In jazz, more than in any other musical genre, recordings abound that are marketed as the last concert, the last date, the final recording, or some variation on those themes. To name a few: *Last Date* (Eric Dolphy, Fontana 1964), *The Beginning and the End* (Clifford Brown, Columbia 1973), *The Last Waltz* (Bill Evans Trio, Milestone 2000), *His Final Work* (Charles Mingus, Gateway Records 1984), and *Last Testament* (Fats Waller, Drive Archive 1996). There are many more, even though these records do not necessarily offer what their album covers suggest. Indeed, the status of final performances is regularly challenged by other recordings that claim to carry the true final notes. For instance, Dolphy’s *Last Date* (June 2, 1964) is supplanted by the sessions of June 11, 1964, which surfaced later and have been released as *Unrealized Tapes: The Very Last Recording* (West Wind 1988; reissued as *Last Recordings* [DIW 1988]). Similarly, Stan Getz’s nominal *Final Concert Recording* (JVC 1990) was followed by four final concerts recorded in Copenhagen’s Jazzhus Montmartre (March 3–6, 1991), issued on Verve as *People Time* (1992), and reissued as the almost inevitable *People Time: The Complete Recordings* (Sunnyside 2010).

At times, existent recordings are repackaged as final recordings, such as *Lionel Hampton Presents the Music of Charles Mingus* (WWLP 1977), which has been reissued as *Charles Mingus: His Final Work* (Blue Vox 1983). Equally, Billie Holiday’s 1958 recording with Ray Ellis’s orchestra for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), simply titled *Billie Holiday*, was reissued after her death as *The Last Recording*. The appeal of swan songs apparently is such that there is even a fake final album, not merely retitled or mistitled as many other last dates are, but truly doctored to sound like a new find. According to various sources, *Bill Evans Trio: The Very Last Performance at Fat Tuesday’s, September 10, 1980* (Domino, also issued as *Bill Evans Trio: Last Note*) in truth brings together a number of recordings which were earlier released on *Turn Out the Stars* in a different order and even at slightly different speeds. *Turn Out the Stars* contains Evans’s *Final Village Vanguard Recordings*, the album jacket informs the prospective buyer: to the recording industry the last notes of the real jazz greats can be broken down by venue. There is also a *Last European Concert* by Evans (MSI Music 1980) and *His Last Concert in Germany* (West Wind 1996).

What once was just a performance (be it in the studio or on stage) in hindsight may turn out to be a final performance. This tends to invite listeners to hear the music differently, as the recording accrues new layers of meaning in light of the impending death of the featured star. Hence, Getz’s final concerts in Denmark have yielded “a brilliant farewell recording” (Yanow n.d.), a “wonderful testament” (Adcock 2011), and “a passionate coda” (Duda n.d.). The mere fact that these were Getz’s ultimate public appearances makes the recording valuable: “It may not be the greatest Getz
on disc, but it’s likely the last”—Lange (1992, 42) states in his Downbeat review that rates the CD with four out of five stars. Although the vast majority of the songs had been on Getz’s recent and not so recent repertoire, Duda feels that they “seem chosen for their emotional content, as if Getz were aware this might be his swan song” (Duda n.d.). To Lange, the record transcends the ordinary, since it is “as much a statement about courage, and perseverance, and creativity defining a life, as it is a musical experience” (1992, 42). Another reviewer, though aware that the earlier Final Concert Recording is mislabeled, still hears that record as a “wonderful farewell,” too. As reviewer Adcock admits:

Last recordings always carry great poignancy, and there’s no exception here [in People Time] . . . the sense of finality, mortality, combined with the intimate club setting and a knowledgeable, appreciative audience, makes this a recording to savor more than most.

(Adcock 2011)

The Ghost of Gil: Miles Davis

Critics have felt that poignancy in Miles Davis’s July 8, 1991 revisiting of recordings he made with Gil Evans—the late 1940s works collected on Birth of the Cool (1957), and the Miles-plus-orchestra-works of Miles Ahead (1957), Porgy and Bess (1959), and Sketches of Spain (1960). The concert was envisioned as a tribute to Gil Evans (who had passed away March 20, 1988), but it is generally seen as Davis’s last concert. Virtually every reviewer connects the recording (Warner Brothers 1993) to his passing almost twelve weeks later. That connection in itself is not remarkable, but it shapes how commenters assess the concert. As with Getz’s example above, its meaning is partly derived from the notion that the concert was Davis’s final public appearance (even though it was not), which encourages a search for deeper meanings. For Johnson (2010), the concert “retains an aura of closure, a last act in the epic musical life of Miles Davis.” According to CD- Universe, “it’s as if he [Davis] knew that, in a spiritual sense, he had to face this music one last time” (“Miles and Quincy: Live at Montreux”). Elsewhere the reviewer observes that Davis has “come full circle,” which suggests that there was nothing left to do for him after this performance: he was ready to go. Entertainment Weekly called Live at Montreux “simply the most exquisite music of tragedy this side of a New Orleans funeral” (Hajdu 1993).

Reportedly, Davis had reservations about doing the concert (Tingen 2001, 26), but was lured into it by otherworldly powers. Davis’s trumpet-double Wallace Roney provided the details: “I’m telling you that Miles told me he did the concert because he had looked in the mirror and saw Gil [Evans] and Gil had told him that he got to do it” (Cole 2005, 426). Perhaps there was a more earthly motivation for Davis to revisit this material: “When asked directly why he was effectively going back on his principles and playing the gig, Davis answered, ‘in the first place, they offered me a lot of money’” (Cook 2007, 316). Others maintain that Davis had a master plan and saw to it that through this record “his final breaths on the horn would call out from the afterlife to silence us all again” (Tate 1993).

The reviewer at CD-Universe has Davis practically dying on stage, like a mythological warrior on the battle field: “and at the end, when confronted with the incantory, guitar-like grandeur of ‘Solea,’ Miles rises one last time to the challenge of these ancient themes, going out like a champion . . . with his boots on” (“Miles and Quincy: Live at Montreux” [ellipses in original]). But Davis was not dead yet and neither did he play the concert “just a few weeks before he was hospitalized for the last time” (Hajdu 1993). In fact, Davis continued to tour
Europe on a heavy schedule that had him playing almost every other day in the month of July. He did a reunion concert in Paris at La Grande Halle De La Villette with a number of his former sidemen, played at the North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands, did two concerts at the Nice Jazz Festival, played with Pat Metheny in Rome, and ended his tour in Vienna by way of Luxembourg. Back in the United States he appeared at three more concerts, including his final concert at the Hollywood Bowl, August 25, 1991 (Werner 2016). Miles Davis passed away September 28, 1991.

I'm Old and Going: Ben Webster

Final concerts tend to vividly stand out to those who were present and are rife with anecdotes that pre-shade the ensuing fatal events. A case in point is Ben Webster’s last concert in Leiden, the Netherlands. It has all the necessary ingredients: a bootleg recording, prophetic last words, and for those-in-the-know, the passing of the flame.

Thursday, September 6, 1973, was a pretty warm late-summer night, and Ben Webster played in jazz club De Twee Spieghels (The Two Mirrors, founded 1971), with the Irv Rochlin Trio, with Rochlin on piano, Henk Haverhoek on double bass, and Peter Ypma on drums. According to Ben Walenkamp, founder and owner of the De Twee Spieghels, Webster was not well.

I had some one-hundred people inside and about the same number outside. The performance has become historic, not because he played so well—on the contrary: the man was not in shape. Perhaps he actually couldn’t play at all. . . . Had this not been his final concert, it would have been one to forget fast, really fast. (cited in Mentink 2009, 138)

The concert had been recorded on an Akai stereo audiocassette recorder by one of the students in the audience, Ton Olde Monnikhof. No one had thought much of the tape, but it took on a new meaning when Dutch TV announced on September 20, 1973 that Ben Webster had passed away at Amsterdam St. Lucas Hospital. “We were devastated,” Walenkamp recalls, “but we had run a tape and immediately thought that there might be some nice little business in this” (cited in Mentink 2009, 141). Decades later, Walenkamp (who reportedly received a meager 290 guilders for the tape) regretted the recording: “That LP-record . . . was terrible. [The bootleg tape recording] was of course never intended for an LP” (Deroose 2010). Pianist Rochlin was shocked when Record company EMI/Bovema called him to announce they had a tape of the concert. “I said, ‘you shouldn’t release that, Ben didn’t play well at all.’ But the guy said ‘I’m not calling you to ask for permission, we have secured the rights already. I’m calling you to ask for the titles of the pieces.’” (cited in Mentink 2009, 141)

Adding insult to injury, his name was misspelled on the record sleeve as Irv Rocklin. Looking back, drummer Peter Ypma said: “It was a bad quality thing, and they still made a record out of it, with the help of all kinds of professional gear, a double-LP, mind you, and it went all over the world. . . . I was deeply embarrassed by the quality.” (Deroose 2010)

In sum, Webster was not well, his playing was at times painfully inadequate, the recording balance was off, and the tape was technically inferior, but the value was that it captured Webster’s last notes. As an extra, it contained his final words in public, too. At the end of the concert, Webster took the microphone and shared a childhood memory with the audience, which in hindsight resonated with overtones.
Thank you. Now, what I would like to say because all of you are youngsters, and I heard, when I was a kid, from an old [inaudible], he said, yeah: “Son, you are young and growing, and I’m old and going, so have your fun while you can.” [audience approval.] Say it . . . say it in Dutch, my man. [Audience member: “Can you repeat it?”] Yeah, [inaudible]. You’re young and growing, and I’m old and going, so have your fun while you can.

Webster’s closing remarks added further mystique to the concert, and this certainly has not been missed by his biographers. Frank Büchmann-Møller, for instance, hears the recording of the concert quite differently than the original performers Rochlin and Ypma. To him, Webster played very emotionally this evening. . . . It is as if he senses that this is to be his last performance. . . . After the last tune, and following the applause, Ben addresses the audience. The young audience seems to understand him, and they applaud. However, they have no way of knowing just how prophetic this short speech would be.

(Büchmann-Møller 2006, 317–318)

Indeed, Webster’s words helped to construct the mythology of the event. “If I have to believe the people, some 1,000 were present [that night],” said Walenkamp (Deroose 2010).

Mentink’s book on the history of jazz in Leiden dedicates five pages to the concert and its makeshift recording. Two eyewitnesses, Bert Schrier and Pim Ziegelaar, are pictured holding their original Last Concert LPs. Schrier remembers it clearly: “it is etched in my memory, I see everything sharply: Wednesday September 6, 1973 [actually Thursday]. I think daily of the last concert of Ben Webster, the tenor giant” (Mentink 2009, 142). He continues to list some of the pieces Webster played, complete with durations (“no piece shorter than 6:45”): “They played ‘Straight, No Chaser’ as last number, which lasted 12 minutes and 45 seconds” (Mentink 2009, 142). Ziegelaar quotes Webster’s closing remark verbatim and assigns himself a voice in the sonic document: “the silence is longer than his [Webster’s] words, then there are the applause and cheers well into the mouse holes of the bar. . . . I hear myself over the crowd: ‘Yeah man’” (Mentink 2009, 143).

However, the LP does not give a complete registration of the evening. In the audience were tenorist Bob Rigter and his spouse Jasperina Rigter, who took the color slides that night that were used for LP cover. Bob Rigter recounts how Webster was not feeling well at the end of the second set and when he returned from the bar, he asked Rigter to play. Rigter did not want to; he said he did not play anymore and he didn’t have his horn with him, but Webster gave him his neck strap and “Ol’ Betsy” and insisted Rigter played the blues, which he did. “After I had given his instrument back, he played for a while. It didn’t go that well. Then he got up and gave a little speech. . . . The next day he was hospitalized” (Deroose 2010). The story also figures in Rigter’s novel Jazz in de Oostzee (Jazz in the Baltic Sea). Here, Webster specifically seeks him out in the audience while he repeats his childhood memory. A couple of days later, Rigter’s wife—heavily pregnant—brings up the evening.

Did you hear . . . you should start playing again. Have your fun while you can.

He wasn’t talking to me. He was addressing those students. They are young.
You got shit in your ears?
How’s that?
Son is singular, goofball.

(Rigter 1995, 105)
Swan Songs

Rigter indeed went back to playing. What is more, the Rigters’s son Simon, who “witnessed the last concert of Ben Webster prenatally, and was born on Webster’s dying day” (Rigter, n.d.) has become a professional tenor saxophonist, too. While the Rigters themselves refrain from making the all too obvious connection, others find the suggestion too compelling to resist: “Two weeks later . . . at the foot of the old Westertoren [Western Church Tower] Webster blows his last, soundless, short melodic ostinato, and baby Simon Rigter sighs deeply for the first time. A heavy task awaits him” (Ziegelaar, quoted in Mentink 2009, 143).

The Beginning and the End: Clifford Brown

Like Webster’s closing remarks, those of Clifford Brown issued on The Beginning and the End have become part of the jazz canon. According to the jacket, the record gives “the first and last recorded performances” of this much-celebrated trumpet player, who died in a car crash at the age of twenty-five. On the bootleg recording Brown addresses the audience: “Thank you very much, you make me feel so wonderful. It’s been a pleasure being here but I really must go now, it’s so hot.” These words have not failed to move listeners: “Brown’s death was one of the great tragedies in jazz history and his ‘goodbyes’ to the audience are ironic and, in retrospect, quite sad; don’t listen to them twice” (Yanow n.d.). Or: “Listen to the promise contained in the last song Clifford ever played just hours before that promise was snuffed out on the Pennsylvania Turnpike” (Aaron 2012). Strikingly, like Webster’s final words, those of Brown were captured on a bootleg recording, made unbeknownst to him. Still, listeners tend to hear them as prophetic statements by musicians who had the premonition that this would be their last time in public and therefore are addressing a far larger audience. To trumpeter Christian Scott, Brown “sort of says a farewell to the world” (Ellis 2013).

However, the date of the supposed final concert is hazy. Is it from June 25, 1956, as the liner notes would have it (hours before Brown died in a car accident), or rather from May 31, 1955? Saxophonist Billy Root (1934–2013), who played with Brown on the recorded concert, has challenged the date on the issued recording as “a lie” (Rusch 1990), because he was on tour with Stan Kenton the night Brown died and could not possibly have played the gig. That has not necessarily changed people’s views. “[Phil] Schaap, a jazz historian who has studied Brown’s career as closely as anyone, says there is nothing—aside from Root’s statement—to prove that the bootleg tape was made in 1955,” writes the Washington Post (Schudel 2006).

To put an end to what has become a controversy, Don Glanden has looked into the issue for his documentary Brownie Speaks. “One very important part of our research has to do with the details surrounding Clifford’s death” (Schermmer 2014), and therefore Glanden tracked down Ellis Tollin, the co-owner of Music City and the drummer on the tape, who provided him with Music City newsletters that would confirm that the recording indeed took place on the night of Brown’s fatal accident. Much to Glanden’s surprise, “far from proving that the Columbia date was accurate, the newsletters proved the opposite” (Glanden 2014, 14), since they were dated May 31, 1955 and June 7, 1955. Tollin’s letters bore out what Root had been insisting all along: “they took a tape and it was like . . . maybe a year before he [Brown] passed away” (cited in Rusch 1990, 8). Possibly Brown did play again at Music City on the night he died, but that concert was not recorded. Glanden: “almost everyone we talked to mixed up the night of the recording [May 31, 1955] with the night Clifford was killed [June 27, 1956], so they got the wrong tunes and the wrong personnel” (Schermmer 2014). Where for Schrier and Ziegelaar the memories of Webster’s last concert seem to be shaped both by the concert and the LP, for “nearly all of the people” interviewed for Brownie Speaks the recording fully overwrote their actual recollections of the concert, even if they had played with him that night. Neither Ellis Tollin nor Mel “Ziggy” Vines (tenor sax), Sam Dockery (piano), and Ace Tisone (bass) ever publicly challenged the date of the Music City concert as issued on The Beginning and the End.
The Long Fall: Chet Baker

Chet Baker’s final hours have gone into public memory quite differently. Baker’s swan song wasn’t a last concert like Webster’s, nor a concert misdated as final, like Brown’s, but a final concert that never took place. Baker was scheduled to perform in the Singer Concertzaal in Laren, the Netherlands, with Archie Shepp and his quartet for a live radio broadcast on May 12, 1988, but he didn’t show up. His behavior was notoriously erratic because of his heroin addiction and he had missed other concerts before, but this absence accrued relevance in light of the ensuing events. In the early hours of Friday, May 13, Baker was found dead on the pavement in front of the Hotel Prins Hendrik, Prins Hendrikkade 55 in Amsterdam, next to a metal pin that was part of the vertical sliding window of his hotel room. According to biographer De Valk (2007), it was a warm night and Baker must have opened the window, also known as a sash window or a guillotine window. Once opened, the upper part has to be fixated with a metal pin that dangles from a chain. Baker, in all likelihood high on drugs, must have sat in the open window, lost his balance, and grabbed the pin, but to no avail. Contrary to some reports (for example Koert 2011), his absence at the concert had nothing to do with his fatal fall. He died well after the gig ended.

Many have been fascinated by the events that led to Baker’s death. Both his substance abuse and the fatal fall are the cornerstones of most biographies and documentaries, and the titles speak volumes. James Gavin’s Deep in a Dream: The Long Night of Chet Baker, and Bruce Weber’s Let’s Get Lost evoke a life led in a heroin haze. Others predominantly focus on his death, such as Willem Ouwerkerk’s documentary Chet Baker: The Last Days, or curiosities such as Michael Naura’s audio-project Chet Baker: Der Lange Sturz (The Long Fall 2002), “a stage fantasy,” in which Naura has Baker hallucinating in the hour before his death. Then there are Bill Moody’s jazz murder mysteries, loosely centered around the deaths of various musicians. In Looking for Chet Baker (Moody 2002), the book’s hero digs “into the mysterious death of Chet Baker” (Moody 2014). The whodunit has been published with different covers that show Chet Baker in the still of an open window, or a trumpet on the pavement. (Another Moody crime novel, Sound of the Trumpet [Moody 1997], evolves around “recordings purported to be the lost tapes of Clifford Brown” [Moody 2014].) Even the title of Baker’s posthumously published, unfinished autobiography is morbid, given his death: As Though I Had Wings: The Lost Memoir (1998). In the list of Baker-related oddities, we would not want to miss David Wilcox’s My Old Addiction, also known as Chet Baker’s Unsung Swan Song, a piece that takes its inspiration from “what may have been going through Chet Baker’s mind that fateful night in Amsterdam” (Leemans 2010).

Jeroen De Valk’s Chet Baker: His Life and Music is one of the few publications that carry a more factual title. The author seeks to provide a counter-narrative to the by-now canonized stories of the junkie-musician and tries to debunk the conspiracies that surround his death. De Valk has carefully researched Baker’s death, although he feels the topic is overrated. Baker “fell out of the window only once, while he made music professionally for forty years” (De Valk 2013, 18). To the Amsterdam police, Baker’s fall was by all means an accident. Murder has been ruled out since Baker’s hotel room was locked from the inside, the window had fallen shut without the pin to keep it open, and there were no signs of a fight. All his valuables were still there. Suicide seems unlikely, too. Why would one jump with a window-pin in hand? Amsterdam police-inspector Bloos [pronounce as in hose] said that given the drugs found in his room, Baker “maybe thought he could fly” (De Valk 2007, 14). De Valk’s championing of Baker’s music and his quest for a more rational assessment of his life and death has had little success, he complains in an issue of Jazz Bulletin (“25 years after the fall,” the cover somewhat infelicitously reads). A case in point is Robert Brudeau’s 2009 film short The Deaths of Chet Baker, in which a Chet Baker look-alike acts out the possible scenarios that made him fall: accident, suicide, murder. In just under three minutes, Baker goes out of the window three times.
Conclusion

The narratives spun around the final concerts of Webster, Baker, Davis, and Brown reinforce different tropes. All are iconic figures in jazz, but they occupy quite separate spaces. Ben Webster and his “Ol’ Betsy” are authentic and profound; he radiates feeling, warmth, and truth. That they have witnessed Webster’s final performance instills deep pride in local jazz fans, and the accounts they have cultivated around the event lend it authenticity and significance. Webster has become theirs to a certain extent: the Leiden fans share male-bonding stories about urinating with him outside the club during breaks (Mentink 2009, 143). His alcohol addiction is viewed amiably and is the source for good-natured anecdotes. Webster, even when drunk and terminally ill, somehow remained in control. His fellow musicians were painfully aware that he played badly toward the end—which is denied by his biographer—but his music somehow still expresses a deep human understanding. He is the wise old man who foresees his death and maybe his spirit has moved on in a local jazz musician. It won’t get any better than that. Webster’s final concert has affected the lives of those who were present that fateful night. Twenty-seven years later Rigter, Ypma, Haverhoek, and Rochlin (present, but not playing) re-enacted the event in the Twee Spieghels (Deroose 2010).

Chet Baker, by contrast, was controversial. He was the cool, James Dean look-alike, who true to film-noir plots tragically destroyed himself and died violently. Both as a musician and a man, Baker didn’t know what he was doing. He is seen by many as a fraud who couldn’t read music and had no knowledge of chords, an irresponsible junkie whose music was shallow and subordinate to his dangerous lifestyle. Baker’s socially unacceptable heroin addiction was about giving up control, and song titles that play on that theme are used as titles for books and documentaries: Deep in a Dream, Let’s Get Lost. The final decade of Baker’s life—when according to De Valk he played some of his best concerts and record dates—tends to be overlooked by most of his biographers, partly because it played out in Europe. That his fall was an accident doesn’t quite fit the script, and consequently commentators have tended to discount the evidence. Baker’s life and music continue to spark controversy, and the memorial plaque on the Amsterdam Hotel Prins Hendrik underlines that: “His music lives on for those willing to hear and feel.”

In terms of controversiality, Miles Davis stands somewhere between the genuinely loved Ben Webster and the mistrusted Chet Baker. Kind of Blue (1959) is arguably the best-selling record in jazz and Davis’s recordings with Gil Evans have reached a large audience, too. Yet, his public persona was that of the “angry man of jazz” who arrogantly played with his back to his fans and did not make nice conversation. Furthermore, much as he has been hailed for his work with his famous quintets in the 1950s and 1960s, Davis’s move to rock-jazz, fusion, and pop covers in the final decades of his career have not fared well with many critics. His much-lauded innovative stance backfired when he moved in directions deemed too commercial. Stanley Crouch called Davis “the most brilliant sellout in the history of jazz” in a rant in the New Republic (1990). Miles’s one-off revisiting of earlier material at Montreux is welcomed almost with a sense of relief, and many view this break with his own do-not-look-back doctrine as a sign. Given Davis’s frail health, it is not hard to figure out the symbolism of this unexpected turn. The concert is understood as a musical pilgrimage to his earlier now-uncontested successes, a form of penance to right his noisy wrong turns since Bitches Brew. At Montreux, it seems, Miles came to terms with his legacy so he could safely leave this earth. However, that script is contradicted by the actual circumstances. First of all, Davis did not mastermind the concert, but was lured into it by Quincy Jones, who had been trying to persuade him for a long time. Second, even though his health was fragile, Davis’s “life came to an end faster than anyone expected” (Cook 2007, 321). Third, Montreux was not his swan song, since he continued to tour.

Clifford Brown was a young, deeply loved, clean-living, brilliant promise who, unlike the other musicians discussed, died “untimely,” his life nipped in the bud. Brown’s career spanned...
four years and a couple of months, which makes every recorded snippet valuable. That his final concert, played hours before he was so brutally wiped out on the road, is recorded allows listeners to hear him play to the very last moment. We may find comfort in knowing that every valuable note is preserved, and his foreboding closing remarks add an extra layer of tragedy. The dissonant voice of eyewitness and fellow musician Billy Root, who has repeatedly pointed out that the record did not contain Brown’s last concert, has been brusquely brushed aside by historians such as Schaap. Brown’s real last recording, a lo-fi air check with the Clifford Brown–Max Roach Quintet from the Continental Restaurant, Norfolk, VA (June 18, 1956), lacks any magical ingredients. Reissued as The Last Concert in 2005 (Rare Live), it has been welcomed by fans and critics as an interesting document, but without any of the drama that met The Beginning and the End.

Notes

2. All translations are by the author.

References


**Film**