

Oddities:

Sir-ly Observations

Don't get me wrong. I avidly read Robin Hood as a kid. And I was mesmerized in 1952 when I saw Robert Taylor and Liz Taylor in *Ivanhoe*. My dad used to take me to the Detroit Institute of Art and my favorite thing to see was the Great Hall with all those gleaming suits of armor. I would study the complex curves carefully and wonder how ancient blacksmiths did it, and what happened if a knight had downed too many ales before putting on that heavy metal suit. I never had a problem with the idea of calling a knight "Sir": Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawain, Sir Galahad. BUT, I always had a problem with latter day knighthood, titles based on achievement. Sir Elton John, Sir Paul McCartney, Sir Roger Moore, Sir Andre Previn. I always wondered how "politically correct" you had to be to receive the title. And, what were the qualifications of those standing in judgment? TRUE, there's something noble about being honored for a lifetime of achievement. But, I wondered, did the honoree take it that seriously and change all his stationary, and monogrammed shirts? For some I'm sure, it went to their head. I guess the trouble I have is with the whole notion of royalty and their assumption that they have the ability, authority to decide who is superior among us (and the fact that raw edged artists rarely seem to get the old "Sir"...I can't recall any Sir Charlie Parker. Come to think of it, I can't think of any jazz artists other than Previn and the questions is: would he have gotten it had he not been a noted classical musician as well?).

My roots must go back to Oliver Cromwell as my jaundiced view is that an eccentric, barely useful group of folks, wealthy by accident of birth, most of whom have no useful skills (or need for them), living off their subjects' wealth, should have no right to decision making other than where to go fox hunting and horseback riding. I know, I'm merely sore that I didn't get an invitation to the Royal Wedding. The other use of "sir" bothers me too. I do appreciate the politeness when a youngster or an employee serving the public calls me "sir". But, when an adult who knows my name does it, I get suspicious. As an example, I had a student a few years ago who was from Canada. Though studying to be an architect, his real love was criminal justice. He was a volunteer with the Ontario Provincial Police on weekends. He would always call me "sir" in a forthright manner so that I felt for an instant like his Police Chief. When all was said and done, he was buffing me up to let him slide on some late projects, late because he was spending his weekends patrolling the 401.

All this flashed through my mind the other day, when, quite by accident, I came across the grave of Miles Davis. OK, it was just a *picture* of his tombstone. The tombstone, located in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York, appears to be about the size of a Volkswagen; it's dark, shiny granite; it has a few measures of "Solar" carved along the bottom and a trumpet carved in relief to the right of that. Above all this is: *In Memory, Sir Miles Davis*. What happened to Miles Dewey Davis III, I thought? I'm sure his parents would have preferred that. I was further floored by the fact that I had no idea he held this title. He certainly wasn't bragging about it. Checking his biography I learned that he was honored with the title by the Roman Catholic Sovereign Military Order of Malta in 1988. The order goes back to the early Crusades and after losing in that

campaign, they eventually ended up in Spain which gave them the island of Malta. Miles, when interviewed was fairly blasé about it, saying the only request associated with the honor was that he not be prejudiced against any person and that he continue to do good things culturally. He never seemed to use the title on the covers of any of his recordings. An interview in the New York Times quotes Miles' lawyer, Peter Shukat, saying that Miles' family wanted the same people who did Duke Ellington's funeral to do his. As it turns out he is kitty corner to the Duke. He holds other honors as well. An honorary PhD from the New England Conservatory of Music and he's a member of the Rock Hall of Fame (2006). Despite his sizable ego, a part of me wondered: would Miles have wanted to be known forever by the rather pompous title, Sir Miles Davis? I can't prove it, but I think he would have been more pragmatic and, to appropriately suit his vanity, would have preferred a list of actual accomplishments, which were huge (and this tombstone has the room). The cynic in me thinks that handlers and family thought adding the "Sir" would be a good way to confer "class" for eternity. Fortunately, for Miles and any other jazz player, the recorded history will be the final arbiter of artistic worth. For a serious musician, that's the true class.

He's not the only artist to have this handle. Detroit's Sir Roland Hanna was given the title in 1970 by William Tubman, the 19th President of Liberia. How this came to be for a jazz pianist from Detroit is not immediately clear and would be a mystery well worth uncovering. It does make one wonder; can just any government or organization bestow the title Sir? Whatever the case, Hanna is a criminally underrated swinger who could use any accolades that came way, and he seems to have used the title on the cover of his record albums. Jazz's last "knight" would be pianist, organist and arranger Sir Charles Thompson. Thompson is still alive and will be 93, March 21! He got his title from Lester Young who was The President, but as far as I know had no "royal" credentials.

Interestingly, if you had to assemble a royal circle of jazz performers you could put together a group consisting of: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, King Pleasure, Baron Mingus, Lady Day, Earl Bostic, Prince Lasha, hip, jazz club comedian, Lord Buckley and our 3 "Sirs".

Doctoring our Image

I was visiting with an old friend about a year ago and he started talking about his son. He said that he had a PhD in microbiology. "Wow", I said, "he's still in his 20's". He got a glum look and said, "I wish he had gotten the *real* doctor's degree". "George, you're being too hard on him", I said. But I knew what he meant. Often people get into the academic world and keep studying and studying and never make contact with the real world. We need people who want to live among the molecules and atoms and come-up with the next dramatic cure. But George, being a realist and very successful businessman was fearful his son would go into the lab and never come out... or never get the compensation to really make it worth it. Along the same line of thinking, I teach with a woman who has a PhD in architecture. Practicing architects whom I know like to have fun with this idea of a doctorate in architecture. Architecture is a profession that begs to be practiced; it's a pragmatic art. Creating and building buildings at its heart means

“doing”, not “studying”. Sure, there is merit to studying the emotional impression a Gothic ceiling makes on your being and writing about it, but that’s “architectural history”. The biggest put-down is to say, “That person has never designed a building. Wouldn’t know how to provide the detail in order for a building to stand-up, keep out the elements and meet code”.

On the other hand, sometimes things work in reverse and a person will go from the highly theoretical to the pragmatic. I had a student a few years ago who has a PhD in Animal Science. His thesis was on the digestive process of cows. He knows everything that happens to grass and alfalfa inside of a cow from stem to stern. He was working at a lab at Wayne State University, working on the biochemistry of diabetes and trying to find better treatments. But he was bored and unhappy. As a youth growing up in The Thumb on a farm he was fascinated by all the out buildings and had helped create a few. He wanted to be an architect. He was one of my best students, and has a great sense of how things are made. He’s well on his way to becoming an architect. Occasionally he has worked for me and he’s a gem.

I got thinking about all of this doctoral stuff recently with the death of Billy Taylor. As you may have noted, he’s *Dr.* Billy Taylor. He got his doctorate in 1975 in Music Education from the University of Massachusetts. He’s been heavily involved in music education and written quite widely on the subject. And, if you haven’t heard him play, he can swing with the best. All of his playing and devotion to music education has earned him **23** (not a misprint) honorary doctorates. Whew. The honorary doctorate is a far different animal from the doctorate earned by writing a dissertation. It’s earned through real life accomplishments, and you might argue that that makes it more real. I’m certain that in jazz, which is such a performance centered medium, “do it vs. study it”, there are far more honorary than “real” doctorates. Miles Davis (as noted above), Dave Brubeck, Duke Ellington, Quincy Jones, Hank Jones, Count Basie, Clark Terry, Marian McPartland and Bill Holman, to name just a few, have received honorary doctorates.

Bringing this thinking around to the club, I have been thinking lately that we should all be given honorary doctorates in Jazz Studies. When I contemplate all the record jackets and CD inserts read, all the concerts attended, the clubs visited, the tunes listened to (multiple times), musicians encountered (and “interviewed”) and books read, I’m certain we could pass any series of quizzes offered up as a challenge. I’m sure we could carry-on, elbow to elbow with the best jazz experts and writers in the field, confidently expanding upon their statements. The only weak spot I can see would be knowledge of the jazz scene of the last 10 years or so. Well, I’m speaking for myself. Now, if I can just talk Wayne State into printing-up the diplomas.

What’s in a Name?

Having an “off-beat” name has made me conscious of unusual names. As one whose name has been spelled and mispronounced a dozen different ways, I’m fascinated by how a name is spelled and pronounced. As a part time teacher I know how perilous taking attendance for the first time can be, particularly if you have a lot of newly immigrated students. Also, as an architect, I have always been interested in graphics and typography and the look of different letters and alphabets.

As a kid I dreamed of a nice, one syllable name, say Joe, Don or Bob. A name is highly emotional, the first thing people learn about us. I once knew a builder whose last name started with "Q". After "Z", "Q" is the least used letter. If you don't believe it, look in the phone book. His last name was Quart and he liked to build smaller projects. I once said to him he should call himself, Steve T. Quart, the "Pint Sized" builder. He never seemed to take to my "smart" guy idea. One day I asked him what the "T" stood for. He said, "Tracy". "Hey, that's a neat and unusual name", I said. "Yeah", he replied, but it was the name of my dad's dog". Apparently, his dad had a dog while serving as a marine. The dog had died and when he returned from World War Two he named his new son after the dog. Steve was crestfallen that his middle name was the name of a dog. Trying to cheer him, I said, "Well, love is love. Your dad loved that dog as much as any human. You should feel glad he transferred that love to you". He took to that idea as quickly as he took to the "Pint Sized Builder" idea

All this got me thinking. You may have a fairly standard name, but if it starts with a rare letter, you fall into an unusual, limited class. In perusing my All-Music Guide to jazz, I started looking at what (last) names used the fewest pages. It corresponded fairly closely with the rarity of the letter with the exception of "U". There are hardly any jazz musicians whose name starts with "U", but "U" is as commonly used as "C" in daily use. The music guide sections with the fewest names are: "T", "Q", "U", "X" and "Z". "X", by the way, takes the prize with just one musician listed.

The percentage of names that have become fairly well known seems to parallel that of the more common name letters, such as "E". On the other hand, all the "Q" names are well known. Whether or not an unusual name influences our personality or conveys a better chance at being well known (by jazz standards) would be a subject for a musicologist/psychologist/sociologist (such studies have been done on the general public) . At least you could argue that with the "Q's" and the "Z's", your name sticks in the mind of the jazz fan and you're easier to find in the guide. Some of these names seem as though Charles Dickens had conjured them up. The names, some more familiar to early jazz aficionados and some more to modern fans: Susie *Ibarra*, Abdullah *Ibrahim* (changed to *Dollar Brand*), Peter *Ind*, Keith *Ingham*, David *Izenzon*, Sonny *Igoe*, Tony *Inzalaco*, Frank *Isola*, Chuck *Israels*, Dennis *Irwin*, Cecil *Irwin*, Charlie *Irvis*. Ike *Quebec*, Gene *Quill*, Paul *Quinichette*, Chelsea *Quealely*, Howdy *Quicksell*, Benoit *Quarsin*, Charlie *Queener*, Alvin *Queen*, Basheer *Quism* (*Gigi Gryce*). Gebhard *Ullmann*, James Blood *Ulmer*, Michael *Urbaniak*, Phil *Urso*, Phil *Upchurch*, Billy *Usselton*. Edward *Xiques*. Rachall *Z*, Joe *Zawinal*, Denny *Zeitlin*, Michael *Zerang*, Attila *Zoller*, John *Zorn*, Monica *Zutterlund*, Si *Zentner*, Zeke *Zarchy*, Chester *Zardis*. Though it isn't his first name, let's not forget the great *Zoot*!

Garnet Cousins