Born to Be Blue and *Miles Ahead*: Why so much fiction when life is fascinating enough?

John Andrews
7 April 2016

Born to Be Blue*, written and directed by Robert Budreau;* Miles Ahead*, directed by Don Cheadle, written by Cheadle and Steven Baigelman*

Coincidentally, two films based on the lives and personas of leading post-World War II jazz musicians have been released recently. Each deals with only a fragment of a lengthy career, uses flashbacks and liberally mixes in fiction with historic truth.

Despite some reservations, I enjoyed *Born to be Blue*, written and directed by Robert Budreau and starring Ethan Hawke as Chet Baker. However, *Miles Ahead*, directed (and co-written) by Don Cheadle, who also plays Miles Davis in the film, is largely an embarrassment.

Davis (1926-1991) and Baker (1929-1988) had parallel careers, with notable similarities and notable differences. Both played trumpet, and occasionally its larger cousin, the flugelhorn, and both were renowned during the 1950s and early 1960s for their understated, strikingly beautiful improvisations centered in the horn's middle register. Davis spoke in a deep, hoarse whisper, while Baker had an alto voice that he used to great effect when singing romantic ballads. Both, although small physically, were extraordinarily charismatic and photogenic individuals who projected strong sex appeal.

Remarkably, each started his professional career in a quintet led by alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker (1920-1955), a troubled genius principally responsible—along with the more intellectual trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993)—for "bebop," the frenetic style of improvisation at the foundation of modern jazz.

After leaving Parker, Davis acquired a reputation during the late 1940s as the result of his collaboration with arranger Gil Evans, baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and others on an innovative series of recordings for Capitol Records that later became known as "The Birth of the Cool." Based in New York City, Davis led a series of cutting edge, critically acclaimed small groups throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Baker skyrocketed to popularity as a member of Mulligan's Los Angeles-based quartet during the early 1950s, his strikingly good looks and moody demeanor leading to comparisons with the actor James Dean. Because of his personal difficulties, however, Baker's celebrity appeal did not last.

Both Davis and Baker struggled with substance abuse and other personal demons, causing each to take a half-decade hiatus from music during the autumn of his career. Each then had an uneven comeback.

Baker, at the age of 58, fell to his death out of an Amsterdam hotel room window while loaded on cocaine and heroin. Davis died from multiple ailments in a California hospital three years later, at age 65.

There were also significant differences in their lives and musical trajectories, aside from race. Davis came from a well-to-do dentist's family that set him up with a trust fund to study music at Juilliard in New York. Baker's family moved to Southern California from Oklahoma when the future trumpeter was ten because his father, a frustrated country musician, found work in a Lockheed aerospace plant. Baker got most of his formal musical training during two stints in the US Army and at mostly working class El Camino Community College.

Davis joined Parker in 1945, at the dawn of the bebop era, Baker played with Parker during its sunset in 1952. Davis was a potent leader and innovator who rightfully took credit for changing the course of jazz on multiple occasions. Baker was a follower with little direct influence on other musicians.

Davis abandoned acoustic, straight-ahead jazz altogether in the late 1960s for an electrified, funky concoction that opened the door to mass audiences while alienating many of the admirers of his earlier work, while Baker remained true to his bebop and "cool" roots until the end.

The treatment of such complex cultural figures demands serious consideration of the interplay between the personal and the social factors underlying their art. Unfortunately, neither film makes any important attempt to do that.

Born to be Blue

Born to Be Blue opens with a confusing, but eventually comprehensible sequence in which Baker (Hawke), while suffering through opiate withdrawal in an Italian jail cell, is offered an acting role in a Hollywood film based on his own life. Next, a black-and-white flashback portrays Birdland, the New York City nightclub named after Charlie Parker, with Baker's quartet opening opposite Davis and Gillespie in 1954.

Davis (Kedar Brown) tells Baker he needs to live more before he will have anything to say musically, and sends a woman into Baker's dressing room to administer a syringe of heroin. *Born to Be Blue* cuts back to its film-within-a-film as the actress playing Baker's wife in the enactment of the Birdland dressing-room scene finds her husband nodding from the drugs while in the arms of Davis' friend.

Off the set, Baker and the actress, "Jane," nicely played by Carmen Ejogo as a supposed composite of Baker's several wives and girlfriends, become romantically involved after his charm predictably overcomes her obligatory "I don't want to date a junkie" resistance.

Baker undergoes various travails, including a beating over drug debts and Jane's horror over his continuing heroin use. He tries to shake that addiction. The film's events culminate in a predicable manner, with Baker's triumphant return to his jazz origins and his deliberate resumption of his old, bad habits.

A postscript describes Baker's subsequent life in Europe, where he remained, with occasional trips to the United States and one notable tour of Japan, until his death.

Yes, the plot is actually that hackneyed. But *Born to Be Blue* overall is sweet and reasonably well done, sort of mimicking the astringent sentimentality of a Chet Baker solo.

© World Socialist Web Site

It is correct that following the breakout recordings with Mulligan, Baker's quartet headlined opposite Miles Davis at Birdland in 1954. Davis expressed resentment over Baker's somewhat undeserved early popularity, but was not responsible for his addiction as Baker was no doubt using heroin long before the Birdland engagement.

Baker did move to Italy in the late 1950s, and was jailed there for 16 months on drug charges. He had done some acting, and producer Dino de Laurentiis approached him while in prison about making an autobiographical film, but no such project occurred until 1987, when fashion photographer Bruce Weber made *Let's Get Lost*, a disturbing documentary focused on the last year of the musician's life.

Baker returned to the United States in the mid-1960s and, after some initial musical success, sank deeply into addiction. The beating portrayed in the film occurred in 1969 and resulted in Baker's absence from music until 1974, when he played in a successful reunion with Mulligan.

There is no evidence that Baker at any stage of his life ever voluntarily refrained from narcotics. Among Baker's best late-career recordings is a Tokyo performance, however, available on video, while he was on methadone maintenance and free from heroin and cocaine because of Japan's strict enforcement of narcotics laws.

No actual Baker recording appears in the film, but several of his best solos from the mid-1950s are convincingly played note for note, and Ethan Hawke sings a particularly moving version of Baker's signature tune, "My Funny Valentine."

Miles Ahead

Miles Ahead is veteran actor Don Cheadle's debut as a director, and his lack of experience shows. Apparently with the support of heirs to the Miles Davis estate, Cheadle set out to craft a fiction about a "gangsta" that Davis would have enjoyed portraying. The resulting train wreck disgraces the legacy of one of the most important figures in twentieth century music.

The movie opens in the late 1970s, near the end of Davis' documented five-year absence from music. A fictional journalist played by Ewan McGregor forms a typically atypical "buddy" relationship with Davis, which plays out through the end of the movie in ever more ludicrous ways.

Cheadle crudely intersperses this material with flashbacks, which—taken together—comprise a thin, conventional "biopic" covering the productive middle years of Davis' career, during which he had a relationship with classical dancer Frances Taylor, elegantly played by Emayatzy Corinealdi, whom he married in 1960 and bitterly divorced amid allegations of physical abuse, infidelity and drugs eight years later.

The flashback scenes include snippets of Davis' finest music along with actors whom the cognoscenti will recognize as portraying, among others, Gil Evans, the arranger for the seminal late 1950s' albums "Miles Ahead," "Sketches of Spain" and "Porgy and Bess," as well as alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and pianist Bill Evans, three members of the historic sextet that recorded 1959's "Kind of Blue," the critical consensus selection for the greatest jazz album of all time.

One flashback portrays with a high degree of accuracy a notorious 1959 incident on the sidewalk in front of Birdland. While Davis was on a break, New York police officers beat him severely and arrested him on concocted assault charges. Although Davis would later write in his autobiography that the incident made him "feel bitter and cynical again when I was starting to feel good about the things that had changed in this country," *Miles Ahead* does nothing to explore such issues.

Whatever value the flashbacks possess is more than dissipated by the abrupt cuts back and forth to the fictional main story line, which consists of drug use, car chases and gun battles related to a purloined "session tape" tied to Davis' return to music.

In the final scene, the title "Miles Davis (May 26, 1926–)" rolls in the foreground. Miles never died, but lives on through his music—get it?

Why so much fiction?

One has to ask why all the fabricated nonsense is necessary when dramatizing a life as interesting as Miles Davis', and why the Chet Baker story could not be told with more respect for historical truth.

The best performances of Davis and Baker express in a quite beautiful way the aspirations for a better, more harmonious world that emerged out of the carnage of the Second World War and the ensuing struggle for democratic and civil rights. Jazz as an art form arose through the interaction of various ethnic and cultural strains—primarily, the descendants of slaves and exploited, mostly immigrant workers. The development of jazz over the course of the last century reflects both the ability of art to overcome divisions within the population and the emergence of the United States as the dominant power in the world.

Of course neither film has anything to say about such matters. Neither makes meaningful reference to the profound political and social movements that roiled the US during the post-war period.

One can perhaps understand a certain poetic license—after all, the filmmakers are attempting to squeeze an artist's life into the time allotted for a feature film. However, the distortions and outright fabrications that pepper these two works seem to be the means by which the writers and directors evade larger questions and, in that manner at least, reflect the general cultural weakness expressed in contemporary films.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site