about it—and you know they would question us about it!—would we explain our continuing support of Kenny G's music by saying: "Yeah, I know he's beating black men and all that, but this white boy is a musical genius! I don't let personal stuff get in the way of my appreciation of his music. After all, the brothers probably asked for it. You know how it is when y'all start naggin' and shit."

So the question is: How can they hit us and still be our heroes?

And the question is: How can they hit us and still be our leaders? Our husbands?

Our lovers? Our geniuses? Our friends?

And the answer is . . . they can't.

Can they?