I played “My Funny Valentine” for a long time—and didn’t like it—and all of a sudden it meant something.

Miles Davis

A flurry of posthumous tributes to Miles Davis almost managed to conceal the fact that jazz critics and historians have never known how to explain the power and appeal of his playing. Of course, there has been no lack of writing about Davis, and no shortage of praise for his accomplishments. For example, Musician magazine, which covers jazz but is not primarily devoted to it, launched a cover story with the extraordinary statement, “In the entire recording age, no one has meant more to music than Miles Davis.” But histories of jazz, biographies of Davis, and jazz journalism often beg the question of why he ought to be so highly regarded: there is a curious absence of engagement with Davis's music, and especially with his trumpet playing.

Miles Davis has always been difficult to deal with critically: along with his controversial personal life, and his even more controversial decision to “go electric” around 1969, Davis has long been infamous for missing more notes than any other major trumpet player. While nearly everyone acknowledges his historical importance as a bandleader and a musical innovator, and for decades, large audiences flocked to his concerts, critics have always been made uncomfortable by his “mistakes,” the cracked and missed notes common in his performances. “The problem of Miles Davis” is the problem Davis presents to both critics and historians: How are we to account for such glaring defects in the performances of someone who is indisputably one of the most important musicians in the history of jazz?

Often, critics simply ignore the mistakes. In his history of jazz, Frank Tirro delicately avoided any mention of the controversies
surrounding Davis, whether missed notes, drug use, or electric instruments. Joachim Berendt in his The Jazz Book regretfully mentions Davis's "clams," but quickly passes on, and the widely used jazz appreciation text by Mark Gridley, like that of Donald D. Megill and Richard S. Demory, similarly whitewashes Davis's career. When Howard Brofsky and Bill Cole independently transcribed and published the trumpet solo of Davis's 1964 recording of "My Funny Valentine," both chose to leave out the cracks, slips, and spleeahs, enabling them to produce nice, clean texts and to avoid many problematic aspects of the performance.

Critics sometimes apologize for Davis's flaws or try explain them away. Bill Cole acknowledges that Davis had what he calls "mechanical problems," but asserts that Davis "used them well to his advantage," building a style out of his weaknesses, forging "his mistakes into a positive result." Gary Giddins similarly credits Davis with "a thoroughly original style built on the acknowledgment of technical limitations." Giddins comments, "By the time of 'My Funny Valentine,' which contains one of the most notorious fluffs ever released, one got the feeling that his every crackle and splutter was to be embraced as evidence of his spontaneous soul." But Giddins himself does not seem convinced by this argument, and he remains unable either to embrace the fluffs or to excuse them. The best that can be said of Miles Davis in this light is that he was a good musician but a bad trumpet player.

James Lincoln Collier, as usual, is bolder than most other critics:

But if his influence was profound, the ultimate value of his work is another matter. Miles Davis is not, in comparison with other men of major influence in jazz, a great improviser. His lines are often composed of unrelated fragments and generally lack coherence. His sound is interesting, but too often it is weakened by the petulant whine of his half-valving. He has never produced the melodic lines of a Parker or Beiderbecke, or the dramatic structure of Armstrong or Ellington. And although certainly an adequate instrumentalist—we should not overstress his technical inadequacies—he is not a great one. Perhaps more important, he has not really been the innovator he is sometimes credited with being. Most of the fresh concepts he incorporated into his music originated with other men, ironically, in view of his black militancy, many of them white... He has to be seen, then, not as an innovator, but as a popularizer of new ideas.

Collier's complaint is that Davis lacks originality, formal regularity, timbral purity and consistency, and technical facility. But would Davis's playing really be better if his sound were more pure and uniform, or his phrases more regular? By claiming that Davis failed to measure up to presumably objective musical standards, Collier suggests that Davis was not a good trumpet player or a good musician, despite the
popularity and respect he has earned from fans and musicians. Though he is more blunt in his denunciation of Davis than are most other jazz critics, Collier’s assessment is not unique. But when critical judgments become so out of synch with the actual reception of the music they address, it may be time to reexamine some basic premises. Perhaps there are other methods and criteria to use in analyzing and evaluating jazz; perhaps there is a way of theorizing Davis’s playing that would account for its power to affect deeply many listeners.

Miles Davis is perhaps the most important and challenging figure for jazz criticism at the present moment because he cannot be denied a place in the canon of great jazz musicians, yet the accepted criteria for greatness do not fit him well. (The complexity of Duke Ellington’s scoring or the virtuosity of Charlie Parker’s improvisation, for example, seem to be much easier to explain and legitimate than Davis’s performances.) The uneasiness many critics display toward Miles Davis’s “mistakes,” and their failure to explain the power of his playing, suggest that there are important gaps in the paradigms of musical analysis and interpretation that dominate jazz studies. Understanding Davis’s missed notes and accounting for his success as a performer may require rethinking some of our assumptions about what and how music means.

Some useful ways of doing so are implicit in the theory of signification presented by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his book The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism.9 I am not the first to notice that this book has much to offer music scholars; John P. Murphy has drawn upon Gates’s work in his discussion of dialogue among jazz improvisers, Gary Tomlinson has used Gates’s ideas in his excellent essay on jazz canons and Miles Davis’s fusion period, and Samuel Floyd has deployed Gates’s theory in his insightful analysis of the dialogue of rhythmic relationships and formal conventions in Jelly Roll Morton’s “Black Bottom Stomp.”10 But I will argue that Gates’s theory of signifying might yet be applied at a finer level of musical analysis to illuminate the significance of specific musical details and the rhetoric of performance.

At the core of his theory is Gates’s delineation of two different ways of thinking about how meanings are produced. Gates distinguishes between two cultural traditions, white “signifying” and black “Signifyin’(g)” (I find the latter a rather precious and unwieldy alteration of the vernacular term, and I will refer to these as “signification” and “signifyin’,” respectively).11 The two modes contrast sharply. Signification is logical, rational, limited; from this perspective, meanings are denotative, fixed, exact, and exclusive. Signifyin’, conversely, works through reference, gesture, and dialogue to suggest multiple
meanings through association. If signification assumes that meanings can be absolute, permanent, and objectively specified, signifyin' respects contingency, improvisation, relativity—the social production and negotiation of meanings. We might compare the way a dictionary prescribes meanings with the ways in which words constantly change meaning in actual usage by communities of language users. The difference is like that between semantics and rhetoric: signification assumes that meaning can be communicated abstractly and individually, apart from the circumstances of exchange; signifyin' celebrates performance and dialogic engagement.

As Gates himself insists, signifyin' is not exclusive to African-American culture, though it is in that culture that signifyin' has been most fully articulated theoretically, not only by scholars but also in folklore and song lyrics. In fact, the concept could be compared to literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas about dialogue in the novel, or to a variety of other twentieth-century philosophical interrogations of the nature of language and meaning, from Wittgenstein to the American pragmatists to the French poststructuralists. But Gates, while certainly influenced by these critics and theorists, means to illuminate African-American literature by taking seriously the modes of signifyin’ developed within black vernacular traditions.

Gates is not the only African-American literary theorist to draw attention to the importance of signifyin’, or to attempt to define it. Houston A. Baker, Jr., recently equated signifyin’ with deconstruction, and Ralph Ellison had earlier defined signifyin’ as “rhetorical understatement” in his book Shadow and Act. Both definitions highlight the richness and slipperiness of signifyin’ as a cultural tradition and a rhetorical strategy. Like Gates, Baker and Ellison point to performance, negotiation, and dialogue with past and present as features of this mode of artistic activity.

Clearly, Gates’s theory of signifyin’ is opposed to the perspective of modernism. For the modernists, the art work had to be autonomous from mass culture and everyday life; it was the expression of a purely individual consciousness, without social content; such art was supposed to be self-referential, exploring the medium itself. Modernist aesthetic theory has long dominated academic study of the arts, and consequently it has seemed attractive to many jazz critics and scholars as a route to academic prestige and legitimation. At a recent symposium on jazz theory and criticism, Gunther Schuller pondered the question of how to judge jazz, coming up with a characteristically modernist dual answer. On the one hand, he says, we must judge jazz performances or recordings on their own merits, based on the compos-
er's and musicians' intentions and study of the work. On the other hand, we can rely upon certain standards of performance quality and authenticity, the latter encompassing technical accuracy, appropriateness to the style, and originality. That is, art can be understood as intentional, its meanings owned by the artist, but it can also be held accountable to a set of critical standards that are assumed to transcend particular statements or artifacts.

In a response to Schuller's comments published in *New Perspectives on Jazz*, Olly Wilson pointed out that musical techniques, styles, and procedures are never autonomous; they are organized at a conceptual level, a level of cultural priorities and modes of thought, which must be addressed by criticism. Amiri Baraka argued in the same volume that the critic must understand how the work means; an aesthetic, he pointed out, is expressive of a worldview, "subjective, yet reflective of objective political and economic existence." In other words, reactions to art feel personal, but they nonetheless reflect the ways in which even our most personal feelings are socially constituted.

Some jazz critics, then, resist the modernist attitudes that are so antithetical to signifying; such critics are dissatisfied with analytical methods that radically reduce musical activities to formal abstractions that often shed little light on how music is experienced. But overall, academics (and some jazz musicians) seem increasingly drawn to what I will call "classicizing" strategies for legitimating jazz. Now, it seems natural enough that people who are trying to win more respect for the music they love should do so by making comparisons with the most prestigious music around, classical music. But the price of classicism is always loss of specificity, just as it has been the price of the canonic coherence of European concert music (the disparate sounds of many centuries, many peoples, many functions, many meanings all homogenized and made interchangeably "great"). Too often, jazz education and scholarship mimic the elitist moral crusade that created the canon of classical music in the last half of the nineteenth century. Audiences are assumed to be passive, the content of jazz is rarely discussed, its relevance to people's lives never examined. It is simply presumed that increased exposure to jazz is somehow good for people, and appreciation takes the place of understanding. Moreover, history is distorted when devotees work to separate jazz from the rest of popular music, a move that is meant to put them on the right side of the mass culture/modernism divide.

The classicization of jazz has even facilitated a nationalist distortion of jazz in the United States. According to such prominent spokespeople for jazz as Billy Taylor, Wynton Marsalis, and Gunther...
Schuller, jazz is “America’s classical music” or “America’s one truly indigenous musical art form.” It “developed steadily from a single expression of the consciousness of black people into a national music that expresses American ideals and attitudes to Americans and to people from other cultures all around the world.” For them, all jazz makes a single kind of political statement: “in a typical jazz performance each individual performer contributes his or her personal musical perspective and thereby graphically demonstrates the democratic process at work.” Jazz idealizes “the concept of individual freedom.”

But characterizing jazz in this way effaces both its complex cultural history, including the myriad effects of racism and elitism on the music and the people who have made it, and the dialogue that is at the very heart of the music. Taylor praised individualism. But what of collaboration—in collective improvisation, in composition, in the ongoing collective transformation of the discourse of jazz? What of the ways in which musicians, as they play, converse with one another, with their audiences, with their forebears? Taylor celebrates the fact that jazz has gotten substantial support from the United States State Department and that it has been featured on Voice of America radio broadcasts without considering why this might be so. The answer is that the sort of reading of jazz articulated by Taylor, which emphasizes individualism rather than collectivism, autonomous statements rather than dialogue and collaboration, helped enable the use of jazz as propaganda for capitalism by distorting the nature of the music, by blurring its variety and its debt to the collective struggles of African-Americans, and by effacing the fact that jazz has long flourished outside of the United States.

The most obvious failing of the movement to classicize jazz, however, is that it has never been able to do justice to the music; for example, it offers no means of accounting for why Miles Davis misses notes, or even of understanding what he is really doing the rest of the time. This is in part because the musicological treatments of jazz have also been chiefly devoted to legitimation, the main argument having been that jazz is worthwhile because even its improvised solos demonstrate organic unity and motivic coherence. The two writers most often credited as the foremost musical analysts of jazz, André Hodeir and Gunther Schuller, applied the vocabulary of academic musical analysis to jazz, labelling chords and motives without seriously questioning the appropriateness of such wholesale methodological transference. Hodeir’s allegiance to the European canon allowed him only a single yardstick against which to measure every musical object, regard-
less of its history, its discursive premises, or its values. And even though Schuller has written an excellent explanation of the sedimented African priorities in jazz, transformed by African-Americans in their new contexts, he has also accepted from musicology the idea that Western art music operates in an autonomous domain; his writings on jazz are colored by his desire to prove that jazz is equally autonomous and thus equally worthy of respect.

Both Hodeir and Schuller often refer to the importance of "objectivity"—a common priority among those who prefer not to interrogate their premises. Schuller celebrated "real quality and musical talent" without any reflection on how those categories come to be created and understood by various social groups; indeed, he searched for "purely musical qualities," deliberately stripping away the "historical and social trappings" that enable sounds to be meaningful to people. In his famous analysis of Sonny Rollins's "Blue 7," Schuller consistently avoided commenting on rhetoric or affect, and reduced the force of Rollins's improvisation to the articulation of unity and order. Though it is clear that Schuller, along with everyone else, hears much more than that in this recording, his precise labelling of musical details and persuasive legitimation of jazz according to longstanding musicological criteria caused many critics to hail this article as a singular critical triumph. All it really tells us about Rollins, however, is that his improvisations are coherent; it says nothing about why we might value that coherence, why we find it meaningful, or how this solo differs from any of a million other coherent pieces of music.

The price of such classicizing formalism is always the loss of affect and history; most jazz analysts and many critics have been modernists willing to make the trade. But Miles Davis, in such terms, would have to be called postmodern. He refused to be constrained by genre boundaries; his music embraced and explored contradictions; he dismissed questions of authenticity or purity; he was unwilling to separate art, life, and politics. These are the traits that led Stanley Crouch to place the blame for contemporary jazz, which he sees as being in a colossal mess, squarely on Davis; he refers to "the mire Miles Davis pushed jazz into." However, as Robert Palmer argues, such polemics signal cultural contestation of great import: "Critics and musicians who are still trying to hold the line against this cultural democratization, mostly from the classical and jazz camps, are classist bigots fighting a losing battle with musical and social realities. . . . Davis had a particular knack for getting under these purists' skins."

As we will see, Davis's consistent and deliberate use of risky techniques and constant transgression of genre boundaries are antithetical to "classicism"
and cannot be explained by formalism, for, from that perspective, unusual content looks like flawed form. That is why so many critics have responded to Davis's music with puzzlement, hostility, or an uneasy silence.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, theory is useful precisely because his goal was to create the means to deal with cultural difference on its own terms, as an antidote to theoretical assimilation by more prestigious projects. Gates does not shy away from questions of value and analysis, yet his work unmasksthe shallowness of attempts to show that African literature is worthy of study because it is fundamentally the same as European literature, or that jazz is worthy of study because it is just like classical music. Gates's notion of signifyin' codifies a set of ideas about processes of signification, and in the process offers us a bag of new conceptual tools for musical analysis, challenging us to rethink not only the tactics, but also the goals of such work. I want to illustrate the productive potential of these ideas through a detailed analysis of Miles Davis's 1964 recording of "My Funny Valentine." But since audiences hear Davis's recording up against a long history of other performances of the song, I will begin with the issue of intertextuality.

Consider a pop vocalist's treatment of the song, such as Tony Bennett's 1959 recording. Bennett's voice is warm, with constant vibrato throughout; like many singers, he uses vibrato as a component of the vocal sound, rather than as an ornament, so that it projects sincerity and expressivity evenly over the course of the entire song. Bennett follows the original printed version of the song closely, but he often slightly alters the rhythm of the melody to make his delivery of the text seem more natural and intimate; he also changes a note here and there to suggest even more personal earnestness. A few deft appoggiaturas serve to underline his casual control of the music and to complete his modest customizing. Bennett's warm baritone presents the singer as an ostensibly benevolent patriarch, for when the song is sung by a man to a woman (the opposite of the original context in the Broadway musical Babes in Arms), the text's enumeration of faults ("Is your figure less than Greek? Is your mouth a little weak?") becomes somewhat condescending and insulting, however well masked by the tender music. The pianist's nod to "Greensleeves" at the very end completes the atmosphere of poignant sincerity Bennett has worked to create.

"My Funny Valentine" was composed by Rodgers and Hart in 1937. By the time of Bennett's recording, Davis had already recorded the song twice himself, in 1956 and 1958; his live recording was made
five years after Bennett’s. Now can we say that Davis is signifyin’ on—commenting on, in dialogue with, deconstructing—Bennett’s version? The question is made more complex by the idea that as a performer, Davis is signifyin’ on all of the versions of the song he has heard, but for his audience, Davis is signifyin’ on all the versions each listener has heard. What is played is played up against Davis’s intertextual experience, and what is heard is heard up against the listeners’ experiences. Moreover, Davis is no doubt engaging the many Bennett-like performances of “My Funny Valentine” he must have heard, but he is also signifyin’ on many jazz versions, including his own past performances.33 This chain of signifyin’ spins out indefinitely, though most fundamentally Davis is in dialogue with the basic features of the song itself, as jazz musicians would understand them and as listeners would recognize them. The whole point of a jazz musician like Davis playing a Tin Pan Alley pop song can be understood as his opportunity to signify on the melodic possibilities, formal conventions (such as the AABA plan of the 32-measure chorus), harmonic potentials, and previously performed versions of the original song.34

Davis signifies from the very beginning of his 1964 performance; after Herbie Hancock’s piano introduction, Davis understates the first two phrases of the melody (see Ex. 1).35 His tone is soft and without

Example 1. Transcription: Miles Davis, solo on “My Funny Valentine” (1964 recording).
vibrato, and he has clipped the long notes of the song, making his statement seem idiosyncratic yet restrained. Without a constant vibrato such as Bennett uses, there is no warm surface to hide behind; Davis’s statement seems stark and vulnerable. After each phrase, he pauses, and the empty time creates a sense of dramatic engagement as we wait for the continuation we know must occur. On the third phrase (m. 5), Davis deceives us; he begins on the proper note, but instead of ascending to follow the melody, he descends into the lowest register of the trumpet before seeming to gain momentum that shoots him up to almost an octave higher than where he should be, if he were still following the tune. The melody of “My Funny Valentine” was so familiar to his audience that Davis did not need to state it before signifyin’ on it; two brief phrases serve to establish the tune. The third phrase not only deceives, but contrasts sharply with the first two (mm. 1 and 3): during this eruption Davis plays loudly for the first time, and adds some vibrato while he holds the final high note. Unlike Tony Bennett, Davis uses vibrato selectively so that its presence or absence is significant; here he uses it to intensify the end of this outburst before he retreats back to a soft note in his middle range.

That next note, in the last measure of the first A section (m. 8), is rich in signifyin’. Davis plays an A-flat in the normal way, with the
trumpet's first valve depressed. He then slides down to a G without changing valves. This is a technique that, on the trumpet, is difficult, risky, and relatively rare. Acoustically, the trumpet should not be able to play any notes between A-flat and E-flat with only the first valve depressed; Davis must bend the note with his lips without letting it crack down to the next harmonic. The result is a fuzzy sound, not quite in tune. There is no conceivable situation in classical trumpet playing where such a sound would be desirable. Yet, in this solo, it is the audible sign of Davis's effort and risk, articulating a moment of strain that contributes to the affect of his interpretation. If we explain this measure in terms of quarter tones or, as Howard Brofsky does, transcribe it as simply two notes, an A-flat and a G, we gain a neater description but miss the point of the music. Davis deliberately risks cracking that note because it is the only way to achieve that sense of strain. Here, he manages to hold onto the note; at other moments in the solo, such wagers are not won. However, it is crucial to appreciate the extraordinary lengths to which Davis goes to make playing the trumpet even more difficult and risky than it already is, and to understand the musical results of his doing so.

The trumpet, like most wind instruments, underwent a continual process of “improvement” throughout the nineteenth century and, to a lesser extent, the twentieth. In particular, instrument makers sought
to adapt the trumpet to the needs of the expanding nineteenth-century orchestra by striving for a smooth, even timbre across the whole range of the instrument, one that would be consistent at all dynamic levels. In contrast, the eighteenth-century trumpet parts of J. S. Bach make use of the inconsistencies of the instrument as Bach knew it. On the trumpets of that time, every note had a different timbre and a different degree of stability; Bach carefully exploited these characteristics, using weaker or fuzzier notes in harmonically strained passages and returning to cadence with the most gloriously solid notes on the instrument. Players of the time developed a very flexible technique as well, practicing a great variety of articulations, working to make their lines uneven and musically subtle. All of this was undone in the nineteenth century, as both instruments and pedagogy became standardized for the needs of the symphony orchestra. As a consequence, jazz trumpet players like Miles Davis have had to wrestle with an instrument that was literally designed to frustrate their attempts to produce a wide variety of timbres.

Throughout the solo, Davis uses another risky technique; he half-valves—depesses a valve only part of the way down, which produces a split, unfocused airstream—to create a variety of timbres and effects. In mm. 10 and 11, half-valving is combined with dissonant
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Example 1. continued

pitches and halting, fragmented rhythms that create a temporary sense of dislocation. Another half-valved slide blurs the beginning of a reference to the original melody in m. 12. After his unnerving silence during the major seventh chord in the next measure—an important point of arrival in the song—Davis uses a grace note and a slight half-valve to make the high point of the phrase seem delicately virtuosic (m. 14). A quick reprise of the risky bend finishes off the phrase, and we must wait almost two measures for another utterance from Davis.

When it comes, the next phrase contrasts sharply with the previous statement, for its climb is loud and brash, featuring no fewer than three cracked notes in two measures. I suspect that the last of these was done deliberately to make the other two seem thematic in retrospect. This is not uncommon among jazz musicians, who are free to signify on the music they’ve played just seconds before,. Improvisers can comment on what they have just played by spontaneously repeating, embellishing, and developing their best ideas. But jazz musicians can also engage with their most infelicitous phrases; although they cannot be unplayed, they can be resituated and reinterpreted by subsequent statements. Thelonious Monk was particularly adept at using musical accidents as material for development and elaboration. But, of course, jazz musicians vary greatly in their attitudes about such things. Many abhor technical imperfections and strive to avoid uncontrolled noises. Some, like Monk or Davis, play in ways that create such
unforeseen sounds, though Monk seemed to find them fascinating while Davis simply accepted them as consequences of the way he played.

I do not mean to suggest that Davis wanted to make mistakes, or that he was not bothered by them. He had absorbed a dislike of technical failings from many sources, including his first trumpet hero, Harry James, who was famous for his stylish phrasing and flawless technique. And when Davis had to choose among various takes after a recording session, he is said to have invariably picked the one with the fewest mistakes.39 Yet, Davis has also been quoted as saying, "When they make records with all the mistakes in, as well as the rest, then they'll really make jazz records. If the mistakes aren't there, too, it ain't none of you."40 Despite his dislike of failure, Davis constantly and consistently put himself at risk in his trumpet playing by using a loose, flexible embouchure that helped him to produce a great variety of tone colors and articulations, by striving for dramatic gestures rather than consistent demonstration of mastery, and by experimenting with unconventional techniques. Ideally, he would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style.

After the glaring "clams" of mm. 17 and 18, Davis returns with a soft nod to the original melody of "My Funny Valentine" in the following two measures. The next lick again goes beyond the classical boundaries of trumpet technique by using an alternate fingering to produce a different timbre and slightly low pitch. Davis plays a lazy triplet of D's, the first and last with the normal fingering open, but the middle one with the third valve. Another curt nod to the melody sets up a tremendous silence, a charged gap of almost three full measures. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in one of his few explicit comments on African-American music, explains how such a pause can be understood as signifyin':

[A] great musician often tries to make musical phrases that are elastic in their formal properties. These elastic phrases stretch the form rather than articulate the form. Because the form is self-evident to the musician, both he and his well-trained audience are playing and listening with expectation. Signifyin(g) disappoints these expectations; caesuras, or breaks, achieve the same function. This form of disappointment creates a dialogue between what the listener expects and what the artist plays. Whereas younger, less mature musicians accentuate the beat, more accomplished musicians do not have to do so. They feel free to imply it.*41

To create a pause of such length during one of the most tense harmonic moments of the song is, among other things, Davis's confident
assertion of his stature as a soloist. Would an audience wait eagerly through such a pause for a lesser musician? Would a lesser musician dare to find out? Davis indulges in that sort of manipulation that is the prerogative of the virtuoso and at the same time illustrates his freedom from having to articulate all of the chords; rather, the chords are there as a field upon which he signifies.

In a deviation from the standard 32-measure form, Rodgers and Hart extended the final A section of "My Funny Valentine" with an extra four measures (beyond the usual eight). In the ninth measure of this section (m. 33), we can hear Davis signal, with a single pair of notes, a doubling of the tempo, which is immediately picked up by the other musicians. A high rip, solidly on the downbeat, gets their attention, and the subtle swing of two eight-notes on the second beat is enough to cue the band to shift tempo. The eighth-notes are signifi'n on the previous rhythmic feel and cannot be contained within it, thus prompting the change.42 By starting the new rhythmic feel four measures before the start of a new chorus, Davis cuts against the regularity of the song's formal plan, building momentum at what should be the most predictable point in the song, the turnaround into the next chorus, where the melody relaxes. That he succeeds in sparking increased engagement with the audience is clear from their spontaneous applause here, in the middle of his solo.

Davis begins the second chorus of his solo with a striking contrast, a splattered high note followed by one that is neatly and precisely placed (m. 37). The first note comes across as a scream, particularly since it is on the tense ninth degree (D over C minor); the second note not only resolves harmonically to the tonic, but also resolves the gesture of wildness with a demonstration of control. Precise placement of even more dissonant notes in the following measure emphasize Davis's willfulness and strength, as he clashes deliberately with the harmonic context.

The third measure of this chorus (m. 39) is a mess. Clear, distinctly pitched notes are almost wholly absent. What we hear is a raucous, complex ascending gesture. Davis keeps his embouchure very loose and uses breath accents on the higher notes to shape the line. What results is indeterminate in pitch but rhetorically clear. It is a chaotic, almost frantic, climb that briefly shoots past the tonic to the flat ninth degree, then spins back to the tonic and down an octave by way of a deft flip into bluesier terrain. Again, Davis is less interested in articulating pitches than in signifi'n; the two halves of this phrase are in dialogue, the messy scramble upward answered by the casual, simple return. Their juxtaposition furthers our sense of Davis's playful, adventurous, multifaceted, sometimes strained, but ultimately capable
character. Davis does not present his audiences with a product, polished and inviting admiration; we hear instead a dramatic process of creation from Davis as from few others. And as we listen, we can experience these feelings of playfulness, complexity, struggle, and competence as our own.

For the next seven measures, Davis works primarily with rhythm; his phrases are simple and exquisitely swung, and he places substantial pauses in between them so that the rhythm section can be heard swinging in response. Skipping ahead, we hear him doing something similar at the start of the last A section (m. 61), creating a space for dialogue just before he ascends into a series of stratospheric screeches that must have surprised those critics who have insisted that Davis is a weak trumpet player with a limited range. The solo ends (m. 74) with a series of fading quarter notes on the beat, pitched in Davis’s mid-range, a dissonant tritone away from the tonic; an appoggiatura both blurs and emphasizes each note, making the end of his solo seem enigmatic and inconclusive.

Characterizing Davis’s style as “prideful loneliness,” Nat Hentoff has argued that Davis’s power as a soloist was due to his “relentless probing of the song, of himself and of the resources of his horn. There is also the constant drawing of melodic and emotional lines as taut as possible before the tension is released only to build up again. And there is the unabashed sensuality of tone, together with the acute pleasure of surprising oneself in music.” Hentoff’s comments are certainly evocative of what I have called signifying in Davis’s music. And Ben Sidran’s book about orality in African-American music similarly directs our attention toward the dialogic aspects of jazz, as do LeRoi Jones’s Blues People and Christopher Small’s Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music.

Such arguments, however, seem not to have been very influential upon jazz scholarship; with the exception of Hentoff, these writers are not often cited in jazz bibliographies. I think the reason for this has been the lack of attention within jazz scholarship and criticism to articulating links among the impressions of listeners, the techniques of musicians, and the actual sounds that result. Bill Cole remarked of this solo that Davis “holds his listeners’ interest by playing every note as if it were the most important note he would ever play. It is this intensity that is so persuasive in his playing.” This argument is itself persuasive, but how do we actually hear an abstract quality like “intensity”? Gary Tomlinson has nicely described “the technical revolution brought to the trumpet by black Americans, a revolution that toppled the prim Arban methods and military precision of Victorian
cornet virtuosos and broke wide open the expressive range of the instrument." Tomlinson goes on to say specifically of Miles Davis, "the power of his vision was such that he could make even his famous cracked and fluffed notes a convincing expressive aspect of it."48 Like Gary Giddins, Tomlinson is trying to valorize aspects of Davis's performances that escape conventional accounts; like Giddins's attempt, though, it has about it the air of an excuse, and it appeals to a fairly misty notion of "vision." But most important, none of these comments are very specific musically; jazz criticism has lacked detailed analyses of specific performances that articulate links among reactions, theories, performance choices, and technical details.

My analysis of "My Funny Valentine" is certainly not exhaustive; it focuses selectively on certain aspects of one solo in order to make a number of methodological and analytical points. I have presented it as an example of a kind of analysis that takes us into the notes but acknowledges the centrality of rhetoric, that leads us into the trees but also sees the forest. The value of a theory of signifyin' is that it can help direct our attention to aspects of jazz performance and reception that have not been cogently addressed, and it helps provide a language for doing so. By grounding his theory in African-American practices, but not limiting its applicability to African-American culture, Gates helps us gain a new perspective on many different cultural practices.

Prevalent methods of jazz analysis, borrowed from the toolbox of musicology, provide excellent means for legitimating jazz in the academy. But they are clearly inadequate to the task of helping us to understand jazz and to account for its power to affect many people deeply—issues that ought to be central for critical scholarship of jazz. They offer only a kind of mystified, ahistorical, text-based legitimacy within which rhetoric and signifyin' are invisible. Such methods cannot cope with the problem of Miles Davis: the missed notes, the charged pauses, the technical risk-taking, the whole challenge of explaining how this powerful music works and "how" it means.

Why must it be explained? Because it will be, somehow, unavoidably. Artistic experiences are never unmediated by theoretical assumptions, whether positivist or formalist, mystifying or signifyin'. And how we think about Davis's solo on "My Funny Valentine" has implications far beyond our response to this particular performance. The work of Miles Davis seems to repudiate conventional notions of aesthetic distance and insists that music is less a thing than an activity; his music itself provides the most eloquent argument for analysis to open itself up to issues of gesture and performativity. The problem of Miles Davis is that if technical perfection is assumed to be a universal
and primary goal, the deliberate efforts of musicians like Davis to take chances are invisible, and their semiotic successes are inaudible. If individuality and originality are fetishized, signifyin' is lost, for it is fundamentally dialogic and depends upon the interaction among musicians, their audiences, and the experiences and texts they exchange.

For example, one of Davis's biographers asserted that the "My Funny Valentine" solo demonstrates "no readily apparent logic," while another waxed enthusiastic about its "dramatic inner logic." Each critic found it a powerfully moving performance, but both lacked an analytical vocabulary that could do justice to their perceptions.49 Pianist Chick Corea muses, "Miles' solos are really interesting to look at on music paper, because there's nothing to them. On a Trane solo or Charlie Parker solo, you can string the notes out and see all these phrases and harmonic ideas, patterns, all kinds of things. Miles doesn't use patterns. He doesn't string notes out. It's weird. Without the expression, and without the feeling he puts into it, there's nothing there."50 Corea's comments dramatize the problems of accounting for the rhetorical power of aspects of Davis's performances that escape conventional notation and theorization.

Miles Davis once said, "Sometimes you run out of notes. The notes just disappear and you have to play a sound."51 The title of this essay takes as a motto Davis's insistence that musical creativity need not be limited by abstractions such as notes, and it signals a call for critics and scholars not to allow such concepts to constrain their work. Musical analysts need to confront the challenges of signifyin', the real-life dialogic flux of meaning, never groundable in a foundationalist epistemology, but always grounded in a web of social practices, histories, and desires. Modernism and classicism cannot take us into notes, where choices and details signify, nor out of notes, onto that risky rhetorical terrain Miles Davis never stopped exploring.

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were performed as lecture-demonstrations at the African-American Music Forum, University of Michigan, Apr. 26, 1990; the IASPM conference in New Orleans, May 1, 1990; McGill University, Jan. 31, 1992; and the University of California-Riverside, Mar. 11, 1992. This article has benefited from the comments and questions of the audiences at those presentations and from my correspondence with Krin Gabbard and Christopher Small. I am grateful for the corrections and challenges issued by the anonymous reviewer and to John Puterbaugh for setting my transcription of the music.


11. “Signification” also has the advantage of preserving the static, foundationalist character of the theories of meaning to which Gates refers, while “signifyin’” retains the vernacular focus on agency.

12. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). It might seem that semiotics would be highly relevant to musical signifyin’, but scholars working in the area of musical semiotics have typically assumed that the production of musical meaning is a matter of semantics, following older
models developed by structuralist linguistics, or they remain tied to a foundationalist epistemology that is unable to cope with the social and contested production of meanings. See, for example, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).


25. André Hodeir, Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1979), 92. Virtually the whole tradition of musicological analysis of jazz, from Win-
thorp Sargeant on, has been caught between the admission that jazz is different from classical music (and probably inferior) and the desire to legitimate jazz according to the criteria commonly used to analyze classical music. Jazz scholars have long neglected their opportunities to learn about the different premises and values emphasized in African-American culture from scholars and theorists of that culture.


27. Schuller, The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930–1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199, 63, and passim. Thus, when Schuller boasts of listening to over 30,000 recordings while writing this book, one might ask, “But what was he listening for?”


29. Stanley Crouch, “Jazz Criticism and Its Effect on the Art Form [response],” in New Perspectives on Jazz, 86.


32. First issued on Columbia CS-8242, this recording also appears in the Smithsonian Collection American Popular Song (Smithsonian Institution and CBS, RD-031). Most of the comments that follow could apply just as well to Frank Sinatra’s recording on Songs for Young Lovers (Capitol, 1954).

33. See Brofsky for a comparison of three different performances by Davis of “My Funny Valentine.”

34. We might say that the early bebop musicians were signifying on Tin Pan Alley popular songs when they stripped away the melody, doubled the tempo, and explored the harmonic possibilities they found in such tunes as “I Got Rhythm” and “Cherokee.” But bebop practice would have been to give “My Funny Valentine” a new melody and not acknowledge that the tune had any connection with popular song. Davis, when he used Tin Pan Alley songs, always said so, making the signifying less private and esoteric, more explicit and popular. See W. T. Lhamon, Jr., Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 172–73.

35. My transcription is provided as a guide to the analysis that follows. The analysis, though, is based on the sounds of the performance, not the sight of the transcription. It should be clear that I have no illusions about the capacity of musical notation to represent musical performances completely or accurately. I have tried, however, to furnish a transcription that acknowledges its own limitations, one that records the existence of aspects of the performance that are not notatable or that are usually overlooked by analysis. Even so, an enormous amount of important musical information is left out, especially nuances of pitch and timbre. Note the key to special symbols that appears at the end of the transcription (355).
36. Pitches are given at concert pitch, so as to match the transcription. A trumpet player would think of this note as a B-flat.


38. Davis is certainly not the only trumpet player to wrestle with the instrument in this way. For example, Charles Schlueter, principal trumpet of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, has throughout his career struggled to produce a great range of timbres. Schlueter’s experiments with equipment and his risky playing techniques and interpretations have made him perhaps the most controversial trumpet player in American orchestral circles. Like Davis, he has often missed more notes than many think he should, but his risks have also paid off in unsurpassedly rich and beautiful performances. On the controversies surrounding Schlueter, see Carl A. Vigeland, *In Concert: Onstage and Offstage with the Boston Symphony Orchestra* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

39. Berendt cites unnamed “recording directors” who agree on this point (84). On Davis’s admiration for Harry James, see Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 32.


41. Gates, 123.

42. It is quite possible that this tempo change was planned, or that it was at least an option that may have been chosen in previous performances, but it is made to feel spontaneous, to seem musically cued by Davis.

43. Krin Gabbard cites this solo as a perfect example of how Davis alternated strongly phallic gestures with moments of post-phallic vulnerability. See Gabbard, 60.


46. For example, Martin Williams’s bibliography for the Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz, revised ed. (1987) ignores Sidran and Jones, as does the entry on “Jazz” in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980).

47. Cole, 156.


49. See Eric Nisenson, *Round About Midnight: A Portrait of Miles Davis* (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 187; and Carr, 175. The other important biography of Davis (besides Cole’s) is Jack Chambers’s *Milestones: The Music and Times of Miles Davis* (New York: Quill, 1985), a tremendous compilation of facts and quotes, but a book that offers little analysis of the music and its meanings. Barry Kernfeld’s *Adderly*, Col-
trane, and Davis at the Twilight of Bebop: The Search for Melodic Coherence (1958–59) (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1981) uses traditional musicological tools to generate detailed descriptions of Davis's music.


51. Khephra Burns, liner notes for Miles Davis, Aura (CBS, 1989 [rec. 1984]).