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Selling the Dark Prince

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Say the name Miles Davis and it conjures images of the most poignant figure in jazz—ever. He changed the direction of jazz multiple times, and he was always at the precipice of the next groove of his own musical frontier. ... He's been studied and copied and debated. He's a hero and a villain, an artist's artist who always wanted the music to move forward.

Whether you know this about Miles Davis or just learned it, the people in charge of his legacy are working to make sure you never forget it.

"We want to raise the profile of Miles so people just don't remember Miles when they reach into their record collection or turn on the radio," says Darryl Porter, general manager of the Miles Davis estate. "We want it so that when people pick up a newspaper or magazine they have to see him."

Since the beginning of the year, Davis' estate has been managed by a new team comprised of family members and aided by business advisors who want to perpetuate his legacy. Plans are in the works for a motion-picture biography as well as recordings that remix classic Miles and pair him with soul, pop and hip-hop artists. His artwork comprising some 150 lithographs will be exhibited, and we'll soon see Miles showing up in ad campaigns.

As a brand, Miles Davis is probably the next great untapped resource, whose potential to penetrate the market for economic gain and celebrity capital has yet to be realized. In midsummer a number of deals linking Miles to fashion, commercials, music and the use of his likeness are in play. While sifting through the flood of options that confront his estate daily, the group is guided by one principle: "Would Miles do this?" ...

Jonathan Faber...specializes in handling the intellectual property of celebrities including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and Buddy Rich. Faber says deciding what marketing is out-of-bounds and carefully choosing which relationships are appropriate is part of the "branding process." This is a crucial decision by estates that determines how an artist is presented and under what circumstances. "We tend to regard our clients as brands to the extent that's appropriate for that client," Faber says. "We work with Princess Diana, and we would never say that she is a brand because that would be offensive to the people in charge of her rights now, and that is contrary to what she stood for. But you could also say that was her brand: an anti-brand."

A large part of branding involves the use of photographs because they provide an easy vehicle to project an artist in the public consciousness. For instance, there has been an effort on the part of Faber...to market only images of Holiday at her best: youthful, beautiful, vibrant, without the signs of abuse that wore on her countenance later in life. "You can't rewrite history and sometimes tragedy is part of that history," Faber says. "But we would never want to emphasize that."

Control over photos goes beyond projecting a certain aesthetic to the public. It's also important for estates to prevent images from being connected to causes or companies in conflict with the wishes of the artist or the family. Faber says Marilyn Monroe's estate won't license images of her with fur. He has also worked with Humphrey Bogart, who has a cigarette in almost all his photos. "He died of lung cancer, and the family doesn't want to see advertising with Bogart smoking a cigarette," Faber says. "It would be lucrative for Bogart

to license tobacco companies, but they don't want it." ...

Faber says because Miles Davis, like Jimi Hendrix, oozes cool whenever he is thought of or seen, he becomes a metaphor for all things hip, and that quality will be transferred to the product lines he endorses. He believes this dynamic is at work when marketing Ellington. "If you're an ad executive and you have a company that you want to be thought of as sophisticated and intelligent and unique, Duke Ellington is all of those things. And it becomes shorthand because the public already has all of those built-in feelings and emotional connection to him, and it gets assigned to the company whether consciously or subconsciously."

One of the Davis estate's top priorities is to move discussions for a motion picture of the artist's life from the tentative stages to greenlight status. ...

"Hollywood is tripping all over itself to lock up story-life rights," says Faber. "We are constantly being solicited to give options for the right to pursue investors and get everything in place for a biopic. If the artist still maintains publishing rights, it can be very significant for the estate." ...

The caretakers of his legacy are taking the genius of his life to new audiences through the Web and motion pictures, and they're reinventing his music for the next generation of fans while maintaining his presence as a key figure in classic jazz. ...

Excerpted from the article by Marc Hopkins

