

Backtalk

WILLIAM C. RHODEN

Night Train,
Musings
And Miles

For the last two weeks, the air waves have been filled with tributes to Miles Davis, the legendary trumpet player who died last month at the age of 65.

As one tribute followed the other, I continued to be amazed, not only by the length of Miles's career, which spanned more than five decades, but by the reach of his influence. From fashion to fine art to music, Miles carved his signature very deeply into the psyche of American culture.

He also had a passion for sports and throughout his life he shared a special kinship with athletes.

Miles was a sports fan and boxing was an obsession. "A lot of people tell me I have the mind of a boxer, that I think like a boxer, and I probably do," he said in his autobiography. "I guess that I am an aggressive person about things that are important to me, like when it comes to playing music or doing what I want to do. I'll fight, physically, at the drop of a hat if I think someone has wronged me. I have always been like that."

But Miles was more than a boxing fan. He was a student of the fight game and even hired a professional trainer. During the mid-1950's, he worked out at Gleason's gym in midtown and went to Silverman's Gym in Harlem to watch Sugar Ray Robinson train. In fact Davis idolized Robinson and once confessed to the fighter that he was the reason that he broke his heroin habit.

Just as Miles thought of himself as an athlete, a number of athletes, particularly black athletes during



Warren Linn

the 1950's and 60's, identified with him, with the rhythms and improvisations of the jazz musician.

Great athletes depend on instincts as well as on talent, on that inner sense that allows them to be spontaneous, daring, willing to throw away Plan A and create an entirely new Plan B.

Ron Carter, the bass player with Miles Davis from 1963 to 1968 said he's always felt a connection with athletes because "what they do on the field is what we do every night."

Dick (Night Train) Lane, the Hall of Fame defensive back who played 16 seasons in the National Football League, was a good friend of Davis and had numerous friends in the jazz world. Lane, who was married to Dinah Washington, the late jazz singer, said he knew the location of every jazz club in each city that had an N.F.L. team. The night before and after each game, Lane recalled, he and a few teammates would spend hours enjoying the music, mingling with the musicians.

For Night Train Lane, Miles Davis symbolized the kinship between athlete and the jazz musician. As much as anything, Miles was a state of mind.

"Jazz music had feeling, soul and depth," Lane said. "A musician's got to have a style — maybe it's a way of holding the horn or playing a phrase. That's what I was always after. I wanted to

create my own style of playing, of moving."

Lane was born in Austin, Tex., and raised by foster parents. He remembers being surrounded by spirituals inside the house and by all manner of blues in the street.

"I wanted to be a piano player," he said. "I think a lot of the guys I knew who were athletes could have been musicians, maybe some of the musicians would have been athletes. It's just a different way of expressing the same thing."

If the musician inspires the athlete, the athlete energizes the jazz musician's creative juices by converting abstractions into movement. The athlete is an eloquent, physical interpreter, translating riffs into ballet.

Jazz was Earl Monroe's spin move, Joe Namath's attitude; it was Willie Mays's flair and Sugar Ray Robinson's style.

Count Basie wrote "Did You Ever See Jackie Robinson Hit That Ball," in 1949; Harold Mabern wrote "Too Late, Fall Back, Baby," as a tribute to Dick Barnett, the former New York Knick, and Miles dedicated an album to Jack Johnson, the legendary boxer, whose prized possession was his bass fiddle.

I remember a scene in a Los Angeles jazz club a few years ago where Jackie McLean, the great alto saxophonist, was appearing. John Carlos, the sprinter who raised his fist during the national anthem in the 1968 Olympics, walked in as McLean was setting the stage on fire. After the set, McLean walked over to the table and upon being introduced, the two exchanged hugs. Carlos told McLean how his music had carried him through and inspired him during the tough times following the 1968 Olympics.

McLean told Carlos: "Man, you're an American hero."

Times change, seasons change.

The musical tastes of modern athletes seem to reflect more of an alliance with convention and celebrity than a deep-rooted affinity for the music. The performer on athletes' headsets is more likely to be M. C. Hammer than, say, Wynton Marsalis, more often Sting than Geri Allen.

I can't help feeling that they're missing something, that the abstractions of jazz could provide young athletes with a more refined creative instinct.

On the other hand, there have been positive tradeoffs. Just as Miles broke new ground with each decade, professional athletes like Michael Jordan, who recently hosted "Saturday Night Live," are broadening their horizons.

This is in keeping with the spirit of Miles who constantly preached that creativity is inextricably linked to change.

"If anybody wants to keep creating, they have to be about change, about evolution," he once said. "Living is an adventure and a challenge."

The One Time Leo the Lip Kept It Buttoned

By HEYWOOD HALE BROWN

Leo Durocher's lips were almost constantly "soiled with vile oaths," to use the vocabulary of the Rover Boys, but it always seemed to me that Leo had a lot of the Rover Boy in him, particularly Tom, who you may remember was the fun-loving one. Like those long ago fictional heroes, he believed that if you always gave your best, victory and justice would prevail.

When injustice prevailed, in the matter of his suspension as Brooklyn Dodger manager through the whole season of 1947, he was amazingly and unwontedly silent, and why not; the roof of his structure of belief had just fallen on him.

When the Dodgers went to Havana to train that spring — some thought Branch Rickey wanted to introduce Jackie Robinson in a free and easy Caribbean environment; some thought Rickey was looking for sold-out exhibition games in a big park — Leo was warned by Commissioner A. B. (I cannot bring myself to call him "Happy") Chandler to avoid the company of gamblers.

This was difficult to do since Havana at that time was Las Vegas with better architecture, but Chandler was firm, particular in the matter of a couple of race-track friends of Leo's, Memphis Engleberg and Connie Immerman. Why horse players should disturb a former Governor of Kentucky is mysterious, but Leo was scrupulous in his obedience.

Writing as a New Hobby

He found it so uncomfortable to cut Memphis and Connie in chance meetings that he took to staying in his room, writing letters to his wife, Laraine Day. Since Leo's writing had previously been limited to the nine names on the lineup card, the letters, though loving, were probably brief. There was no TV in the rooms of the Hotel Nacional, and one doubts that Leo decided that this was an undistracted opportunity to get through all of Marcel Proust. It must have been a wearing time, but, for once, he did what he was told.

Imagine, therefore, his indignation upon going early to the ball park and seeing — sunning themselves in a box assigned to Yankee owner Larry MacPhail — Immerman and Engelberg.

Righteous wrath, which was housed in an inadequate minimum security cage in Leo's breast, came bursting forth. First

Heywood Hale Brown, a onetime sportswriter for PM and the New York Star (1940-49) and sportscaster for CBS (1966-75), later became an actor and broadcaster. Now, he is an actor again.



The New York Times

Leo Durocher as manager of the Giants in 1951.

there was a fine flow of what are now coyly known as "F words" and "S words." Among them were enough "O words" (for "ordinary") to make the two witnesses present, myself and Dick Young of The New York Daily News, understand that he was not mad at Memphis and Connie, who were good friends and kept cleaner books than a number of banks recently in the news. Neither was Leo mad at MacPhail, with whom he had a love-hate relationship of many years' standing.

He was angry that an owner could consort with people off-limits to Leo (to be fair, MacPhail never showed up in the box, simply having offered the facility to a couple of jolly fellows he had met at the track). Leo was angry, as always, at injustice.

At the end of all this came the fatal words — to me logical words — "if those guys were sitting in my box, I'd get banned from baseball." The "if" is important here but was subsequently ignored.

Young, either a better reporter than I, or a more ruthless person, or both, printed the whole thing. I, aware that the baseball Establishment was laying snares for Leo, printed none of it, though I later wrote to the commissioner offering to testify. There is a use for such letters, they are now called "recycled toilet tissue."

MacPhail took the remark as a slur on his integrity and stormed into Chandler's sanctum with the demand that Leo be punished. Chandler obliged, saying there

where other vague, unspecified things in the indictment, probably things that Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, men who unlike Leo were icons, did every day.

The trap was sprung, and the manager missed out on the pennant-winning year.

Ready for Any Fight

Leo's French heritage never seemed to give him the Gallic acceptance of an existentialist world. Always, just like the Rovers, he was startled and hurt when inevitable unfairness hit him like a flaming pie.

Before World War II began, Leo volunteered for the draft and looked forward to some happy grenade-throwing as a Victor McLaglen-type sergeant. He was

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turned down, and hurt at the collapse of another of his Rover dreams, he said sourly that this was Hitler's happiest day.

Now, he was mad all over again. Larry MacPhail had stolen the Kaiser's ashtray and Leo wanted to go into Hitler with his spikes high.

From a Bum to a Giant

As the years passed, despite his triumphs he brooded more on his trials. The day he moved from being manager of the Dodgers to manager of the Giants — Robert E. Lee defending Gettysburg instead of attacking it — I chanced, by assignment, to switch as well and sat alone with him in the dugout waiting for the arrival of the Giant press.

His clarion voice was muted like a Cootie Williams trumpet and his face was wretched. "What'll I do, Heywood?" he asked. "These guys hate me." He was never afraid of confrontation; in fact, I found him free of physical fear, but he never knew what to do about the smilers with the knives, the men who had taken away one of his pennants.

Of course, he won them over and presided triumphantly over the great boys' book season of 1951, but I'm puzzled about the press account that he died of natural causes, with its suggestion of peaceful resignation. I can only guess that he was asleep when they put the black ball on him or the heavens would have heard the clangorous cry: "Whaddaya mean out?"

MAILBOX

Ryder Cup Revisited

To the Sports Editor:
Some comments on the memorable 1991 Ryder Cup match:

1. There is nothing more exciting than international match-play golf. The consequence of a missed shot in stroke-play event is you lose some but not all the money — in match play even seasoned players lose their minds!

2. Chip Beck is right. The Europeans over-celebrated at the last Ryder Cup in 1989. Jacklin talked as if they had won — they only tied.

3. There was exceptional coverage by

USA and NBC, but something was missing at the finish. The losers appeared to melt away and no attempt seemed to be made to bring them into the coverage — quite regrettable given the closeness of the match.

4. When Pate was injured on Thursday, an alternate should have been sought for the final-day singles. The final score of the incredible 1991 Ryder Cup will always contain the qualifier that one singles was not played and that this could have affected the final outcome.

5. The United States professionals could compete with success against a World team. Why not take this logical next step?
ALASTAIR C. BROWNIE
Getzville, N.Y.

Mets No Inspiration

To the Sports Editor:

I have worked as a registered nurse for 15 years. I have seen patients hold onto their lives for things like tight pennant races, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup. Sports, for them, creates order in the world, gives them small triumphs, brings joy. Personally, when my brother was dying, and in our recovery as a family, baseball was a single happiness, a healer.

I love the Mets. My patients love the Mets. Yet this year, they got tired of playing for us when it was clear they wouldn't win big. It's a sorry state of affairs when a bone-thin person, hooked up to oxygen, watches a baseball game, only to see ruggedly handsome and healthy players un-

happy, unable to joke or clap for teammates in the dugout because they are depressed about losing. This is not what loss is about.
MARY JANE NEALON
New York

Beware of G.M.'s
In Bow Ties

To the Sports Editor:

Why is it that general managers who build winning franchises with brilliant trades and maneuvering stay complacent, then let them founder and wilt, as did Frank Cashen and Bill Torrey? Could it be that they are tying their knots too tight?
LEWIS J. LORIA
Roslyn, L.I.

OUTDOORS/Bill Hunter

Spectacular Salmon Fishing in Russia's Waters

My fishing guide, Sergei, smiled broadly as he watched me release another Atlantic salmon. It was the sixth one I had landed in 45 minutes. I was fishing just below the mouth of the Russia's Pournache River, where it emptied into the larger Ponoï River. There were salmon leaping and rolling all around me. It was an incredible scene! I could cast in any one of three directions and hook a bright, silvery Atlantic salmon fresh from the Arctic's Barents Sea.

Looking upriver, into the lowering sun, I could take in a sweep of 500 yards of water and see dozens of flashes against the flat, dark surface. The low angle of the sun's rays were lighting up each leap of a moving salmon like a flashbulb going off. This was the largest concentration of Atlantic salmon I had ever seen in 20-plus years of chasing this beautiful fish.

For years there had been rumors about great numbers of Atlantic salmon in Russian rivers, but since these rivers lay in a vast, sensitive military zone bordering Finland, on the Kola Peninsula in the northwestern corner of the Russian federation republic, no one was ever able to verify them.

In 1990 a small group from G. Loomis Outdoor Adventures, of Woodland Wash., gained access to the easternmost tip of the Kola Peninsula, and a whole new chapter in Atlantic salmon fishing was about to be written.

As part of this group, I spent three weeks in the late summer of 1990 fishing a variety of Kola rivers including the Ponoï, Varzuga, Pana, Nizma and Umba to name a few. All held wild Atlantic salmon stocks, but the Ponoï had the potential to be the dream river we all were seeking.

Sitting above the Arctic Circle, accessible only by air, the Ponoï River is the largest watershed on the Kola, winding its way through more than 250 miles of tundra and spruce forest to empty into the cold Barents Sea. Several feeder riv-

ers boost the Ponoï's flow, and the only human inhabitants along the waterway are a small group of reindeer herders. There is no industrial, logging, mining or urban impact on the river.

The wooded banks paint a broad green swath across the tundra desert, creating an oasis that attracts moose, reindeer, capercaillie, mink, eagles, fish hawks and the occasional brown bear. You can roam the vast wilderness for days and never sight another human. The river holds a variety of fish, including pike, grayling and brown trout, both native and sea run.

In December 1990, G. Loomis Co. secured a long-term contract allowing western sportsmen to fish the lower 40 miles of the river each summer. The agreement stipulated we practice a catch-and-release fishery and that barbless hooks only be used. This attitude was in keeping with the fly fishing ethic we Americans espoused and also assured the Russians their resource would not be plundered.



Bill Hunter

The Ponoï River in northern Russia, where salmon numbers defied reality.

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In June 1991, a modest number of anglers willing to pay about \$7,000 a week to try the Ponoï's promising but as yet unproven fishery became the first guests in the plush, newly constructed tent salmon camp there. I knew we would have good fishing, but never dreamed it would be as spectacular as it was.

From June 15 to July 20, the weekly average was slightly better than 62 salmon per angler. This incredible number needs repeating: 62 Atlantic salmon per man, per week! Some anglers had weeks of 100 or more fish landed and released, and one ambitious young man from Vermont managed to land and release 35 salmon in a single day. Nowhere, to my knowledge, has there ever been such a prolific Atlantic salmon fishery.

To gain a better perspective on the richness of the Ponoï fishery, one only needs to compare it with the other Atlantic salmon rivers of the world. The great rivers of eastern Canada for instance normally yield 3-4 salmon per week, per

angler, while Icelandic rivers average 6-8 salmon per week, per angler.

Of course, none of this comes cheaply. The cost for one week of fishing during next year's June 6-Sept. 25 season on the Ponoï is \$6,200, plus \$1,400 airfare. But salmon fishing trips are expensive: a week angling for Norwegian salmon runs around \$12,000. In this context, the Ponoï is something of a bargain: It's cheaper than Norway and Iceland, and has a much larger resource. Having said all this, if you are interested in fishing the Ponoï, you'll probably have to wait because next summer's weeks are 90 percent full. (More information is available from Frontier Adventures — 800-245-1950 — of Wexford, Pa., this country's largest hunting and fishing travel outfit.) But the experience is well worth the wait.

The Ponoï's salmon come up the river in small waves of 10-20 fish, settling into resting spots along the rocky banks. They are not skittish, rather they appear quite confident in their suits of brilliant silver with dark black-olive backs. Their mirror sides change color from shades of lavender to peach as they leap and roll, twisting in the Arctic sun. This showiness makes them a natural for the dry fly fisherman, and as many as 40 percent of the fish were taken on floating flies, which they attack aggressively and repeatedly until hooked. Once hooked they react with the strong runs, and spectacular leaps that their specie are noted for.

The average Ponoï River salmon weighed approximately 10 pounds, with the largest fish weighing 24 pounds. A few 30 pounders managed to escape at the net. An estimated 25 percent of the salmon hooked weighed between 12 and 20 pounds!

Few anglers ever have the opportunity to walk the banks of a river so blessed as the Ponoï, where days are filled with quiet broken only by the sound of rushing water and the playful splash of yet another homeward bound salmon. For myself and several others who have wished to just once experience a river "the way it used to be," the dream came true on the banks of the Ponoï.