

## Miles Ahead

"Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis" by Robert Walser, in *The Musical Quarterly* (Summer 1993), Oxford Univ. Press, Journals Dept., 200 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Trumpeter Miles Davis (1926–91) helped create the "cool" sound in jazz during the late 1940s, and later in his career he was a pioneer of jazz-rock "fusion" and other jazz idioms. Most critics acknowledge Davis's importance as a creative force in jazz, but in assessing him as a performer they are made uneasy by the "mistakes"—the cracked and missed notes—that he made. "Davis has long been infamous for missing more notes than any other major trumpet player," Walser, a professor of music at Dartmouth College, observes.

Some critics have apologized for, or tried to explain away, Davis's fluffs. Bill Cole, for instance, says the musician built a style out of his "mechanical problems" and turned "his mistakes into a positive result." Is this the best that can be said of Davis: that he was an important innovator but a bad trumpet player? Walser thinks not. From *The Birth of the Cool* (1949) to *Kind of Blue* (1959) and *Bitches Brew* (1970), Davis's performances had great power—and his mistakes were just the price he paid for that power.

Davis himself, Walser points out, did not kid himself about his errors. "He had absorbed a dislike of technical failings from many sources, including his first trumpet hero, Harry James, who was famous for his stylish phrasing and flawless technique." At the same time, however, Davis looked upon jazz, at least his sort of leading-edge jazz, as necessarily entailing high risks. "When they make records with all the mistakes in, as well as the rest, then they'll really make jazz records," he

once said. "If the mistakes aren't there, too, it ain't none of you."

Davis deliberately took risks in his playing. At one point in his 1964 recording of "My Funny Valentine," for example, he plays an A-flat in the normal way, with the first valve of the trumpet depressed, but then he slides down to a G without changing valves. "This is a technique that, on the trumpet, is difficult, risky, and relatively rare," Walser observes. "Acoustically, the trumpet should not be able to play any notes between A-flat and E-flat with only the first valve depressed; Davis must bend the note with his lips without letting it crack down to the next harmonic. The result is a fuzzy sound, not quite in tune." Such a sound would have no place in classical trumpet playing, yet in Davis's solo, "it is the audible sign of [his] effort and risk, articulating a moment of strain that contributes to the effect of his interpretation." In that instance, he managed to hold the note; elsewhere in the solo,

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## Those Who Can't . . . Can't

"When professors undertake to appraise and improve student writing, the blind are leading the blind," observes historian Patricia Nelson Limerick in the *New York Times Book Review* (Oct. 31, 1993).

*Ten years ago, I heard a classics professor say the single most important thing—in my opinion—that anyone has said about professors: "We must remember," he declared, "that professors are the ones nobody wanted to dance with in high school."*

*What one sees in professors, repeatedly, is exactly the manner that anyone would adopt after a couple of sad evenings sidelined under the crepe-paper streamers in the gym, sitting on a folding chair while everyone else danced. Dignity, for professors, perches precariously on how well they can convey this message: "I am immersed in some very important thoughts, which unsophisticated people could not even begin to understand. Thus, I would not want to dance even if one of you unsophisticated people were to ask me."*

*Think of this, then, the next time you look at an unintelligible academic text. "I would not want the attention of a wide reading audience, even if a wide audience were to ask for me." Isn't that exactly what the pompous and pedantic tone of the classically academic writer conveys?*

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he loses some of his "wagers."

"Ideally," Walser writes, "he would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style." His audiences were given not a polished "product," but something that was, in his case, more impressive: "a dramatic process of creation."

### *Retouching History*

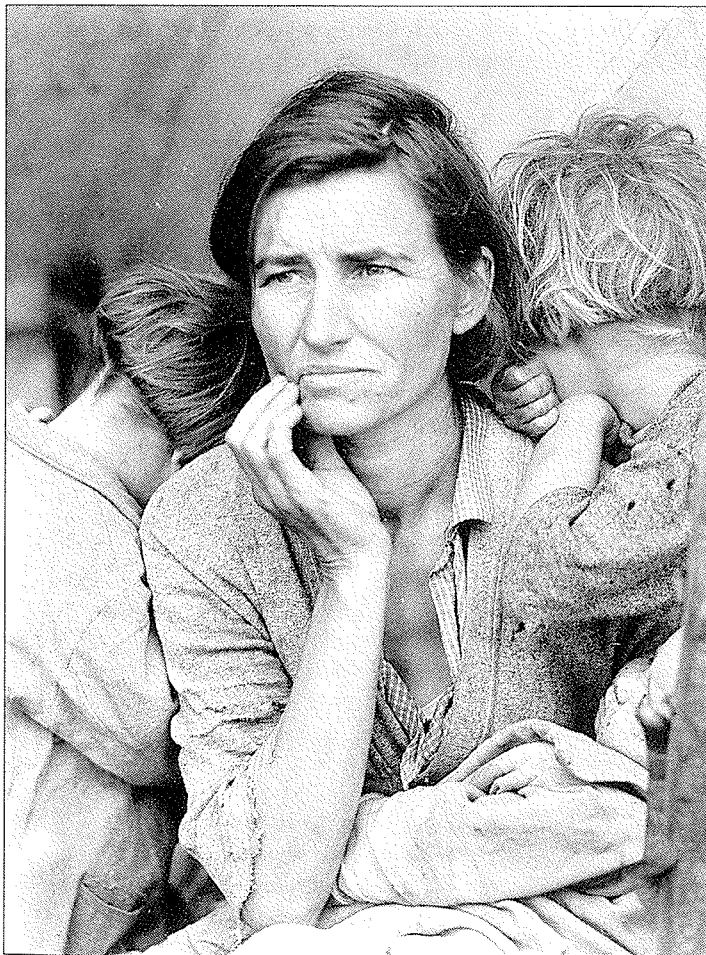
"The Farm Security Administration File: In and Out of Focus" by F. Jack Hurley, in *History of Photography* (Autumn 1993), Taylor & Francis Ltd., 4 John St., London WC1N 2ET, United Kingdom.

Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" and Arthur Rothstein's "Dust Storm" are among

the most powerful images of American life during the Great Depression. Those photos were among more than 272,000 taken by the small photographic section of the U.S. government's Resettlement Administration, established in 1935, and its successor, the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In recent decades, contends Hurley, a historian at Memphis State University, revisionist scholars have produced grossly distorted accounts of this New Deal enterprise, portraying the photographers as victims and the project itself as little more than a propaganda machine for the federal government or other sinister forces.

In his much-praised *American Photography: A Critical History, 1945 to the Present* (1984), for example, Jonathan Green quotes a 1940 letter from Roy Stryker, director of the photography

section, to photographer Jack Delano. With war approaching, Stryker was getting calls for photos that emphasized the positive aspects of American life. He asked Delano to get some pretty pictures of New England in autumn: "I know your damned photographer's soul writhes but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer's soul with Hitler at our doorstep? You are nothing but camera fodder to me." Green, according to Hurley, solemnly viewed this



*Revisionists level unfounded charges against the New Deal's famous photographers, says Hurley. They accuse Dorothea Lange of having directed her "Migrant Mother" (left) to bring her hand to her face and claim that Arthur Rothstein staged "Dust Storm." They also portray Rothstein's "Bleached Skull of a Steer" as a complete fake.*