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—United Press International

The Autobiography
MILES DAVIS
with Quincy Troupe

miles

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An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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This Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition May 2026

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Designed by Karolina Harris

Manufactured in the United States of America

23 25 27 29 30 28 26 24

Library of Congress Control Number: 90037501

ISBN 978-1-4516-4318-3

ISBN 978-1-4391-2659-2 (ebook)



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Foreword by Nas

Many musicians were born. Miles was lightning that hit the planet on May 26, 1926.

His sound—pure, harmonic human expression—is timeless. Since I first heard his name in someone’s mouth, wonder and admiration surrounded it. The first time his music hit my ears, it felt like it belonged in the background of my life. The first time I saw him in a picture or on TV, it made sense to me that he would seem perfectly as black as the solar system, with a clear December midnight skin tone.

Miles had won the world over before I got here. My mother and father shared a common appreciation for real music. My father, being a musician himself with a deep respect for Mr. Davis’s music, was most likely the one who introduced me to one of the world’s most fearless artists.

I later grew into all his music. It took me a while to understand what jazz was. I was too young, and my music of choice was hip-hop and popular eighties hits. But through the years I found Miles again, particularly his masterpiece album *Kind of Blue*.

Miles and hip-hop share the same blood, sweat, and tears. The same struggles and triumphs. Hip-hop is heavily influenced by jazz music. It’s our roots. So many of our biggest songs have jazz samples in them.

Hip-hop and Miles are both innovative and extremely bold. Learning about his personal life was a whole different experience. His journey reflected the times and different eras he lived through. He faced discrimination head-on. He got bloody and received scars, but he kicked his elegant shoes through racism like it was trash on the streets.

When he was sharing his light with emerging giants it was something to witness. He had those artists play in his band and gave them the spotlight at his shows. Onstage, Miles would sometimes turn to face his band, leaving the audience with incredulous expressions while his back faced the crowd. That makes me laugh every time I see it.

There are many highs and lows in the shark-infested entertainment business, and they weigh on artists in ways most wouldn’t imagine. But Miles made sure to preserve his soul. Some days were harder than others, and some of his pain was self-inflicted. He didn’t pretend to be something he wasn’t. He spoke his mind to whomever, whenever.

I sometimes ask myself, “How did he casually make music that made the world a better place to live in?” He’s my go-to when I want to chill. When I want to feel safe. He felt free to make the music he wanted to make. We can still learn a lot from him through his music, as well as his classic memoir.

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In *Miles* he manages to tell his story in an entirely new way, and his book is a thrilling and revealing experience, just like his music. It is always cool to see further into his work and life. Miles was a once-in-a-lifetime talent who teaches us something new with every listen.

Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, 2026

Foreword by Hanif Abdurraqib

When I close my eyes, even decades later, I can see the photo. I found the magazine it was in when I was nine years old, flipping through a pile of old Black music mags my dad had stashed in our basement. My introduction to Miles Davis did not include or involve his actual face in any way. In the photo, a horn is the star of the show, but not just any horn. Miles is halfway out of the frame, though you can see his legs, crossed, mostly covered in a pair of gold pants. His brown legs are not exactly protruding *from* the pants as much as it looks like a seamless gradient of gold to brown. Resting across his legs is the horn. It is red, ornamented with gold accents, including his name, engraved in crisp gold cursive, angling toward the bell. I had seen trumpets before, but most of them were on the black-and-white or monochromatic record covers in my father's collection. This photo seduced me into a fantasy of the trumpet unlocking my own pathway to cool. I wanted to be as good of a player as Miles Davis, whom I hadn't seen or heard before, but I knew he *had* to be good to have a horn that cool, to have an instrument stamped with his own name.

I was a bad trumpet player because I refused to practice. I thought the instrument itself would do the work I didn't want to do on my own. It's all work. You don't just *get* the spoils. I like a musician who looks like they're working on a stage. The first time I saw a video of Miles Davis playing anything, it was because my music teacher, who my father paid money to make me good at an instrument I mostly wanted to wear like an accessory, told me one day *you just gotta SEE it, man. You gotta REALLY see it.* And so he put on this grainy VHS of Miles Davis performing in Copenhagen, and when the static retreated, there was Miles, in a fluorescent jacket, playing a dark-colored horn. What I loved most was watching the sweat emerge on his temples, even though he was barely moving, only swaying back and forth, or drifting into a deep lean when pushing a prolonged note out of the horn. And yet, there was sweat that seemed to arrive not on the wings of urgent movement, but, instead, of deep focus.

I didn't become any better at the trumpet and eventually abandoned it, but I remember thinking of how correct my music teacher was, in that moment, to suggest that you have to know what it was, and what it takes. You have to see what it is to earn a belief in the limitlessness of your own abilities.

Miles was an artist awash in contradictions—the ones that exist off the stage and beyond the music are well worn, and many of them come alive in this very book. But I think his musical contradictions are the more appealing part of his story. He was talented and ambitious, and much of his dreaming involved bringing music that was challenging to the masses, charging it with an excitement and adventurousness.

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But he was also someone who rankled critics, who, even in appreciating his abilities as a bandleader and innovator, pushed back on what they heard as missed notes, or half-valving leading to notes being fractured with air. There were those who would suggest that Davis was a musician with ideas that outpaced his ability to effectively execute them in performance.

I have always heard something different. In poetry workshops I urge readers to assume intention. Do not be so bold to define a mistake on behalf of another artist. Assume, instead, that this is a person who has built their voice with real clarity of thought and action, even if it evades some of the more proper notions of form that others may be used to. All the things I love about Miles's playing have to do with the uniqueness of his sound, which he established through, among other things, knowing that he might be misunderstood by those who would assume he wasn't skilled enough to fulfill his ambitions to the level that *they* imagined them being executed to. Miles would split notes, bend pitches, turn sharp corners without warning. And yet, he's one of the most consistent bandleaders you can find. In all the years, with all the different players he'd have behind him, Miles's playing rarely changed, which I believe is the most generous way to lead a band. Establish yourself as the known entity, unpredictable as you may be, and let everyone else keep up. It's like watching two different planets, spinning through a dark ecosystem, brushing up against each other once in a while.

In that Copenhagen performance, the manifestation of the focus, the labor, the sweat on the temples, is that the trumpet is given a real voice. The tones are rounded and alive with warm colors. It feels as though the trumpet itself is charged with the ability to speak. Not with language, exactly, but a voice. Like the horn, too, is fighting to be clearly understood in a world that is used to hearing it only one single way.

And it's not easy to do. I laugh now thinking that it ever was.

This is a book that is, by definition, a memoir, but it is also, largely, a collection of stories, which are at times riveting, at times illuminating, at times humorous. It is a portrait of Miles Davis as a full person, beyond the reductions that were thrust upon him for much of his life and career.

I sometimes find myself reading books like this, musicians writing about themselves, and delighting in the storytelling, and the personal histories, but foolishly seeking some kind of information about how to replicate their individual brilliance, so that I might understand how someone could *possibly* do what Miles Davis did. But even if there were step-by-step instructions, it wouldn't be enough. You have to see it. You really have to see it.

Hanif Abdurraqib, 2026

Prologue

Listen. The greatest feeling I ever had in my life—with my clothes on—was when I first heard Diz and Bird together in St. Louis, Missouri, back in 1944. I was eighteen years old and had just graduated from Lincoln High School. It was just across the Mississippi River in East St. Louis, Illinois.

When I heard Diz and Bird in B's band, I said, "What? What is this!?" Man, that shit was so terrible it was scary. I mean, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, Buddy Anderson, Gene Ammons, Lucky Thompson, and Art Blakey all together in one band and not to mention B: Billy Eckstine himself. It was a motherfucker. Man, that shit was all up in my body. Music all up in my body, and that's what I wanted to hear. The way that band was playing music—that was *all* I wanted to hear. It was something. And me up there playing with them.

I had already heard about Diz and Bird, was already into their music—especially Dizzy's, with me being a trumpet player and all. But I was also into Bird. See, I had one record of Dizzy's called "Woody'n You" and a record of Jay McShann's with Bird on it called "Hootie Blues." That's where I first heard Diz and Bird, and I couldn't believe what they were playing. They were so terrible. Besides them I had one record of Coleman Hawkins, one record of Lester Young, and one of Duke Ellington with Jimmy Blanton on bass that was a motherfucker, too. That was it. Those were all the records

I had. Dizzy was my idol then. I used to try to play every solo Diz played on that one album I had by him. But I liked Clark Terry, Buck Clayton, Harold Baker, Harry James, Bobby Hackett, and Roy Eldridge a lot, too. Roy was my idol on trumpet later. But in 1944 it was Diz.

Billy Eckstine's band had come to St. Louis to play at a place called the Plantation Club, which was owned by some white gangsters. St. Louis was a big gangster town back then. When they told B that he had to go around to the back door like all the other black folks, he just ignored the motherfuckers and brought the whole band through the front door. Anyway, B didn't take no shit off nobody. He would cuss and knock a motherfucker out at the drop of a hat. That's right. Forget about the playboy look and air he had about himself. B was tough. So was Benny Carter. They both would drop anybody they thought was disrespecting them in a minute. But as tough as Benny was—and he was—B was tougher. So these gangsters right there on the spot fired B and brought in George Hudson, who had Clark Terry in his band. Then B took his band across town to Jordan Chambers' Riviera Club, an all-black club in St. Louis, located on Delmar and Taylor—in a black part of St. Louis. Jordan Chambers, who was the most powerful black politician back in them days in St. Louis, just told B to bring the band on over.

So when word got around that they were going to play the Riviera rather than the Plantation, I just picked up my trumpet and went on over to see if I could catch something, maybe sit in with the band. So me and a friend of mine named Bobby Danzig, who was also a trumpet player, got to the Riviera and went on in to try and catch the rehearsals. See, I already had a reputation around St. Louis for being able to play by that time, so the guards knew me and let me and Bobby on in. The first thing I see when I got inside was this man running up to me, asking if I was a trumpet player. I said, "Yeah, I'm a trumpet player." Then, he asked if I got a union card. I said, "Yeah, I got a union card, too." So the guy said, "Come on, we need a trumpet player. Our trumpet got sick." This guy takes me up on the bandstand and puts the music in front of me. I could read music, but I had trouble reading what he put in front of me because I was listening to what everybody else was playing.

That guy who ran up to me was Dizzy. I didn't recognize him at first. But soon as he started playing, I knew who he was. And like I said, I couldn't even *read* the music—don't even talk about *playing*—for listening to Bird and Diz.

But shit, I wasn't alone in listening to them like that, because the whole band would just like have an orgasm every time Diz or Bird played—especially Bird. I mean Bird was unbelievable. Sarah Vaughan was there also, and she's a motherfucker too. Then and now. Sarah sounding like Bird and Diz and them two playing everything! I mean they would look at Sarah like she was just another horn. You know what I mean? She'd be singing "You Are My First Love" and Bird would be soloing. Man, I wish everybody could have heard that shit!

Back then Bird would play solos for eight bars. But the things he used to do in them eight bars was something else. He would just leave everybody else in the dust with his playing. Talk about me forgetting to play, I remember sometimes the other musicians would forget to come in on time because they was listening to Bird so much. They'd be standing up there on the stage with their mouths wide open. Goddamn, Bird was playing some shit back then.

When Dizzy would play the same thing would happen. And also when Buddy Anderson would play. He had that thing, that style that was close to the style that I liked. So I heard all that shit back in 1944 all at once. Goddamn, them motherfuckers was terrible. Talk about *cooking!* And you know how they were playing for them black folks at the Riviera. Because black people in St. Louis love their music, but they want their music right. So you *know* what they were doing at the Riviera. You know they were getting *all* the way *down*.

B's band changed my life. I decided right then and there that I had to leave St. Louis and live in New York City where all these bad musicians were.

As much as I loved Bird back then, if it hadn't been for Dizzy I wouldn't be where I am today. I tell him that all the time and he just laughs. Because when I first came to New York he took me everywhere with him. Diz was funny back in those days. He's still funny now. But back then he was something else. Like, he'd be sticking his tongue out at women on the streets and shit—at white women. I mean, I'm from St. Louis and he's doing that to a white person, a white *woman*. I said to myself, "Diz must be crazy." But he wasn't, you know? Not really. Different, but not crazy.

The first time in my life I went on an elevator was with Diz. He took me up on this elevator on Broadway somewhere in midtown Manhattan. He used to love to ride elevators and make fun at everyone, act crazy, scare white people to death. Man, he was something. I'd go over to his house, and Lorraine, his wife, wouldn't let nobody

stay there too long but me. She would offer me dinner all the time. Sometimes I'd eat and sometimes I wouldn't. I've always been funny about what and where I eat. Anyway, Lorraine used to put up these signs that said, "Don't Sit Here!" And then she'd be saying to Diz, "What you doing with all them motherfuckers in my house? Get them out of here and I mean right now!" So I would get up to leave, too, and she'd say, "Not you, Miles, you can stay, but all the rest of them motherfuckers got to go." I don't know what it was she liked about me, but she did.

It seems people loved Dizzy so much they used to just want to be with him, you know? But no matter who was around, Dizzy always took me every place he went. He would say, "Come on, go with me, Miles." And we'd go down to his booking office, or someplace else, or like I said, maybe ride in elevators, just for the hell of it. He'd do all kinds of funny shit.

Like his favorite thing was to go by where they first started broadcasting the "Today" show, when Dave Garroway was the host. It was in a studio on the street level, so people could watch the show from the sidewalk, looking through this big plate glass window. Dizzy would go up to the window while the show was on the air—they shot it live, you know—and stick out his tongue and make faces at the chimpanzee on the show. Man, he would fuck with that chimpanzee, J. Fred Muggs, so much, he would drive him crazy. The chimpanzee would be screaming, jumping up and down and showing his teeth, and everybody on the show would be wondering what the fuck got into him. Every time that chimpanzee laid eyes on Dizzy, he'd go crazy. But Dizzy was also very, very beautiful and I loved him and still do today.

Anyway, I've come close to matching the feeling of that night in 1944 in music, when I first heard Diz and Bird, but I've never quite got there. I've gotten close, but not all the way there. I'm always looking for it, listening and feeling for it, though, trying to always feel it in and through the music I play every day. I still remember when I was just a kid, still wet behind the ears, hanging out with all these great musicians, my idols even until this day. Sucking in everything. Man, it was something.

Chapter 1

The very first thing I remember in my early childhood is a flame, a blue flame jumping off a gas stove somebody lit. It might have been me playing around with the stove. I don't remember who it was. Anyway, I remember being shocked by the whoosh of the blue flame jumping off the burner, the suddenness of it. That's as far back as I can remember; any further back than this is just fog, you know, just mystery. But that stove flame is as clear as music is in my mind. I was three years old.

I saw that flame and felt that hotness of it close to my face. I felt fear, real fear, for the first time in my life. But I remember it also like some kind of adventure, some kind of weird joy, too. I guess that experience took me someplace in my head I hadn't been before. To some frontier, the edge, maybe, of everything possible. I don't know; I never tried to analyze it before. The fear I had was almost like an invitation, a challenge to go forward into something I knew nothing about. That's where I think my personal philosophy of life and my commitment to everything I believe in started, with that moment. I don't know, but I think it might be true. Who knows? What the fuck did I know about anything back then? In my mind I have always believed and thought since then that my motion had to be forward, away from the heat of that flame.

Looking back, I don't remember much of my first years—I never liked to look back much anyway. But one thing I do know is that the

year after I was born a bad tornado hit St. Louis and tore it all up. Seems like I remember something about that—something in the bottom of my memory. Maybe that's why I have such a bad temper sometimes; that tornado left some of its violent creativity in me. Maybe it left some of its strong winds. You know, you need strong wind to play trumpet. I do believe in mystery and the supernatural and a tornado sure enough is mysterious *and* supernatural.

I was born May 26, 1926, in Alton, Illinois, a little river town up on the Mississippi River about twenty-five miles north of East St. Louis. I was named after my father; he was named after his father. That made me Miles Dewey Davis III, but everybody in my family called me Junior. I always hated that nickname.

My father was from Arkansas. He grew up there on a farm that his father, Miles Dewey Davis I, owned. My grandfather was a bookkeeper, so good at what he did he did it for white people and made a whole lot of money. He bought five hundred acres of land in Arkansas around the turn of the century. When he bought all that land, the white people in the area who had used him to straighten out their financial matters, their money books, turned against him. Ran him off his land. In their minds, a black man wasn't supposed to have all that land and all that money. He wasn't supposed to be smart, smarter than them. It hasn't changed too much; things are like that even today.

For most of my life my grandfather lived under threats from white men. He even used his son, my Uncle Frank, as a bodyguard to protect him from them. The Davises were always ahead of the game, my father and grandfather told me. And I believed them. They told me that people in our family were special people—artists, businessmen, professionals, and musicians—who played for the plantation owners back in the old days before slavery was over. These Davises played classical music, according to my grandfather. That's the reason my father couldn't play or listen to music after slavery was over, because my grandfather said, "They only let black people play in gin houses and honky-tonks." What he meant was that they—the white people—didn't want to listen to no black folks playing classical music anymore; they only wanted to hear them sing spirituals or the blues. Now, I don't know how true this is, but that's what my father told me.

My father also told me my grandfather told him that whenever he got some money, no matter where or who he got it from, to count it

and see if it was all there. He said you can't trust no one when it comes to money, not even people in your family. One time my grandfather gave my father what he said was \$1,000 and sent him to the bank with it. The bank was thirty miles away from where they lived. It was about 100 degrees in the shade—summertime in Arkansas. And he had to walk and ride a horse. When my father got down there to the bank, he counted the money and there was only \$950. He counted it again and got the same amount: \$950. So he went on back home, so scared he was just about ready to shit in his pants. When he got back he went to my grandfather and said that he lost \$50. So Grandpa just stood there and looked at him and said, "Did you count the money before you left? Do you know if it was all there?" My father said, no, he didn't count the money before he left. "That's right," my grandfather told him, "because I didn't give you nothing but \$950. You didn't lose anything. But didn't I tell you to count the money, anybody's money, even mine? Here's \$50. Count it. And then go ahead on back and put that money in the bank like I told you." Now what you got to keep in mind about all of this is that not only was the bank thirty miles away but it was hotter than a motherfucker. It was cold of my grandfather to do that. But sometimes you've got to be cold like that. It was a lesson my father never forgot and he passed it on to his kids. So today I count *all* my money.

My father, like my mother, Cleota Henry Davis, was born in 1900 in Arkansas. He went to elementary school there. My father and his brothers and sisters didn't go to high school, just skipped right over it and went straight to college. He graduated from Arkansas Baptist College, from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and from Northwestern University's College of Dentistry, so my father received three degrees and I remember looking at them motherfuckers up on his office wall after I got older and saying, "Goddamn, I hope he won't ask *me* to do that." I also remember seeing a picture somewhere of his graduating class from Northwestern and counting only three black faces there. He was twenty-four when he graduated from Northwestern.

His brother, Ferdinand, went to Harvard and some college in Berlin. He was a year or two older than my father, and like my father, he skipped over high school. He went straight into college after passing the entrance exam with high scores. He was a brilliant guy also; used to talk to me all the time about Caesar and Hannibal, and black history. He traveled all over the world. He was more intellectual than

my father, and a ladies' man and player, editor of a magazine called *Color*. He was so smart he made me feel almost dumb; he was the only person I knew growing up who made me feel this way. Uncle Ferdinand was something else. I loved being around him, hearing him talk and tell stories about his travels, his women. And he was stylish as a motherfucker, too. I hung around him so much that my mother would get mad.

My father got out of Northwestern and married my mother. She played the violin and the piano. Her mother had been an organ teacher in Arkansas. She never talked much about her father, so I don't know much about her side of the family, never did, never asked either. I don't know why that is. From what I have heard of them, though, and the ones I did meet, they seemed to be middle class and a little uppity in their attitudes.

My mother was a beautiful woman. She had a whole lot of style, with an East Indian, Carmen McRae look, and dark, nut-brown, smooth skin. High cheekbones and Indian-like hair. Big beautiful eyes. Me and my brother Vernon looked like her. She had mink coats, diamonds; she was a very glamorous woman who was into all kinds of hats and things, and all my mother's friends seemed just as glamorous to me as she was. She always dressed to kill. I got my looks from my mother and also my love of clothes and sense of style. I guess you could say I got whatever artistic talent I have from her also.

But I didn't get along with her too well. Maybe it was because we both had strong, independent personalities. We seemed to argue all the time. I loved my mother; she was something else. She didn't even know how to cook. But, like I said, I loved her even if we weren't close. She had her mind about the way I should be doing things and I had mine. I was this way even when I was young. I guess you could say I was more like my mother than my father. Although I've got some of him in me, too.

My father settled first in Alton, Illinois, where me and my sister Dorothy were born, then moved the family to East St. Louis, on 14th and Broadway, where my father had his dental practice up over Daut's Drugstore. At first we lived upstairs behind his office, in the back.

Another thing I think about with East St. Louis is that it was there, back in 1917, that those crazy, sick white people killed all those black people in a race riot. See, St. Louis and East St. Louis were—

and still are—big packing-house towns, towns where they slaughter cows and pigs for grocery stores and supermarkets, restaurants and everything else. They ship the cows and pigs up from Texas or from wherever else it is that they come from and then they kill them and pack them up in St. Louis and East St. Louis. That's what the East St. Louis race riot in 1917 was supposed to be about: black workers replacing white workers in the packing houses. So, the white workers got mad and went on a rampage killing all them black people. That same year black men were fighting in World War I to help the United States save the world for democracy. They sent us to war to fight and die for them over there; killed us like nothing over here. And it's still like that today. Now, ain't that a bitch. Anyway, maybe some of remembering that is in my personality and comes out in the way I look at most white people. Not all, because there are some great white people. But the way they killed all them black people back then—just shot them down like they were out shooting pigs or stray dogs. Shot them in their houses, shot babies and women. Burned down houses with people in them and hung some black men from lampposts. Anyway, black people there who survived used to talk about it. When I was coming up in East St. Louis, black people I knew never forgot what sick white people had done to them back in 1917.

My brother Vernon was born the year the stock market crashed and all the rich white men started jumping out of them Wall Street windows. It was 1929. We had been living in East St. Louis for about two years. My older sister, Dorothy, was five. There was just three of us, Dorothy, Vernon, and me in the middle. We have always been close all our lives, my sister and my brother, even when we are arguing.

The neighborhood was very nice, with row houses, something like the ones they have in Philadelphia or Baltimore. It was a pretty little city. It's not like that anymore. But I remember it was that way back then. The neighborhood was also integrated, with Jews and Germans and Armenians and Greeks living all around us. Catercorner across the street from the house was Golden Rule's Grocery Store, owned by Jews. On one side was a filling station, with ambulances coming in all the time, sirens blasting, to fill up with gas. Next door was my father's best friend, Dr. John Eubanks, who was a physician. Dr. Eubanks was so light he almost looked white. His wife, Alma, or Josephine, I forget which, was almost white, too. She was a fine lady,

yellow, like Lena Horne, with curly black, shiny hair. My mother would send me over to their house to get something and his wife would be sitting there with her legs crossed, looking finer than a motherfucker. She had great legs and she didn't mind showing them either. As a matter of fact she looked good everywhere! Anyway, Uncle Johnny—that's what we called her husband, Dr. Eubanks—gave me my first trumpet.

Next to the drugstore under us, and before you got to Uncle Johnny's house, was a tavern owned by John Hoskins, a black man who everybody called Uncle Johnny Hoskins. He played saxophone in the back of his tavern. All the old-timers in the neighborhood went there to drink, talk, and listen to music. When I got older, I played there once or twice. Then there was a restaurant owned by a black man named Thigpen down the block. He sold good soul food; the place was real nice. His daughter Leticia and my sister, Dorothy, were good friends. Next to the restaurant was a German lady who owned a dry goods store. This was all on Broadway going toward the Mississippi River. And there was the Deluxe Theatre, a neighborhood movie theater on 15th going toward Bond Street, away from the river. All along 15th paralleling the river toward Bond were all kinds of stores and places like that owned by blacks, or Jews, or Germans, or Greeks, or Armenians, who had most of the cleaning places.

Over on 16th and Broadway this Greek family owned a fish market and made the best jack salmon sandwiches in East St. Louis. I was friends with the son of the guy who owned it. His name was Leo. Everytime I'd see him, as we got bigger, we'd wrestle. We were about six. But he died when the house he lived in burned down. I remember them bringing him out on a stretcher with his skin all peeling off. He was burnt like a hot dog when you fry it. It was grotesque, horrible-looking shit, man. Later, when somebody asked me about that and whether Leo said anything to me when they brought him out, I remember saying, "He didn't say, 'Hello, Miles, how you doing, let's wrestle,' or nothing like that." Anyway, that was shocking to me because we were both around the same age, though I think he was a little older. He was a nice little cat. I used to have a lot of fun with him.

The first school I went to was John Robinson. It was located on 15th and Bond. Dorothy, my sister, went one year at a Catholic school, then transferred over to John Robinson, too. I met my first best friend in the first grade there. His name was Millard Curtis, and

for years after we met we went almost everywhere together. We were the same age. I had other good friends in East St. Louis later, as I got more into music—musician friends—because Millard didn't play music. But I knew him the longest and we did so many things together that we were almost like brothers.

I'm pretty sure Millard came to my sixth birthday party. I remember this birthday party because my boys, guys I was hanging out with at the time, said to me, let's go hang out on the runway—the wooden scaffolding that runs across sign boards, them billboards that have them ads all pasted over them. We would go and climb up on them, sit on the scaffolds with our feet dangling down in the air and eat crackers and potted ham. Anyway, my boys told me we might as well go do this because later I was having a birthday party, so wasn't none of them going to school that day. See, it was supposed to be a surprise birthday party, but all of them knew it and told me all about what was happening. Anyway, I think I was six; I could have been seven. I remember this cute little girl named Velma Brooks being at the party. Her and a whole lot of other pretty little girls with short dresses, like miniskirts, on. I don't remember any little white girls and boys being there; there might have been some—maybe Leo before he died and his sister, I don't know—but I don't remember any being there.

The *real* reason I remember that party was because I got my first kiss from a little girl there. I kissed all the little girls, but I remember kissing Velma Brooks the longest. Man, was she cute. But then my sister, Dorothy, tried to ruin everything by running and telling my mother that I was in there kissing all over Velma Brooks. My sister did this to me all my life; she was always telling on me or my brother Vernon about something. After my mother told my father to go in there and stop me from kissing on Velma, he said, "If he was kissing on a boy like Junior Quinn, now that would be something to tell. But kissing on Velma Brooks ain't nothing to tell; that's what the boy supposed to be doing. So as long as it ain't Junior Quinn he's kissing on, then everything's cool."

My sister left in a huff with her mouth stuck out, saying over her shoulder, "Well, he's in there kissing on her and somebody ought to stop him before he give her a baby." Later, my mother told me that I had been a bad boy kissing all over Velma and that I shouldn't do that and if she had it to do all over again that she wouldn't have had no son like me who was so bad. Then she slapped the shit out of me.

I never forgot that day. At that age, I used to remember feeling that nobody liked me, because they always seemed to be whipping on me for something, but they never beat on my brother Vernon. I mean, his feet hardly ever touched the floor. He was like a little black doll for my sister and my mother and everybody else. They spoiled the shit out of him. Every time Dorothy had her friends over, they would bathe him, comb his hair, and dress him up just like he was a little baby girl doll.

Before I was into music I was really into sports—baseball, football, basketball, swimming, and boxing. I was a small, skinny kid, with the skinniest legs anybody ever had—my legs stayed skinny until today. But I loved sports so much I couldn't be intimidated or scared by people bigger than me. I ain't never been the scaredy type, never was. And if I liked someone I liked them, no matter what. But if I didn't like you, I didn't like you. I don't know why that is but that's the way I am. That's the way I've always been. For me, it's always been a vibe thing, a spiritual thing, whether I like someone or not. Like people say that I'm arrogant, but I've always been the way I am; I haven't changed that much.

Anyway, Millard and I would always be looking to find a game of football or baseball to play. We'd play a game called Indian ball, too, which was a kind of baseball game played with three or four guys to a team. If we weren't playing this, we were playing regular baseball on some vacant lot or baseball diamond. I played shortstop and could play my ass off. I could really field the ball and I was a pretty good hitter, though I didn't hit too many home runs because of my small size. But man, I loved baseball, and swimming and football and boxing.

I remember we used to play tackle football on the little plots of grass in between the sidewalk and the curb. This was on 14th Street in front of Tilford Brooks's house, who later got a Ph.D. in music and lives in St. Louis today. Then we'd go over and play in front of Millard's house. Man, we'd be getting tackled and falling on our heads and busting them wide open and bleeding like butchered hogs. Scarring up our legs and giving our mothers fits. But it was fun, man, it was a lot of fun.

I liked to swim, I loved to box. Even today those are the favorite sports I like to do. I would swim every chance I got then, and I swim every chance I get now. But boxing was and is my heart. I just love it. I can't explain why. Man, I would listen to all of Joe Louis's fights

like everybody else. We'd be all crowded around the radio waiting to hear the announcer describe Joe knocking some motherfucker out. And when he did, the whole goddamn black community of East St. Louis would go crazy, celebrate in the streets, drinking and dancing and making a lot of noise. But it was joyful noise. And they did the same thing—but not as loud—when Henry Armstrong won, because he was from across the river, from St. Louis, so that made him a black local, a hometown hero. But Joe Louis was the man.

Even though I loved boxing, I didn't get into fights when I was young. We would body punch, you know, hit each other in the chest, but nothing more serious than that. We were just like every other normal bunch of kids, growing up and having fun.

But there were gangs all around East St. Louis, bad gangs like the Termites. And they had some real bad ones over in St. Louis. East St. Louis was a rough place to grow up in, because you had a lot of cats, black and white, who didn't take no shit off nobody. I wasn't into fighting until I got to be a teenager. I wasn't into no gangs when I was growing up because I was into music so much. I even stopped playing sports because of music. Now, don't get me wrong, I used to fight with motherfuckers and shit, especially when they called me Buckwheat, because I was little, skinny and dark. I didn't like that name, so if anybody called me that they had to fight. I didn't like the name Buckwheat because I didn't like what the name meant, what it represented, that stupid *Our Gang* bullshit image white people had about black people. I knew *I* wasn't like that, that I came from people who were somebodies and that whenever anybody called me by that name they were trying to make fun of me. I knew even way back then that you've got to fight to protect who you are. So, I'd fight a lot. But I never was in no gangs. And I don't think I'm arrogant, I think I'm confident of myself. Know what *I* want, always have known what I wanted for as long as I can remember. I can't be intimidated. But back then, when I was growing up, everybody seemed to like me, even though I didn't talk too much; I still don't like to talk too much now.

It was even tough in the schools as well as out in the streets. They had an all-white school up the street from where I lived, Irving School, I think it was called, that was clean as a whistle. But couldn't no black kids go there; we had to go past it to get to our school. We had good teachers, like the Turner sisters at John Robinson where I went. They were the great-granddaughters of Nat Turner and they

were race-conscious just like he was. They taught us to have pride in ourselves. The teachers were good, but the black schools were all fucked up, with running toilets and things like that. They stunk like a motherfucker, man, like open cesspools in Africa where poor people live. I mean that shit made me not want to eat while I was going to elementary school, made me sick to my stomach then—and now whenever I think about it. They treated us black kids like we was just a bunch of cattle. Some people I went to school with say it wasn't this bad, but that's the way I remember it.

That's why I used to love to go to my grandfather's place in Arkansas. Down there out in the fields, man, you could walk with your shoes off and you wouldn't step into no pile of shit and get it all running and sticky and funky all over your feet, like in elementary school.

My mother was always—it seems now—putting me, my brother, and my sister on trains when we were real young to go visit my grandfather. She pinned name tags on us, gave us boxes of chicken, and put us on the train. And man, that chicken was gone soon as the train left the station. Then we'd starve all the way to wherever we were going. We always ate up the chicken too fast. Never did stop doing that. Never did learn to eat that chicken slowly. It was so good we couldn't wait. We'd be crying all the way to my grandfather's house, hungry and mad. Soon as we got to his place, I always wanted to stay. My grandfather gave me my first horse.

He had a fish farm down in Arkansas. We would catch fish all day long, buckets of them, tubs of them. Man, we ate fried fish all day long, and talk about good? Shit, that fish was a motherfucker. So, we'd run around all day. Ride horses. Go to bed early. Get up early. And do the same thing all over again. Man, it was fun being on my grandfather's farm. My grandfather was about six feet tall, brown-skinned with big eyes; looked something like my father, only taller. My grandmother's name was Ivy, and we called her Miss Ivy.

I remember getting into all kinds of things there you couldn't get into back in a town like East St. Louis. One time me and my Uncle Ed, my father's youngest brother, who was a year younger than me, went out one morning busting up nearly all of Grandpa's watermelons. We went from one watermelon patch to another and busted up every watermelon we could find. We took the heart, the center, out of them, ate some, but mostly left all the rest behind. I think I was ten and he was nine. Later, back in the house, we laid up laughing

like two motherfuckers. When Grandpa found out, he told me, “You can’t ride your horse for a week.” *That* cured me forever of busting up watermelons. Like my father, my grandfather was something else, didn’t take no shit off no one.

When I was about nine or ten I got me a paper route and started delivering papers on weekends to make some extra money. Not that I needed it, because my father by now was making a whole lot of money. I just wanted to make my own money and not have to ask my parents for anything. I’ve always been like that, always been independent, always wanted to make it on my own. I didn’t make much, maybe sixty-five cents a week, but it was mine. I could buy me some candy. I kept a pocketful of candy and a pocketful of marbles. I would trade candy for marbles and marbles for candy, soda, and chewing gum. Somehow I learned back then that you’ve got to make deals—and I don’t really remember who I learned it from, but it could have been from my father. In the middle of the Depression, I remember a lot of people were hungry and poor. But not my family, because my father was taking care of the money side.

I used to deliver papers to the best barbecue man in East St. Louis, old man Piggease. His place was located around 15th and Broadway, where they had all the rest of those businesses. Mr. Piggease had the best barbecue in town because he’d get the fresh meat from them packing houses in St. Louis and East St. Louis. His barbecue sauce was just outta sight. Man, that shit was so good I can taste it now. Nobody made barbecue sauce like Mr. Piggease, nobody, then or now. Nobody knew how he made his sauce, nobody knew what he put in it. He never told nobody. Then, he made this dip for the bread and that was a motherfucker, too! Plus fish sandwiches that were outta sight. His jack salmon sandwiches eventually got as good as my friend Leo’s father’s.

Mr. Piggease didn’t have nothing but a shack that he sold his barbecue out of. Only about ten people could get in there at any one time. He had his barbecue grill laid with bricks, made it himself. He also built the chimney and you could smell that charcoal smoke all over 15th Street. So everybody got themselves a sandwich or one of those bad small ends of barbecue before the day was out. The stuff was ready about six o’clock; he had it all cooked and done. I’d be there at six on the dot, giving him his paper, the *Chicago Defender* or the *Pittsburgh Courier*, both black newspapers. I’d give him both of those papers and he’d give me two pig snouts; pig snouts cost

fifteen cents apiece. But because Mr. Piggease liked me, thought I was smart, he'd let me slide for the dime and sometimes throw in an extra pig snout, or pig ear sandwich—that's where he got his nickname "Mr. Pig Ears"—or rib tip, whatever he felt like giving me that day. Sometimes he'd throw in a piece of sweet potato pie or candied yams and a drink of milk. So, he put that shit on paper plates, which would absorb all that fucking great flavor, in between slices of that funky, tasty bread he got from the bakery. Then, he'd wrap it all up in newspapers, yesterday's newspapers. Man, that was good. Ten cents for a jack salmon, fifteen cents for a snout. So I'd get my shit and sit down and talk to him for a while, with him behind the counter, dealing with everybody. I learned a lot from Mr. Piggease, but mainly he taught me—along with my father—to avoid unnecessary bullshit.

But I learned the most from my father. He was something else. He was a good-looking guy, about my height but a little bit on the plump side. As he got older, he began to lose his hair—which fucked with his head a little bit, in my opinion. He was a well-bred man, liked nice things, clothes and cars, just like my mother.

My father was pro-black, very pro-black. Back in those days someone like him was called a "race man." He was definitely not an "Uncle Tom." Some of his African classmates at Lincoln University, like Nkrumah of Ghana, became presidents of their countries, or high up in their country's governments. And so my father had these connections over in Africa. He liked Marcus Garvey more than the politics of the NAACP. He felt that Garvey was good for the black race, because he got all those black people together back in the 1920s. My father thought that was important and hated the way people like William Pickens of the NAACP thought and talked about Garvey. Pickens was a relative, an uncle, I think, of my mother's, and sometimes when he was passing through St. Louis he would call her up and come over. At the time I think he was high up in the NAACP, a secretary or something. Anyway, I remember him calling up to come by one time and when my mother told my father, he said, "Fuck William Pickens, because the son of a bitch never did like Marcus Garvey and Marcus Garvey didn't do anything other than get all those black people together to do something for themselves, and that's the most black people have ever been together in this country. And this cocksucker is opposed to him. So fuck the motherfucker, fuck him and all his stupid ideas."

My mother was different; she was all for the uplifting of the black race, but she saw it like somebody in the NAACP would see it. She thought that my father was too radical, especially later when he started getting into politics. If I got my sense of style and clothes from my mother, I think I got most of my attitude, my sense of who I was, my confidence and race pride from my father. Not that my mother wasn't a very proud person, she was. But most of it I picked up from my father, the way I looked at certain things.

My father didn't take no shit off nobody. I remember one time when this white man came by his office for something. He was the one who sold my father gold and stuff. Anyway, my father's office was real crowded when this white man comes in. Now, my father had a sign behind the reception desk that read, "Do Not Disturb," which he used when he was working on somebody's mouth. The sign was up, but the white man, after waiting about a half an hour, says to me—I was about fourteen or fifteen, working the receptionist's desk that day—"I can't wait any longer, I'm going on in." I say to him, "The sign says 'Do Not Disturb,' can't you see what the sign says?" The man just ignores me and goes on in to my father's office where he does the teeth. Now, the office is full of black people who *know* my father don't tolerate that kind of shit. So, they just kind of smile and lay back, to see what was going to happen. No sooner did the gold man get into my father's office when I hear my father say to him, "What the fuck are you doing in here? Can't you read, motherfucker? You dumb white motherfucker! Get the fuck on out of here!" The white man came on out of there quick, looking at me like I was crazy or something. So I told the motherfucker as he was going out the door, "I told you not to go in there, stupid." That was the first time I ever cussed a white man who was older than me.

Another time my father went looking for a white man who had chased me and called me a nigger. He went looking for him with a loaded shotgun. He didn't find him, but I hate to think of what would have happened if he had. My father was something. He was a strong motherfucker, but he was weird in the way he looked at things, too. Like he wouldn't cross certain bridges going from East St. Louis to St. Louis because he said he knew who built them, said they were thieves and that they probably didn't build the bridges very strong because they were likely cheating on the money and the building materials. He actually believed that them bridges would fall into the Mississippi one day. And to the day he died he believed this was so

and was always puzzled by the fact that they never did fall. He wasn't perfect. But he was a proud man and was probably way ahead of his time for a black man. Shit, he even liked to play golf way back then. I used to caddy for him over on the golf course in Forest Park in St. Louis.

He was one of the pillars of the black community in East St. Louis, because he was a doctor and got into politics. Him and Dr. Eubanks, his best friend, and a few other prominent black men. My father carried a lot of weight and influence in East St. Louis while I was growing up. So some of his importance was carried over to his kids and that's probably why a lot of people—black people—in East St. Louis treated my brother and sister and me as if we were kind of special. Now, they didn't kiss our asses or nothing like that. But they did treat us most times like we were different. They expected us to make something important of ourselves. I guess this kind of special treatment helped us have a positive attitude about ourselves. This kind of thing is important for black people, especially young black people—who mostly hear all kinds of negative things about themselves.

My father was a strict man when it came to discipline. He made us all aware that we had to keep our shit together. I think I got my bad temper from him. But he never, ever whipped me. The maddest he ever got with me was once when I was about nine or ten and he had bought me a bike, I think my first bike. So me being mischievous, I used to ride the bike off the stairs. We were still living on 15th and Broadway, and hadn't yet moved to the house at 17th and Kansas. Anyway, I rode my bike down these real high stairs and had a curtain rod in my mouth. I was going so fast that I couldn't stop and ran into the front door of the garage behind our house. The curtain rod jammed back into my mouth and busted it wide open. Well, when he found out what had happened he got so mad I thought he was going to kill me.

Another time that he got very mad with me was when I set fire to the shed, or the garage, and almost burned the house down. He didn't say nothing, but if looks could kill I would have been dead. Then later when I got older and thought I knew how to drive, I backed the car all the way across the street and ran it into a telephone pole. Some of my friends had been teaching me how to drive, but my father wouldn't let me practice, because I didn't have a license. And me being like I was—headstrong—I wanted to see if I

could drive. When he found out about my crashing the car, he didn't do nothing but shake his head.

The funniest thing I can remember happening when I did something wrong was when he took me over to St. Louis and bought me all of these clothes. I think I was about eleven or twelve and I was just getting into clothes. Anyway, it's Easter time and my father wants me and my sister and brother to look good in church. So he takes me over to St. Louis and buys me a pleated, gray double-breasted suit; some Thom McAn boots; a yellow, striped shirt; a hip beanie cap; and a leather change purse that he put thirty pennies in. Now I know I'm clean, right?

When we get back home my father goes upstairs to get something from his office. I got these thirty pennies burning a hole in the new change purse he just bought me. Now, you know I've just got to spend this money—hip and clean as I am, right? So I go into Daut's Drugstore and tell Mr. Dominic, the owner, to give me twenty-five cents' worth of them juicy chocolate soldiers—my favorite candy at that time. You could get three chocolate candy soldiers for a penny, so he sells me seventy-five of them. Now I got my big bag of candy, and I'm standing out in front of my father's office, sharp as a tack, and I'm eating the candy soldiers faster than nobody's business. I ate so many of them I got sick and just started spitting them out. My sister, Dorothy, sees me and thinks I'm spitting up blood, and runs and tells my father. So he comes downstairs and says, "Dewey, what are you doing? This is my place of business. People come to see me here and they'll think that I done killed somebody, think all this chocolate is dried-up blood, so get upstairs."

Another time around Easter, the next year, I think it was, my father bought me an outfit to go to church, a blue suit with short pants and socks. Along the way while me and my sister was going there, I saw some of my boys playing in the old factory house. They asked me to join them and I told my sister that I'd catch up with her. I went on in that factory house and all of a sudden it's so dark in there I can't see. I trip, fall, and I'm crawling around. I fall into this puddle of dirty water with my good new clothes on. And it's Easter. You know how I felt. So, I didn't go to church. I just went back home and my father didn't do anything. But he did tell me that if I so much as "ever stumble again like that, and you're not supposed to stumble, I'm going to kick your motherfucking ass." So that stopped me from doing really silly shit like that again. He said, "That could have been

acid or anything you fell in. You could have been dead, going in a strange dark place like that. So don't you ever do it again." And I didn't.

Because it wasn't so much the clothes he was concerned about. It didn't bother him that I ruined them. It was *me* he was worried about. I never forgot that, that he was only concerned about me. So we always got along well. He was always behind me 100 percent, whatever I wanted to do, and I believe that his confidence in me made me have confidence in myself.

But my mother would whip 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.

My mother and father never did get along well. They saw most things through different eyes. They had been at each other's throats since I was a little kid. The only thing I ever saw that really connected them up was later when I got my bad heroin habit. When that happened, they seemed to forget their differences and pulled together to try to save me. Other than that time, they always seemed to me to be fighting like cats and dogs.

I remember my mother picking up things and throwing them at my father and saying all kinds of off-the-wall, nasty things to him. Sometimes he would get so mad that he'd also pick up something and throw it at her, whatever he could get his hands on—a radio, the dinner bell, anything. And she'd be screaming, "You're trying to kill me, Dewey!" I remember one time after an argument my father had gone outside to cool himself out. When he came back my mother wouldn't open the door and let him back in—he had forgotten his key. He was standing out there screaming for her to open the door, and she wouldn't. It was one of those glass doors that you could see through. He got so mad with her he punched her right in the mouth through the glass. He knocked a couple of teeth right out of her

mouth. They were best apart, but they gave each other grief until they finally got divorced.

I think part of their problem was that they had different temperaments. But it wasn't only that. They developed a typical doctor-wife relationship in that he was seldom ever at home. It didn't bother us kids too much because we were always doing something. But I think it bothered her a lot. And then when he got into politics he was there even less. Plus, they always seemed to be arguing about money, even though my father was considered wealthy. At least, he was for a black man.

I remember when he ran for State Representative of Illinois. He was running because he wanted to put a fire department out where he had his farm in Millstadt. Some white people wanted to give him money not to run, but he ran anyway and lost. My mother got on him for not taking the money. She said that they could have used that money to go on a vacation or something. Plus, she was mad at him later for losing most of his fortune gambling; my father lost over a million dollars gambling like he did. And she never did like all that radical political shit my father was into. But after they broke up she told me later that if she had it to do all over again, she would have treated my father differently. But by then, it was way too late.

None of our parents' problems seemed to affect the fun that me, my sister, and my brother were having, although looking back I guess it really did. It had to affect us somehow, although I don't really know how. I just thought it was a drag to watch them fighting all the time. Like I said, my mother and I didn't get along too well and so I guess I blamed her for all the problems. I know my father's sister, Corrine, blamed her; she never did like my mother.

My Aunt Corrine had a lot of money and shit, but everybody thought she was weirder than a motherfucker. I did too. But they were close, my father and his sister. And even though she was against my father marrying my mother, people said that when they got married my aunt said, "Lord, help that poor woman. Because she don't know the trouble she's getting into."

Aunt Corrine was a doctor of metaphysics or something like that. She had her office right next to my father's. There was a sign out in front saying "Dr. Corrine, Reader, Healer," with an open palm facing the viewer. She told people's fortunes. She'd be in her office lighting all them candles and shit and smoking them cigarettes. Man, she'd be up in her office behind all those clouds of smoke, talking weird

shit. People were scared of her; some thought she was a witch, or some kind of voodoo queen. She liked me. But she must have thought that *I* was weird, because as soon as I walked in her office she started lighting those candles and smoking cigarettes. Ain't that a bitch; she thought *I* was weird.

All of us kids—my brother and my sister and me—liked artistic things when we were young, especially Vernon and me, but Dorothy, too. When I was growing up—before I really got into music—me and Dorothy and Vernon used to have our own talent shows. We were still living on 15th and Broadway when we started. I think I was about nine or ten. Anyway, I was just beginning to play trumpet, just getting into it. As I said, Uncle Johnny had given it to me. So, I would play trumpet—as much as I could play back then—and Dorothy would play piano. Vernon would dance. We had a lot of fun. Dorothy could play a few church songs. But other than that, she couldn't play. Mostly we would do little skits—funny shit, you know—talent shows with me being the judge. Man, I was hard on them. Vernon could always sing, draw, and dance. So, he'd be singing and Dorothy would be dancing. By this time my mother was sending her to dancing school. Anyway, that's the kind of shit we was doing. But as I got older, I got more serious, especially about my playing music.

The first time I really paid attention to music was when I used to listen to a radio show called "Harlem Rhythms." I was about seven or eight. The show used to come on at fifteen minutes to nine every day, so I was late to school a lot because I was listening to that program. But I *had* to hear that show, man, had to. Most of the time they played black bands, but sometimes when they had a white band on I would cut it off, unless the musician was Harry James or Bobby Hackett. But that program was really great. It had all them great black bands on there and I remember being fascinated by hearing the records of Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Lunceford, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and a whole bunch of other bad motherfuckers on that program. Then when I was nine or ten I started taking some private music lessons.

But before the lessons, I also remember how the music used to sound down there in Arkansas, when I was visiting my grandfather, especially at the Saturday night church. Man, that shit was a motherfucker. I guess I was about six or seven. We'd be walking on these dark country roads at night and all of a sudden this music would seem to come out of nowhere, out of them spooky-looking trees that

everybody said ghosts lived in. Anyway, we'd be on the side of the road—whoever I was with, one of my uncles or my cousin James—and I remember somebody would be playing a guitar the way B. B. King plays. And I remember a man and a woman singing and talking about getting *down!* Shit, that music was something, especially that woman singing. But I think that kind of stuff stayed with me, you know what I mean? That *kind* of sound in music, that blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing, that southern, midwestern, rural sound and rhythm. I think it started getting into my blood on them spook-filled Arkansas back-roads after dark when the owls came out hooting. So when I started taking music lessons I might have already had some idea of what I wanted my music to sound like.

Music is a funny thing when you really come to think about it. Because it's hard to pinpoint where it all began for me. But I think some of it had to have started on that Arkansas road and some on that "Harlem Rhythms" radio show. When I got into music I went all the way into music; I didn't have no time after that for nothing else.

Chapter 2

by the time I was twelve, music had become the most important thing in my life. I probably didn't realize how important it would become, but looking back, I can see just how important it was. I still played baseball and football, still hung out with my friends like Millard Curtis and Darnell Moore. But I was seriously taking trumpet lessons and was really into my horn. I remember going to Boy Scout camp near Waterloo, Illinois, when I was about twelve or thirteen. It was Camp Vanderverter, and Mr. Mays, the Head Scoutmaster, knew that I played trumpet. He gave me the job of playing taps and reveille. I remember how proud I was for him to ask me, picking me out from everyone. So I guess by then I was starting to play all right.

But I really started to stretch on out as a player after I left Attucks Junior High and went to Lincoln High School. My first great teacher, Elwood Buchanan, was at Lincoln. Lincoln was both a junior and senior high school; I went there for junior high and stayed all the way to graduation. When I started playing in the band I was younger than everybody else. After my father, Mr. Buchanan was the biggest influence on my life up until then. He was definitely the person who took me all the way into music at that time. I knew I wanted to become a musician. That was all I wanted to be.

Mr. Buchanan was one of my father's patients and drinking buddies. My father told him how interested I was in music and in playing

trumpet, specifically. So he said he would give me trumpet lessons and that was that. I was going to Attucks when I first started taking lessons from Mr. Buchanan. Later, after I started going to Lincoln High School, he still sort of looked after me to keep me on the right track.

On my thirteenth birthday, my father bought me a new trumpet. My mother wanted me to have a violin, but my father overruled her. This caused a big argument between them, but she soon got over it. But Mr. Buchanan was the reason I got a new trumpet, because he knew how bad I wanted to play.

It was about that time that I first started having serious disagreements with my mother. Up until then, it had been over small things. But it just kind of went downhill. I don't really know what her problem was. But I think it had something to do with her not talking real straight to me. She was still trying to treat me like I was a little baby, the way she was treating my brother, Vernon. I think this had something to do with him becoming a homosexual. The women—my mother, my sister, and my grandmother—always treated Vernon like a girl. So, I wasn't having none of that shit from them. It was a matter of talking straight to me or not talking to me at all. My father told my mother to leave me alone when we started having problems. And she did most of the time, but we really got into some bad arguments. Despite all that, my mother did buy me two records by Duke Ellington and Art Tatum, though. I used to listen to them all the time and that helped me later in understanding jazz.

Because Mr. Buchanan had already given me trumpet lessons at Attucks before I came to Lincoln, I was advanced on the instrument. I was already playing pretty good. Then in high school I also started studying with a great German trumpet teacher named Gustav who lived over in St. Louis and played first trumpet with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He was a bad motherfucker. He also made great trumpet mouthpieces, and I use one of his design even today.

At Lincoln High, the band under Mr. Buchanan's direction was a motherfucker. We had a hell of a cornet and trumpet section. It was me, Ralaigh McDaniels, Red Bonner, Duck McWaters, and Frank Gully—who played first trumpet and was a bad motherfucker. He was about three years older than I was. Because I was the smallest and youngest person in the band, some of the kids would pick on me. But I was mischievous, too, playing little pranks on people and shit—throwing spitballs and hitting people upside the head when they

weren't looking. You know, little kid, teenage shit, wasn't none of it serious.

Everybody always seemed to like my tone, which I kind of got from the way Mr. Buchanan played at the time. This was on cornet. As a matter of fact, Red and Frank and everybody else who was playing cornet or trumpet in the band used to pass around Mr. Buchanan's instrument; I think I was the only one in the cornet section who had his own instrument. But even though they were all older than me and I had a lot to learn, they all encouraged me, liked the way I sounded, the way I approached playing. They always used to tell me I had a lot of imagination on the instrument.

Mr. Buchanan kept us playing strictly marches and shit like that. Overtures, real good background music, John Philip Sousa marches. He didn't let us play no jazz shit while he was around, but when he would leave the band room for a while we would try to get into some jazz. One of the hippest things Mr. Buchanan taught me was not to play with vibrato in my tone. At first, I used to like to play with vibrato because of the way most of the other trumpet players played the instrument. One day while I was playing in that style, with all this vibrato, Mr. Buchanan stopped the band and told me, "Look here, Miles. Don't come around here with that Harry James stuff, playing with all that vibrato. Stop shaking all those notes and trembling them, because you gonna be shaking enough when you get old. Play straight, develop your own style, because you can do it. You got enough talent to be your own trumpet man."

Man, I never forgot that. But at the time, he hurt and embarrassed me. I just loved the way Harry James played. But after that I started to forget James and found out that Mr. Buchanan was right. At least, he was right for me.

By the time I was in high school I started getting really serious about my clothes. I started caring about the way I looked, trying to look hip and everything, because about this time girls started paying attention to me—although at age fourteen I wasn't really into them yet. So I started dressing real hip, taking a lot of time about selecting the clothes I bought and wore to school. Me and a couple of my friends—who were also into clothes—started comparing notes on what was hip and what wasn't. I liked the dress style of Fred Astaire and Cary Grant back then, so I created a kind of hip, quasi-black English look: Brooks Brothers suits, butcher boy shoes, high top pants, shirts with high tab collars that were so stiff with starch that I could hardly move my neck.

One of the most important things that happened for me in high school—besides studying under Mr. Buchanan—was when one time the band went to play in Carbondale, Illinois, and I met Clark Terry, the trumpet player. He became my idol on the instrument. He was older than me and was a drinking buddy of Mr. Buchanan. Anyway, we went down there to Carbondale to play and I saw this dude and walked right up to him and asked him if he was a trumpet player. He turned and asked me how I knew he was a trumpet player. I told him I could tell by his embouchure. I had on my school band uniform and Clark had on this hip coat and this bad, beautiful scarf around his neck. He was wearing hip butcher boy shoes and a bad hat cocked ace-deuce. I told him I could also tell he was a trumpet player by the hip shit he was wearing.

He kind of smiled at me and said something that I have forgotten. Then, when I asked him some things about playing trumpet, he sort of shined on me by telling me that he didn't want to "talk about no trumpet with all them pretty girls bouncing around out there." Clark was really into the girls at that time, and I wasn't. So what he said to me really hurt me. The next time we met it was a different story altogether. But I never forgot that first time me and Clark met, how hip he was. I decided then I was going to be that hip, even hipper, when I got my shit together.

I started hanging out with my friend Bobby Danzig. Bobby was about the same age as me and was a hell of a trumpet player. We used to go around listening to music and sitting in wherever we could. We went everywhere together, we were both into clothes, even thought a lot alike. But he was more outspoken than me. He would tell a motherfucker off in a minute. Man, we'd go to a club and listen to a band and if the horn player was standing wrong, or the drummer had his drums set up wrong, Bobby would say, "Let's get out of here, man, because this motherfucker can't play. Look at how the drummer done set up his drums, man; they're wrong. And look at how that trumpet player's standing. His posture's all fucked up. Now you *know* that motherfucker can't play standing up there on the bandstand like that! So let's get out of here!"

Man, Bobby Danzig was something else. He was a great trumpet player and he was even a greater pickpocket. He'd get on one of them trolleys that was running in St. Louis and by the time it had reached the end of the line, Bobby would have himself \$300, or more on a great day. I met Bobby when I was sixteen and I think he was

the same age. We joined the union together and we'd go everywhere together. Bobby was my first musical best friend, my running partner. Like I said, it was him who went with me to the Riviera when I went to audition for the Billy Eckstine band, and he could play trumpet like a motherfucker. I later became good friends with Clark Terry, but Clark was about six years older than I was and so we were into different head sets. But Bobby was right there in the things we liked to do together. Except I was never into picking pockets like he was. He was the best at it I have ever seen.

Another great trumpet player was Levi Maddison. My teacher Gustav used to rave about him. Levi was his star pupil, and man, he was a motherfucker. Back in those days, around 1940, St. Louis was a great city for trumpet players and Levi was one of the baddest, if not *the* baddest. But Levi was a crazy motherfucker who went around laughing to himself all the time. And once he started laughing at something he couldn't stop. A lot of people said he was laughing all the time because he was despondent. I don't know *what* Levi was despondent over, but I know he could sure play the trumpet. I used to love to watch him. His trumpet was an extension of him. But all of the trumpet players from St. Louis at that time played like that—Harold “Shorty” Baker, Clark Terry, and myself. We all played like that, had what I used to call “that St. Louis thing.”

Levi would always be smiling with that crazy look in his eyes. That distant thing. He was out and he was always being confined in the nuthouse for a few days. He didn't never hurt nobody, he wasn't violent or anything like that. But I guess people back in those days didn't want to take no chances. Later, after I left St. Louis to live in New York, every time I would come back home for a visit I would go and see Levi. Finding him was sometimes difficult. When I found him, though, I would always ask him to put the trumpet to his mouth just because I loved the way he held it. And he would, with a big smile on his face.

Then once when I came back I couldn't find him. They said he started laughing one day and couldn't stop. So they took him to the sanatorium and he never came out again. Or, at least, nobody ever saw him again. But the thing Levi used to do on trumpet was just too bad, man, he was a hell of a musician. When he picked up the horn you would hear all this tone and brilliance, you know? Nobody else had it and I have yet to hear a tone like that. It's almost like mine, but it was rounder—sort of in between Freddie Webster's and mine.

And Levi had that air about him when he picked up his horn that you were going to hear something you'd never heard before in your life. Only a few people had that attitude. Dizzy had it and I think I have it. But Levi was the man. He was a motherfucker. If he hadn't gone crazy and went to the nuthouse, people would have been talking about him today.

Gustav would tell *me* I was the worst trumpet player in the world. But later, when Dizzy had a hole in his lip that wouldn't heal and so he went to see Gustav about changing mouthpieces, he said Gus told him that I was his best pupil. All I know is that Gus never told me that to my face.

Maybe Gus thought that by telling me I was his worst student that I would play harder. Maybe he thought that was the way to get the best out of me. I don't know. But it didn't bother me. As long as he taught me that half an hour for the \$2.50 I paid him, he could say anything he wanted. Gus was a technician. He could run chromatic scales about twelve times in one breath. He was something. But by the time I was going to him for lessons I already had some confidence in my playing. I knew I wanted to be a musician and so everything I did was leaning toward that.

While I was in high school I started hanging out with a piano player named Emmanuel St. Claire "Duke" Brooks. (His nephew, Richard Brooks, an all-American football player, is now the principal of Miles Davis Elementary School.) He got his nickname "Duke" because he knew and could play all of Duke Ellington's music. He used to play with the bassist Jimmy Blanton at a place across the street from where I lived then called the Red Inn. Duke Brooks was two or three years older than me, but he had a big influence on me because he was into the new music that was happening at the time.

Duke Brooks was a hell of a piano player. Man, the motherfucker played like Art Tatum. He used to teach me chords and shit. He lived in East St. Louis and had a room by himself in his parents' house, off the porch. I'd go over to his house and listen to him at lunchtime when I was going to Lincoln High School. He lived about two or three blocks from school. He smoked a lot of reefer and I think he was the first person I knew who did that. I never did it with him, though. I never did like reefer too much. But then, at that time, I wasn't doing nothing, not even drinking.

Duke eventually got killed when he was hoboing a ride on a train somewhere in Pennsylvania. He was in one of those cars filled with

gravel and sand. I heard the shit fell on him and he suffocated. I think this was in 1945. I still miss him and think about him even up until today. He was a hell of a musician and if he hadn't gotten killed, he would have been a motherfucker on the music scene.

I was starting to play the running trumpet style that I was hearing around St. Louis. Me and Duke and a drummer named Nick Haywood—who had a hump in his back—had a little group together. We used to try to play like the black guys who played in Benny Goodman's band. Benny had a black piano player named Teddy Wilson. But Duke played hipper than Teddy Wilson. Duke played piano then like Nat "King" Cole. He was just that slick, Duke was.

The only new records we had during this time were mostly the records they took out of jukeboxes and sold you for a nickel. And if you didn't have money to buy it then you'd just have to go and cop it by listening to the jukebox. I was playing by ear back then. Anyway, our little group would play tunes like "Airmail Special." We'd play it with those hip accents. Duke was such a motherfucker on the piano that it made me play in the running style he had.

About this time I was starting to have a little reputation around East St. Louis as an up-and-coming trumpet player. People—musicians—thought I could play, but I wasn't vain enough to admit it out loud. But the way I was beginning to think to myself was that I could play as good as any motherfucker walking. I probably thought I could play better. Because when it came to reading music and remembering the parts, I had a photographic memory. I didn't forget anything. I was also improving as a soloist from working with Mr. Buchanan and being around guys like Duke Brooks and Levi Maddison. So, a lot of things were starting to fall into place. Some of the best musicians around East St. Louis wanted me to play with them. I was beginning to think I was the hippest thing around.

Maybe one of the reasons I didn't say it out loud was because Mr. Buchanan was still on my back to get better at Lincoln High. Although he leaned toward me in the band after Frank Gully graduated—I was playing most of the first parts—he still came down on me hard sometimes. He'd say my sound was too small or he'd tell me he couldn't hear me sometimes. But he was always like that—hard on you, especially if he thought you could play. Once when I was younger and everybody was thinking I was going to be a dentist, he had told my father, "Doc, Miles ain't gonna be no dentist. He's gonna be a musician." So he'd already seen something in me even back

then. He told me later that it was my curiosity, wanting to know so much about music, that was my edge. That was carrying me forward all the time.

Duke Brooks and Nick Haywood, some other guys, and me used to play at a place called Huff's Beer Garden. Frank Gully used to play there with us sometimes. We'd make some pocket change on Saturdays. But it wasn't nothing to call home about. We'd just make the gigs for the fun of it. We played all kinds of little gigs in East St. Louis: social clubs, church affairs, any place we could play. Sometimes we'd make as much as six dollars a night. We used to practice in my basement too. Man, did we play loud. I remember one time my father came by Huff's to hear us play. When he told me about it the next day, he said all he could hear was the drums. Anyway, we were trying to play all of Harry James's tunes. But after a while, I quit the band, because outside of Duke's playing there wasn't nothing happening for me in it.

Thinking about nothing but music cut me out of the gang wars and shit, and limited the time for playing sports. I was practicing every chance I got—fucking around trying to learn how to play piano, too. I was learning how to improvise and really getting deep into jazz. I wanted to be able to play the things I heard Harry James playing. So I quickly got tired of listening to motherfuckers who couldn't play hip shit. Some of the guys who weren't advanced in music started to laugh at me for trying to play the newer music. But I didn't give a fuck about what they were talking about. I *knew* that I was on the right track.

About the time I was sixteen I had a chance to play some gigs on the road—Belleville, Illinois, places like that. My mother said I could play on weekends. This was with a guy named Pickett. We used to play shit like "Intermezzo," "Honeysuckle Rose," and "Body and Soul." I would just play the melodies because nothing else hip was happening. We were making a little pocket change. But I was learning all the time. Pickett played that roadhouse music, or what some call honky-tonk. You know. That shit that they play in black "bucket of blood" clubs. "Bucket of blood" refers to the fights that were likely to jump off in those clubs. But after a while I got tired of asking when I was going to be able to get off—play the hip shit I was getting into. It wasn't long before I quit Pickett's band.

By the time I was fifteen or sixteen, I had learned how to play chromatic scales, too. When I started playing that shit everybody

around Lincoln stopped and asked me what I was doing. They started looking at me differently after that. Also, me and Duke were beginning to catch jam sessions in Brooklyn, Illinois—just up the road from East St. Louis. One of my father's best friends was the mayor of Brooklyn, so he let me play even though I was too young to be going into clubs. A lot of really fine musicians played those riverboats on the Mississippi from New Orleans to St. Louis. They were always sitting in up in those all-night Brooklyn nightspots. Man, them places was always jumping, especially on weekends.

East St. Louis and St. Louis were country towns full of country people. Both towns are real square, especially the white people from around there—*really* country, and racist to the bone. Black people from around East St. Louis and St. Louis were country, too, but kind of hip in their countryness. It was a hip place. A lot of people from that area had a whole lot of style back in those days—still probably do. Black people from that area of the country are kind of different from black people in other places. And I think when I was growing up it was because of the people—especially black musicians—moving back and forth from New Orleans. St. Louis is close to Chicago and Kansas City, as well. So people would bring the different kinds of styles of those places back to East St. Louis.

There was a hipness in the black people then. After St. Louis closed down at night, everybody over there came to Brooklyn to listen to the music and party all night long. People in East St. Louis and St. Louis worked their asses off in them packing and slaughterhouses. So you know they was mad when they took off work. They didn't want to hear no dumb shit off nobody, and would kill a motherfucker quick who brought them some stupid shit. That's why they were serious about their partying and listening to music. That's why I loved playing up in Brooklyn. People were really into listening to what you were playing. If you weren't playing anything, the people in Brooklyn would let you know it quick. I've always liked honesty and can't stand people being any other way.

About this time I was starting to make a little money, not much. My teachers at Lincoln knew that I was serious about being a musician. Some of them heard me up in Brooklyn on weekends or at other jam sessions. But I made it a point to do real good in my studies, because if I didn't, I knew my mother and father weren't going to let me play. So I studied harder.

When I was sixteen, I met Irene Birth, who was going to Lincoln

with me. She had real pretty feet. I was always a sucker for pretty little feet. She was about five feet six inches tall and weighed about 103 pounds. A slender woman, but a real nice figure—reminded me of a dancer's body. She was half yellow-looking in color. You know, kind of light-skinned, but half-assed light skin. Outside of her being pretty and hip, with a good body, her feet is what really attracted me. She was a little older than I was—I think she was born May 12, 1923—and a couple of grades ahead of me. But she liked me and I liked her and she was the first real girlfriend that I had.

She lived up on Goose Hill, which is a part of East St. Louis that is over by the packing houses and the pens where they used to keep the cows and pigs after they unloaded them from the trains. The neighborhood was poor and black. There was always a real bad smell in the air, of burnt meat and hair. The smell of manure and cow shit mingled with this smell of death. What a weird, funky smell. Anyway, it was a long distance from where I lived, but I used to walk over there to see her. Sometimes alone and sometimes with my friend Millard Curtis, who was by then a star football and basketball player; I think he was captain of the football team.

I was really into Irene. I got my first orgasm with her. I remember the first time I bust my nuts I thought I had to pee and jumped up and ran to the bathroom. I had had a wet dream before, when I thought I had rolled over on an egg and burst it. But, man, I had never experienced nothing like that first nut.

Irene and I used to take the trolley car across the bridge over the Mississippi River to St. Louis on weekends. We'd go all the way out to Sarah and Finney—which was the richest black neighborhood in St. Louis back then—to the Comet Theatre, the best black movie house in town. The whole trip cost about forty cents for both of us. I used to carry my horn every place we went, because I figured I might get a chance to play. Always wanted to be ready if the opportunity presented itself, and sometimes it did.

Irene used to dance in one of those groups they had around East St. Louis. She could really dance. I never was a good dancer. But I could dance with Irene for some reason; she seemed to be able to pull the shit out of me and not make me stumble all over the place and look like a fool. She actually made me look like I knew what I was doing. But Irene was one of the only girls—besides my sister, Dorothy—I could dance with. I didn't like to dance because I was too shy back then.

Irene grew up with her mother, who was a good woman, strong and fine like Irene. Her father, Fred Birth, was a numbers writer. He was a gambler, a real tall dude. She had a younger half-brother named Freddie Birth who I used to give trumpet lessons to. He was a pretty good player, but I was hard on him, like Mr. Buchanan was hard on me. After I left Lincoln, Freddie played first trumpet in the school band. He is a school principal back in East St. Louis today. Freddie Jr. grew up to be a very nice and hip dude.

Irene also had a little brother named William, about five or six years old, I think, who I liked very much. William was a real cute little boy, with curly hair, but thin and always coughing. He had gotten real sick with pneumonia, or something like that. So anyway, this doctor came over to see William. Because Irene knew that I had thought of being a doctor—following in my father's footsteps, but on the medical, not dental side (something few people knew about me)—she called me to watch what he did. The doctor came and took one look at William and flat out said, without any emotion, that there was nothing he could do. He said that William was going to be dead before morning. Man, that shit made me so fucking mad. You know, for a long time I couldn't understand how he could say something like that and be so cold about it. It just turned my stomach, man. William did die early the next day in his mother's arms at home without the doctor ever taking him to the hospital, and that shit hurt me so bad.

After this happened, I went to my father and asked him how a doctor could come to see William and tell his family that he was going to be dead before morning and not do nothing about it. He's a doctor, ain't he? Is it that they don't have no money, or what? So my father, knowing that I was asking these questions because of my interest in medicine, said, "If you go to some doctors with a broken arm, they will just cut it off instead of setting it because it might be real hard for them to set it. It might take too much effort. So it's easier for them to cut it off. He's one of them kind of doctors, Miles. There are plenty of them in the world. Those kinds of people, Miles, are only in medicine for the prestige and money that it brings them. They don't love it like I do, or like some of my friends do. You don't go see him if you're really sick. The only people that go to see him are poor black people. Those doctors and he don't care nothing about them. That's why he was so cold to William and his family. He don't care nothing about them, do you understand?"