

FROM THE EDITOR

At the first “Miles Davis and American Culture” conference in 1995, organized by Gerald Early and held on the Washington University campus, poet/novelist/biographer Quincy Troupe, Jr., spoke of his father, Negro League baseball player Quincy Troupe, and Miles Davis in the same breath. Something about St. Louis, Troupe said, spurred both men on to greatness.

After Troupe made this remark, I became interested in the question of what this “something” is. Is it a positive thing, an energy from the city’s people, or is it the exact opposite—still an “energy,” but one based in fear, racism, and anger?

In his autobiography, *20 Years Too Soon: Prelude to Major-League Integrated Baseball* (Missouri Historical Society Press, 1995), Troupe describes St. Louis as a place to escape to. In 1912, Quincy’s father and brother Buddy left their hometown of Dublin, Georgia, to find a new home for the family in St. Louis, away from the Deep South’s racism. After being denied food in a train station restaurant, Quincy’s mother told him and his brothers: “Boys, you know things is pretty bad here now for us. Like in that restaurant. That’s why Papa has taken Buddy to St. Louis. He don’t want Buddy or any of you to get into any trouble just ‘cause you’re black.”

Once in St. Louis, Quincy found a community of baseball players for encouragement and support. “I liked the old river city from the first moment I saw it,” he remembers, writing later: “It was really Compton Hill and the friends I had there that

“I liked the old river city from the first moment I saw it.”

—Quincy Troupe

shared an influence on my life. . . . Our names are well known now all over this hemisphere wherever baseball is played, and we like to claim Compton Hill as our home.”

In Davis’s autobiography, *Miles*, written with Quincy Troupe, Jr. (Touchstone, 1989), a different St. Louis emerges. “East St. Louis and St. Louis were country towns full of country people,” Davis writes. “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.”

Davis attributes St. Louis blacks’ “hipness” to the city’s role as a way station for African Americans

traveling to and from other places: Chicago, Kansas City, New Orleans, New York. They brought with them the musical styles of other places, deposited a bit of each in St. Louis—blues and jazz in all their forms—and moved on. Davis wanted to be in the one “hip” place all this music was moving on to, not just living in the crossroads. In 1944, at the age of eighteen, he achieved his dream by attending the Julliard School of Music in New York City.

Davis fell in with Charlie “Bird” Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in New York while Troupe was enjoying his greatest days in the Negro Leagues. The great catcher played not only for the St. Louis Stars, but also for the Kansas City Monarchs, the Bismarck Cubs, and the Mexico City Reds,

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—Miles Davis

among half a dozen others. Troupe, like Davis, assembled and played with some of the greatest talents of his day: the names of Paige, Bell, and Gibson in his baseball world paralleled those of Parker, Gillespie, and Coltrane in Davis’s jazz universe. Both men encountered staggering personal lows and humiliating racism in their long careers, but overall their art—their music, their baseball—sustained them.

Still, the questions remain: What does it mean that both of these men came from St. Louis? Does “coming from” a place mean anything beyond the accident of birth that it first and foremost is?

The essays and interviews in this issue of *Gateway Heritage* argue that “coming from” a place matters. Whether the influence is fundamentally nurturing, as it was for Troupe and the people who have shared their stories with Vida “Sister” Prince, or energizing, as it was for Davis and the faithful of St. Louis’s Islamic community, our place of origin is key in determining identity. Of course, the tensions and energy of a place mold and shape everyone who lives there, regardless of race, but it is the crucible of race that is the focus of this issue.

If we focus only on “great men” of the past like Troupe and Davis, however, it is possible to forget the unsung heroes that Julian Bond writes of in “Hope, Heroes, and History.” Troupe the baseball player or Davis the trumpet player are, as Bond says of Martin Luther King, “only half the man.” The other half is formed by everyday family, friends, community—the other half is formed by place.

—Tim Fox