Hero Worship and Moral Uncertainty

Each of these things is just like the other,
just like the other.

Bill Cosby. Roman Polanski. Woody Allen. Miles Davis. Jameis Winston.

I read this Ta-Nehisi Coates piece in *The Atlantic* – a writer's mea culpa regarding the rape allegations swirling around Mr. Pudding Pop – while I was listening to Miles Davis, just minutes after our local fishwrap announced yet another postponement to the Jameis Winston sexual assault hearing. And I really wish I had not stumbled across this particular two and two.

I love the music of Miles Davis. Every period, every style. My widely shared opinion: he's the musical equivalent of Picasso, Joyce, Jonas Salk, Einstein, &c. If number of plays and space on the shelf mean anything, Miles is certainly one of the top three musicians in my little world.

And he was an admitted wife beater, and according to some, a rapist.<fn>Stories I was told by a musician who knew Miles are Rick James-level stuff. Hair raising.</fn>

I grew up with Bill Cosby. Fat Albert, driving in San Francisco, his brother Russell. *I Spy* and the *Cosby Show(s)*. Jello and hey hey hey. And it's beginning to seem that he has been a serial rapist most of these years. My first Woody Allen movie was *Play it Again, Sam*. I was 13. That night, I stumbled across a movie on TV called *Casablanca*. Kismet. My ongoing

devotion to the old classics began that night. I owe that debt to Woody Allen, not to mention admiring his work for 40 years. And yeah, he has nasty cloud over his head, too. Polanski made some brilliant movies and raped a child. The only difference from the others mentioned here: he pleaded guilty to rape – before he fled the country to escape punishment – and is thus the only one of this group to actually carry a legal finding of guilt. The rest are technically *not guilty*, if not quite innocent.

And then there's Jameis Winston. Heisman Trophy winner, leader of a championship football team, star baseballer, and hero to many in my adopted hometown – none of which I give two tiny shits about. And according to at least one accuser, he's a sexual predator.

I like to consider myself a moral person, one who would never do such a thing, harrumph, and how horrible that the police have seemingly conspired to protect this young man from the hand of justice, won't someone consider the victim(s?), is football really that damned important where are our priorities? They let those guys get away with anything. I hold these truths to be self-evident as I sit here listening to Miles Davis, and oh by the way, I watched part of *Chinatown* (again) just last week. ("You see, Mr. Gittes, most people never have to face the fact that at the right time and the right place, they're capable of ANYTHING.")

I've watched Winston play a few games, and I get it, I really do, I understand why the coaches and athletic directors and university presidents and the diehard fans are so willing to suspend their judgment. On the field, Winston is Miles. He's so good at what he does, and so many people have come to depend upon him for their own success, that of course they protect him. Just like Miles' people protected him.

But I'm self-righteously appalled at the special treatment doled out to athletes. I generate high dudgeon when I read

about schools sweeping campus rape under the rug to protect the institution. Give these people their just deserts! Jerry Sandusky? Buggering priests and the bishops who protect them? Castration is too good for them! Cosby? Old and in the way. Polanski and Woodman? Who cares, long past their prime.

And yet I treasure the 47 Miles Davis cds on the shelf.

How would you feel if a football player raped you or someone you love? How would you feel if your favorite musician/comedian/etc. had done so? Either way, you'd probably be fit to kill. What if the victim were a stranger, the attacker a friend? Where do your loyalties fall now?

Would Seminole apologists have different thoughts about the victim in the Winston case if the perpetrator had been Miles Davis? Would the people who view the quarterback's victim as a gold-digging opportunist have more sympathy for her had her assailant been a jazz musician they don't care about?

There are too many reasons why rape culture is insidious, but it is largely due to widespread, reflexive excuse-making and victim blaming. Boys will be boys. Let's not let one incident ruin a young man's entire life. And hey, she was drunk/dressed wrong/out too late/should have known better, what was she thinking going there, of course she was asking for it, obviously it's her fault this nice boy is in trouble now. (A CNN anchor took victim blaming to a new low by suggesting to one of Cosby's victims that she could have prevented the assault if only she had bitten his dick off.) And so on. A litany of bullshit. But…

Do personal behaviors undermine exceptional achievements? Should I pretend that Miles is not one of the most important musicians of ever? Am I off the hook, morally speaking, because he's dead and no longer a menace? Or should I take a firm moral stance and not listen to his music anymore? Should the legions of fans who turn out or tune in to watch FSU

football take a noble stand and turn their collective back whenever Winston is in the game? Switch their allegiance to a team or sport that has a stricter moral profile?<fn>Good luck with that.</fn> Are consumers responsible for the moral integrity of the entertainers?

The hell if I know.

What if you remodeled your house to become your dream home? The quality of the work shimmering with care and craft, your new space everything you'd dreamed of, and you discover the contractor is a rapist. Would you have it torn down?

(And none of this even begins to look at the role of race in this dilemma, but if anyone expects this aging white guy to start moralizing about race, you have a long wait ahead. Suffice to say that it is more than passing strange that the most lurid tales of sexual and physical assault out of the sports world shorthand young black men in ways that DW Griffith would recognize even from his grave. To be blunt, most Jameis defenders care more about another FSU championship than they do about his personal well-being. If he were not a star he would be seen as just another thug, just another example of the sad decline of our society.)

The root driver of rape culture lies in a common refusal to face rape as a crime, full stop. This goes for the rapist and those who would defend him. Guys, it's so fucking simple I can't believe I have to take the time to write this: If your target says no, is too drunk to say no, is too afraid to say no, is passed out naked, if you're in a line of other guys taking turns, if she said yes once but says no any time after that, any of that….IT'S NOT OKAY. Period. Ever. It really should begin and end right there. But since the world is full of assholes who believe right and wrong are considerations for other people, let's move to the next link in the chain of enablement.

The casual reflex of many in law enforcement to treat rapes as he said-she said events would never pertain to any other crime.<fn>“So you say he stole your necklace, but he says you were flaunting your jewelry late at night. How do we know you weren’t just leading him on?”</fn> This becomes especially pernicious when powerful institutions (often more than one, in collusion) work hard to discredit crimes that threaten their reputations. The way local police and FSU athletics colluded to undermine the investigation into the Winston assault charges signals (at least) two things.

First, and most importantly, it sends a strong message to anyone who is a victim: Come forward and we will savage you. Go ahead and complain, we will make your life a living hell. And, aside from the choices and actions of the rapist, this leap to examine the victim for any personal flaw that might explain away the crime is the greatest contributor to a rape-excusing culture.

But this impulse to protect at all costs also signals that the institution itself is forever suspect. In the end, only the feverishly devout will believe proclamations of innocence. The stain of guilt is made permanent, deserved or not. We’ll never know if Winston is utterly innocent of wrongdoing or guilty as original sin. Face it, his name will always trigger an “of course he’s guilty” reflex. The institution’s failure to embrace full and transparent accountability pegs the accused and his protectors as inherently untrustworthy.

I admit that this two plus two equals Miles/Jameis bugs the shit out of me. I would rather enjoy great art without the burden of wondering whether my favorites are moral avatars. Sports fans probably feel the same way. My personal bias is that music is “more important” than football, that great art outlives the fleeting excitement of the last minute touchdown. And *of course,* everyone knows that football culture celebrates violence and savagery and is therefore to blame in a way that Music is not. But that’s a lot of stable sweepings, no matter

how “true” it may be. No matter how corrupt and exploitative the NCAA/NFL has become, the music industry is no better.<fn> Although you never saw fans who preferred Clifford Brown or Dizzy Gillespie heckling Miles from the cheap seats the way rivals taunt opposition athletes who are under suspicion.</fn> Whichever of these allegations is true, and no matter which culture gave rise, there are no excuses. There’s no excuse for the unwanted advance, the ‘accidental’ hand on the ass, the ‘hey, sweetie, how about a smile?’ intimidation, the black eye, the busted lip. And certainly no excuse for rape. No excuses all the way down. Period.

The always-terrific Charles Pierce summed up the Cosby situation thus: “I decline to be disillusioned. I laughed at his work when I was young. I think he probably should have been standing in the dock while I was doing so. That’s the way of the world.”

And so with Miles or Jameis. Miles dodged the prosecutor and Winston may do the same. Cosby (and Sandusky, and more priests/bishops/carpenters/accountants/you-name-it than you can count) beat the devil for years before justice caught up. Some criminals (because really, that’s the word for it) get away with it forever. Karma and comeuppance are as random as the weather. It’s a sad and ancient truth.<fn>”Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.”</fn> Fame and great talent make getting away with it more likely, in large part because too many people take a personal stake in affirming the hero’s good reputation. And that’s where we go wrong. We confuse the heroic achievement with the person. And we protect the guilty at the expense of the victims past, present, and more horrifically, future.

Fans may be disappointed when personal behavior means that our favorites cannot pursue their profession, when we are deprived of the thrills they provide. Tough shit. We have no right to their genius, any more than they are justified in using their genius to excuse a crime. Hendrix died, Bird died, Garcia

died, all as a result of personal behaviors. It does not diminish their art. If Miles had been jailed in 1960, 1970, or 1985, it would not have changed the quality of the art that came before. If Cosby is chased from the arena, he will remain one of the best and most influential comic creations of the past 75 years. Jameis? Guilty or not, he's won 26 games in a row, and is an undefeated national champ and Heisman winner. So far. That's real achievement, criminal or not.

In *Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes famously suggested that the conflation of the author with the work is a fundamental error. I recognize the tension between the imperfection of humans and the glimpse of transcending perfection offered by the great composition/novel/two-handed backhand down the line, &c. I can appreciate the artistry and still believe Miles/Jameis should be in the dock. It's not about forgiveness; that is not mine to give anyway. But I can ultimately accept that unless their misdeeds are directly related to their work (e.g., cheating or plagiarism), their misdeeds are distinct from their achievements.

Like Pierce, I refuse to be disillusioned. And I refuse – with a lingering pang of guilt – to give up my Miles cds. Mea culpa.

Soft rollout part iii – Grand Opening on Monday

Join us Monday morning for the Grand Opening of this emerging blogular powerhouse. We'll have cupcakes, candy corn, fruit punch, frozen egg rolls, and Jager

shots. Please invite all your cool friends who don’t realize they’re cool.

In the meantime, here is a piece of awesome from the mental_floss website. There will be a quiz.

Soft rollout part ii – My Favorite World

Here’s the unofficial debut of My Favorite World, the weekly Wednesday i2b feature. A preview teaser of what next week’s grand opening will bring.

Monday – “The Moral Uncertainty of Hero Worship: Each of these things is just like the other, just like the other”

Wednesday – A few words about a new recording from two of my favorite guitarists.

Just Another Blog from FLA

Welcome to the about-to-be *Immune to Boredom* blog.

From December 1, 2014, until December 2, 2015, you can count on:

- No Moral Monday: A post with no moral. Stories, essays, opinions, questions. But no moral or epiphany.
- My Favorite World: A Wednesday post about trivial things

that are as important as your life.

- Wanton Words: Whatever I want. Whenever I want.

Check out the manifesto and about page. Regular posting begins Monday, December 1.