

DIRECTION NOWHERE

MILES DAVIS AND NEIL YOUNG AT THE FILLMORE EAST

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In the loosely related fields of planetary science and apocalyptic fiction, the phrase “minimum orbit intersection distance,” or MOID, describes the closest point of contact between the paths of two orbiting objects. Most vividly invoked whenever an asteroid encroaches on our corner of the solar system, that bit of jargon also has its aesthetic uses. Consider the coordinates of Neil Young and Miles Davis on the evenings of March 6 and 7, 1970, at the juncture of East Sixth Street and Second Avenue in Manhattan.

That setting, cosmic only in culturally suggestive terms, was the Fillmore East, a New York outpost of Bill Graham’s hippie empire. Young was the headliner, and Davis the opener. As far as we know, there was no particular spark of friction or connection between the two. But the musical evidence, even 40 years later, attests to the mysterious gravity of that moment. For all their differences — what you might inadvisably call their intersection distance — Young and Davis were both in the thrall of reinvention, pushing a distinctly contemporary, shrewdly cooperative agenda. It also happened that they were each in the midst of creative transition as they took the Fillmore stage.

Few musicians of any era have outdone Davis or Young when it comes to catalog savvy. For Davis, that development has been posthumous: the trumpeter died in 1991, just as the compact-disc reissue boom was getting under way. His music has since been endlessly repackaged and repurposed, and in some instances — like *Live at the Fillmore East (March 7, 1970): It’s About That Time*, released by Sony Legacy in 2001 — made commercially available for the first time. Last year Legacy put out what would seem to be a culminating gesture: *The Complete Columbia Album Collection*, spanning 70 discs.

Young’s camp released a fetish object of their own in 2009: *Neil Young Archives Volume 1 (1963-1972)*, a 10-DVD or Blu-Ray set consisting of obscurities, rarities and assorted other flotsam from a roughly half-century career. Among its bounty is the concert recording that was also released, in more standard form, as *Live at the Fillmore East* on Reprise in 2006. The material was assembled with active participation from Young, who had ample reason to reflect fondly on the Fillmore shows.

At that time, he was on tour with Crazy Horse: Danny Whitten on guitar, Billy Talbot on bass and Ralph Molina on drums. Not quite a year earlier they had released their first album, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*. Young had spent much of his time since toiling as the final consonant in CSNY: Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the supergroup whose album *Déjà Vu* would be issued within a week of Young’s Fillmore East shows, delivering what Billboard hailed as “a skill and sensitivity bound to be the measure of excellence in rock for 1970.”

Whatever he thought of such proclamations, Young felt the call to work with musicians who upheld what you might call different aesthetic aspirations than CSN. Their raggedness was not entirely

planned. Young himself has said: “With Crazy Horse it’s such a special thing, because none of us can really play. We know we aren’t any good. Fuck, we’d get it in the first take every time, and it was never right — but we could never do it better.” That’s overstating the case a bit, as his own solos at the Fillmore would demonstrate. But there is something to his assertion of anti-virtuosity. Long before Crazy Horse, he was a skinny kid with a nervous voice, the embodiment of vulnerability. After a session with his Winnipeg high school band, the Squires, the engineer complimented his guitar playing but said he’d never make it as a singer.

Which somewhat implausibly brings us to Miles Davis, a trumpeter long appraised in jazz circles more in terms of resourcefulness than proficiency. Gary Giddins has credited him with “a thoroughly original style built on the acknowledgement of technical limitations.” The conservative orthodoxy often compares Davis unfavorably to Dizzy Gillespie or Clifford Brown, which is not unlike saying Neil Young was no Stephen Stills.

In a 1993 essay, musicologist Robert Walser analyzed the most notoriously flawed performance of the Miles Davis canon, a 1964 rendition of “My Funny Valentine,” and argues that Davis had mastered the process of signifyin’ famously articulated by Henry Louis Gates. To really hear what he’s saying, you have to dislodge standard notions of legitimacy, or spike them with the awareness of an alternative technique. To that end, perhaps the most striking analogue between Miles Davis and Neil Young, or just the most obvious, is the fact that both artists make expressive and powerful use of an instrument regarded in some circles, even now, as imperfect.

Listen to the sprawling version of “Down by the River” that anchors *Live at the Fillmore East*, and you’ll hear that voice, along with that of a partner, Danny Whitten. The ringleader of Crazy Horse before it was Crazy Horse — that is, when it was the Rockets — Whitten was a good singer, in the conventional sense. He was also an excellent guitarist, especially in this context. Young once pegged him this way:

A really great second guitar player, the perfect counterpoint to everything else that was happening. So sympathetic. So unthoughtful. And just so natural. That’s really what made “Cowgirl in the Sand” and “Down by the River” happen — Danny’s guitar parts. Nobody played guitar with me like that — that rhythm.

The Fillmore tapes represent the only known live document of Whitten with Crazy Horse. Soon after this tour, heroin addiction ended his tenure in the band and, within a couple of years, his life. This drama played out famously in song: first, “Come on Baby Let’s Go Downtown,” a set opener at the Fillmore East featuring Whitten’s soulful lead vocal. Then Young singing “The Needle and the Damage Done,” never more nakedly than in the acoustic solo version caught on the recently released 1971 Massey Hall concert.

Young’s description of Whitten is telling. Sympathetic. Natural. These are the attributes of a certain kind of intuitive virtuoso, an “unthoughtful” one. You often hear similar descriptions of jazz musicians. Young locates Whitten’s ability as a component force, “the perfect counterpoint.” His artistry, in other words, functioned best as a catalyst. In the same interview, Young goes on to say,

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“When I played these long guitar solos, it seemed like they weren’t all that long, that I was making all these changes, when in reality what was changing was not one thing, but the whole band. Danny was the key.”

Jazz discourse is full of theorizing about the expression of the self within a collective: Ralph Ellison put it succinctly in his famous formulation about “an art of individual assertion within and against the group.” For his part, Young has recalled that it was during a 1970 CSNY tour that he grew obsessed with the John Coltrane Quartet, hiding in his hotel room with cassettes of *Equinox* and *My Favorite Things*. “I used to listen to that shit all the time,” he said, adding: “The bass player was really good.” The fact that Young’s appreciation includes a special nod to Steve Davis may help explain why he isn’t often lumped together with the other rockers who valorized Coltrane at this time. Unlike Carlos Santana or Duane Allman, he didn’t fixate on the heroic and suggestively spiritual solo voice, but the cohesive and hypnotic properties of the group.

Speaking of which, Davis also came to the Fillmore East with a working cohort: saxophonist Wayne Shorter, keyboardist Chick Corea, bassist Dave Holland, drummer Jack DeJohnette. Also on hand was percussionist Airto Moreira, who had been present the previous year for the recording of *Bitches Brew*. That album was issued in April, one month after the Fillmore stand. So Miles was not yet the hero that he would become to this crowd; *Cashbox* reported that most of the kids waited out his set in the lobby. This was the trumpeter’s first-ever performance explicitly for a rock audience. He had been cajoled into playing there by Clive Davis, his label head at CBS. (The cajoling probably had a lot to do with the opening slot.)

Jazz-rock was not a brand-new development, and Miles was no naïf. A year and a half earlier he had recorded “Mademoiselle Mabry,” an adaptation of “The Wind Cries Mary,” by Jimi Hendrix. That song was dedicated to a mutual acquaintance, Betty Mabry, who married Miles six days after the tune was recorded, and graced the cover of the album on which it appeared. (She has enjoyed a recent reissue revival of her own.)

Almost 20 years Davis’s junior, Mabry led him by the hand into a new social circle, one that included Hendrix and Sly Stone. Abruptly, he abandoned Brooks Brothers for bell-bottoms, opening the door to what Robin Kelly has called “the pimp aesthetic.” Musically, the shift was more methodical, as a trove of Legacy reissues has underscored.

His most recent album at this time was *In a Silent Way*, a bated-breath sound collage that has about as much in common with rock as it does with jazz. (Not much, in other words.) The composer of that album’s title track also wrote “Directions,” the song that opened every set at the Fillmore East. His name was Joe Zawinul, and together with Wayne Shorter, he would lead Weather Report. That ‘70s fusion flagship was just preparing to sail: the Fillmore East marked Shorter’s last gig as a member of Davis’s band. (You can hear him in incipient Weather Report mode on “Spanish Key,” from 4:00 to 7:00.)

Personnel-wise, it was becoming a difficult stretch for Davis. His 1960s quartet, one of the world’s finest-ever jazz ensembles, had splintered. Its slipstream post-bop had matured past its prime, as

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Davis had been forced to admit. So where to go next? He had no great regard for the avant-garde scramble of the era, which Corea and Holland would soon explore vigorously in a band called Circle. (Those interests crept into the Fillmore sets; check their conspiratorial glee on “Directions,” from 6:30 on.)

Quite the contrary: in his memoir, Miles recalls yearning for the sound of the Muddy Waters band, because his own music had grown so “abstracted.” This jibes with Greg Tate’s suggestion that the trumpeter “left post-bop modernism for the funk because he was bored fiddling with quantum mechanics and just wanted to play the blues again.”

The blues proposed a complicated racial dynamic for Davis. “Let the white folks have the blues,” he had told Herbie Hancock as the end of the ‘60s loomed. “They got ‘em, so they can keep ‘em.” In 1969 he told *Rolling Stone*: “All the white groups have got a lot of hair and funny clothes. They got to have on that shit to get it across.”

“But,” he added in the same interview, “Jimi Hendrix can take two white guys and make them play their asses off. You got to have a mixed group: one has one thing, and the other has another. For me, a group has to be mixed.” One can only imagine how Davis might have vibed with Jack Nitzsche, who played keyboards with Crazy Horse at the Fillmore East, and later made the assertion that Danny Whitten “gave Neil the blackness he lacks.” Race was rarely far from Miles’s mind during this era, but it probably loomed larger on this night than most. He had lately been fretting about how to reach young black audiences, and only one of those adjectives applied broadly to this Fillmore crowd.

And he was probably still seething from a fresh indignation. On March 3, a few days before this concert, Miles was sitting in his red Ferrari in a no-standing zone on Central Park South. Reportedly he was with a young woman, and he was dressed in a turban, a sheepskin coat and cobra-skin pants. An officer approached and asked for his registration. Somehow a pair of brass knuckles was discovered, and Miles, booked on a weapons violation, spent the night in jail. Later he told *Newsweek*: “It wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t been a black man driving a red car.”

What, then, to make of Davis opening for Young? Would he have been upset about playing an opening set for one of those all-white rock bands? There’s always danger in ascribing intentions to art, but the trumpet playing on *It’s About That Time* is slashing and aggressive, almost confrontationally virile. (The album *Jack Johnson*, when it landed, would echo this quality.) And yet it’s more than possible that Davis heard something appealing in Young’s music. Three months earlier, he had recorded a group hallucination on David Crosby’s “Guinevere,” which would go unreleased until 1979. And if Miles heard something redeeming in CSNY, he might have done the same with just the Y, despite — or maybe because of — the rugged musical vocabulary of the accompaniment.

And what did Neil get from Miles? It’s just as hard to say. His method of recording in the next few years would come to resemble Davis’s in its shambling, say-nothing, capture-everything intensity. He even had his Teo Macero in the producer David Briggs. But if Young was taken with Davis, he didn’t say much about it. He had plenty else on his mind, including an increasingly unmanageable

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Whitten, whose strong delivery at the Fillmore East — notwithstanding a few bum chords in “Wonderin’” — was deceptive.

Whitten would soon be cast out of Young’s performing entourage, as Shorter would decamp from Davis’s. Within a month, *Bitches Brew* would appear as if out of a haze, with a sound much cooler and more alluring what was heard at the Fillmore East. Miles would usher in the album’s release at the Fillmore West, sharing a bill with the Grateful Dead. (That gig would yield its own catalog release, in 1997.)

That was April; in May the Kent State shootings would prompt Young to write “Ohio.” CSNY would perform it on each of their shows the following month, back at the Fillmore East. August comes. Miles performs at the Isle of Wight Festival. September: Neil releases *After the Gold Rush*. Their sounds had both changed more than once already, and would change again. Along the way there would be obsolescence and resurgence, and finally something like permanence. (When Davis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2006, he once again joined the company of Young, a member since ’95.)

It’s almost strange to think that Neil Young and Miles Davis are icons of our culture, one stubborn and rumpled and the other truculent and proud. It’s strange because each is a study in restless motion, fumbling forward with steady purpose. Which is perhaps the singular recommendation for this Fillmore testimony: It captures both artists at a pinpoint moment, spinning hard on their separate trajectories, each on his way to someplace else.

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