

# Nicknames And Rememberance: Memorials To Woodlawn's Jazz Greats

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In the world of jazz, musicians are known by their nicknames. "Duke," "Bear," "Cootie" are the names we recognize when we talk about the music made by Duke Ellington and his orchestra. The Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx is known worldwide as the final resting place of many jazz musicians, including Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Coleman Hawkins, and Lionel Hampton. Although the nicknames of many members of the jazz community are incorporated into their gravemarkers, there are several musicians whose inscriptions record their legal names and make no reference to the nicknames connecting them to their careers. When an inscription is selected for a grave marker, it is permanent and shows how the purchaser of the memorial wants the individual to be remembered. In this essay, the resultant relationships among friends, family, and memorials is discussed.

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## Background

The Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx is known for spectacular Gilded Age mausoleums, significant sculpture and as the final resting place of many notable members of the jazz community. If you go to the main office of the cemetery and ask if Duke Ellington is buried there, the staff member responding to your inquiry may tell you there is no one with that name interred in the cemetery. Cemeteries traditionally transcribe the legal name of the deceased from the death certificate on to daily interment records at the time of burial. So if you revise your inquiry and ask for information about the final resting place of Edward Kennedy Ellington, Woodlawn's staff would direct you to the Ellington family lot<sup>1</sup>, located in the Wild Rose Plot<sup>2</sup> of the cemetery.

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When you arrive at the location, you will see two six-foot granite crosses inscribed with “The Lord is My Shepherd” at the top and “Ellington” carved into the base. In the center of the lot there is a small flat gray granite marker bearing the inscription:

“Duke”  
Edward Kennedy Ellington  
1889-1974

Reading the popular nickname of the jazz great on the stone memorial, you are confident you have found the grave of the notable composer and you have learned the true name of the musician. The legal names of many notable jazz musicians are not familiar to their fans, as they are recognized primarily by their nicknames. These nicknames were given to them by their families, members of the press, concert promoters, the public, or by their fellow musicians.

Although the nicknames of many members of the jazz community are incorporated into their grave markers, there are several famous musicians whose inscriptions record their legal names and make no reference to the nicknames connecting them to their careers. The key factors involved in the selection of the epitaph, artwork, and inscription on a gravestone are: the wishes of the lot owner, the relationship of the purchaser of the monument to the individual at rest, the length of time between interment, and memorialization and the rules and regulations of the cemetery. It is the purpose of this study to gain a better understanding of the relationship of these nicknames to grave markers by investigating the memorials of the jazz greats interred at The Woodlawn Cemetery.

Jazz musicians and their families purchased lots in The Woodlawn Cemetery because of its convenient location. When the cemetery was established in 1863, the New York Railroad made Woodlawn accessible from Grand Central Station. In 1916, the IRT #4 Subway, known as the Lexington Line,

connected the cemetery to all of Manhattan, making a stop in Harlem at 125th street. In addition, the four-hundred-acre burial ground has always been non-sectarian, serving the diverse population of metropolitan New York. Many figures from the Harlem Renaissance and the early jazz age are interred at The Woodlawn Cemetery.

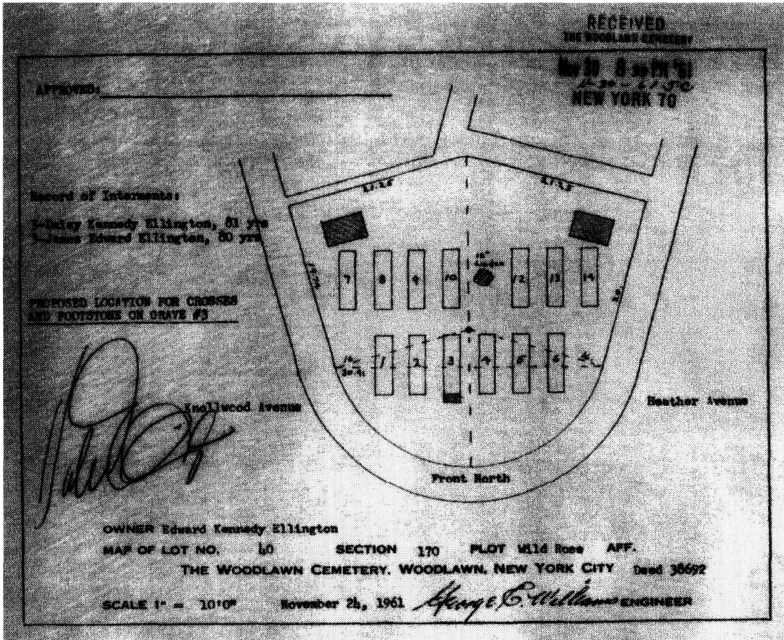


Figure 1 Ellington Lot Layout

Edward Kennedy Ellington purchased his lot in Woodlawn on November 12, 1959, and moved the remains of his beloved parents to the cemetery. The 1073-foot lot was designed to accommodate fourteen grave<sup>3</sup> spaces, and allows for the interment of twenty-eight individuals. On November 30, 1961, the cemetery received Ellington's signed approval of the proposed location for two granite crosses and a footstone on Grave #3 to mark the grave of his parents. Ellington made no provisions for his own footstone. Almost a year after his

death, his son Mercer Ellington and long time companion Evelyn "Evie" Ellington submitted a diagram of the proposed footstone for installation.

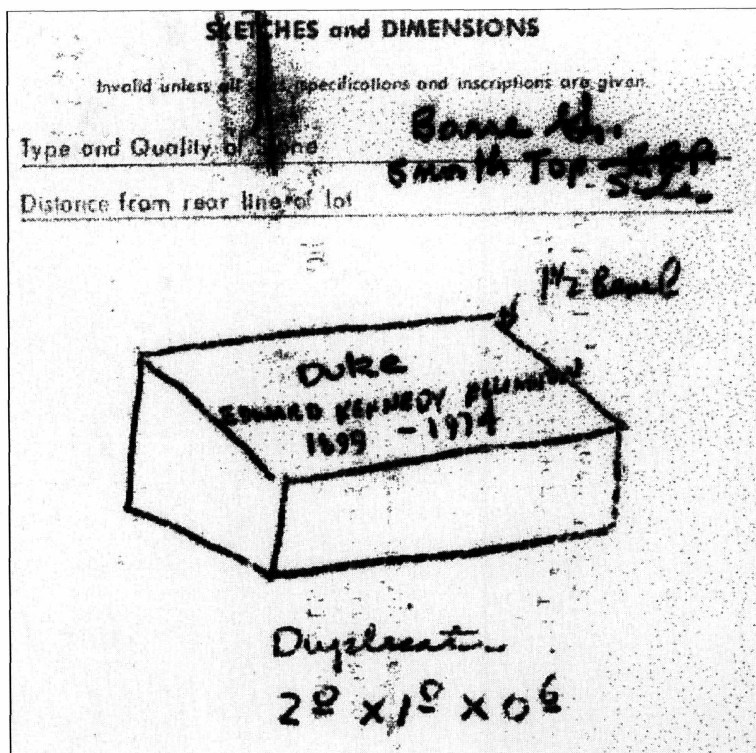


Figure 2 Ellington Memorial Foundation Order Form

By incorporating his legal name into the simple inscription, the monument links Ellington to his mother, Daisy Kennedy Ellington, and by including his stage and recording nickname into the memorial, it identifies the gravesite for fans interested in paying their respects. Although many musicians, journalists, and jazz aficionados called Ellington "the Maestro," celebrating his talent as a composer and orchestra leader, he was known internationally as "Duke." Ellington had

gone by this nickname since his high school years. "I had a chum, Edgar McEntree, a rather fancy guy who liked to dress well. He was socially uphill and a pretty good, popular fellow around, with parties and that sort of thing. I think he felt that in order for me to be eligible for his constant companionship I should have a title. So he named me Duke" (Ellington 1971,20).

The majority of the jazz greats buried at Woodlawn have a connection to Ellington. In 1984, Duke Ellington's sister, Ruth, purchased a lot in Woodlawn's Zinnia Plot for the interment of Ada Smith DuConge, internationally known as "Bricktop." Bricktop was a singer and owner of fashionable jazz clubs in Paris, Rome, and Mexico City. Ellington credited her with giving him his first job when he arrived in New York in 1923 (Ellington 1971). Known by friends as "Brick," or "Brickie," the real name of the "red haired doyenne of cafe society" was Ada Beatrice Queen Victoria Louise Virginia Smith (Krebbs 1984).

Her clubs were also called "Bricktop" and were patronized by many celebrities, including Cole Porter, Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. When she died at age 89, Ruth Ellington made the arrangements for her burial and memorial. The grave is marked by a bronze plaque that reads:

Bricktop  
Ada Smith DuConge  
1895-1984

In the center of the bronze relief is a single red rose, a symbol of love.

Rarely identified by his legal name, Charles "Cootie" Williams is buried a few hundred feet from the Ellington lot in the Alpine Hill plot. Williams played lead trumpet for the Ellington orchestra, moved on to play with Benny Goodman, toured with his own band, and then later in his career he returned to play with the Ellington band. In his *New York*

*Times* obituary, the nickname is attributed to a childhood event. At an early age, Williams's parents took him to a band concert and when they asked him what he heard, his response was "Cootie, cootie, cootie" (Fraser 1985).

In an article announcing Williams's performance at the funeral of W.C. Handy, the reporter gave a different explanation for the nickname. "Mr. Williams is known in his profession as 'Cootie' because he hops around so lively" (Phelan 1958). No matter what the origin of the nickname, it was the name he was known by throughout his career

Popular songs included Williams's famous nickname in their titles. Duke Ellington wrote "Concerto for Cootie" in 1940. When Williams left the band in 1940, composer Raymond Scott popularized the tune "When Cootie Left the Duke." Williams even used his nickname rather than his legal name when he was credited for composing the jazz standard "Round Midnight" with Thelonius Monk.

Catherine Williams, Cootie's widow, purchased the flat flush granite marker to identify their final resting place. The inscription reads "Charles 'Cootie' Williams" and has a small trumpet blaring up toward the heavens carved on the side. The marker was designed to accommodate two inscriptions; the name and dates for Mrs. Williams were added to the stone following her death in 2000.

#### Hawkins

In cases where the memorials for the jazz greats are marked with individual footstones<sup>4</sup> or headstones<sup>5</sup>, it is common for their nickname to be included in the inscription. When the names are incorporated into a family memorial containing several names, it is often the case that the performer's nickname or stage name is not recorded on the stone. In several sections of The Woodlawn Cemetery, lot owners are not allowed to add individual footstones or headstones due to space limitations and design guidelines. In these plots, there are two to six individuals buried in the lot with one central monument<sup>6</sup>. Traditionally, the last name of

the family will be in the center of the memorial and there will be spaces allocated along the sides of the stone for the names and dates of the members of the family buried in the lot.

Coleman Hawkins, "The Father of the Tenor Sax," is buried with one of his daughters and two of his grandchildren in the Yew Plot of the cemetery. Throughout his career, he was known as "Hawk" or "The Hawk" by members of the press and by fellow performers. Coleman Hawkins was also called "The Bean," a nickname Duke Ellington used when he paid tribute to the saxophonist in his composition, "Self Portrait of the Bean."

In his book, *The song of the hawk; the life and recordings of Coleman Hawkins*, author John Chilton writes: "He raised no objection to being nicknamed 'Bean' by his fellow musicians and willingly explained that he was called this because 'my head resembled a haricot bean' " (1990). There is a conflicting account of how Hawkins received his nickname in James Burnett's earlier biography, *Coleman Hawkins*: "In his later years his favourite pastimes were said to be cooking beans and listening to string quartets. His culinary predilections were responsible for the nickname 'Bean' which he acquired and which frequently appears on record sleeves and album titles and in the titles of tunes written by, for, or about him" (1984, 11).

Hawkins daughter, Colette Hawkins, purchased the family lot on May 19, 1969, at the time of her father's death. A month later, Nina and Pavane Wright, two infant granddaughters of Coleman Hawkins died and were buried in the lot with their famous grandfather. It wasn't until six years later, in the summer of 1975, that arrangements were made to place a memorial on the family lot.

The design for the marker was typical for those intended to memorialize a family. "Hawkins" is carved into the center of the memorial and the stone is decorated with a Christian cross and an eternal flame centered above the last name of the lot owner. The monument sits on a base; there is

room on the front of the rectangular base to inscribe the names and dates of four individuals. Coleman Hawkins is identified by his legal name and his years of birth and death.

### Castle

Buried in the Iris Plot, a section of the cemetery laid out with two or more grave spaces per lot, is trumpet player and band leader Lee Castle. Born in the Bronx in February of 1915, Lee Castle's real name was Aniello Castaldo (*New York Times* Obituary, 1990). He was part of a musical family; his four brothers also became musicians and two of them, Charles and John, are buried alongside their brother in the Castaldo family lot.

Lee Castle played with Artie Shaw and Jack Teagarden and it was when he started his own band in the early 1940's that he adopted the name "Lee Castle." Eventually, he settled into a relationship with the Dorsey brothers, taking over the leadership of the Jimmy Dorsey band after Dorsey's death and continuing up until his own death in 1990.

The pink granite Castaldo memorial bears no reflection on the career and talent of the individuals buried in the lot. "Castaldo" is etched into the memorial and the first names of the three brothers appear on the side panels of the monument. Only those familiar with the story of Castle's name change and his rise to fame in the entertainment world would know that a jazz musician was at rest in the lot.

In cases where the monument is purchased by fans rather than by family, the inscription traditionally includes the nickname of the jazz musician or provides an epitaph or symbol that ties the individual to his career. When an individual or group that is not the owner of the lot proposes to erect a memorial, the cemetery is required to obtain the approval of the original lot owner or his descendants prior to allowing the installation of the marker. If the lot owner cannot be found, the cemetery will exercise due diligence and make every effort to find a family member.



## Oliver

The first internationally known jazz musician to be buried at Woodlawn was Joseph "King" Oliver. Born in Louisiana in 1885, Oliver played the coronet and by 1915 was leading his own band. Kid Ory, one of the first successful jazz band leaders, began billing him as "King" Oliver late in 1917 (Larkin, 2004). Oliver was best known as the leader of the Creole Jazz Band and mentor of a young musician named Louis Armstrong. In his memoirs, Armstrong recalls his early years and fondly refers to Oliver as "Papa Joe" (Armstrong, 1954). When he died in 1938, Oliver is identified as "King Joe."

In his final years, Oliver lost his ability to play the coronet. He suffered from a gum disease that resulted in the removal of his teeth. Oliver worked as a custodian and died in Savannah, Georgia, in April of 1938. His sister had his remains shipped to New York, and Oliver was interred in a lot with his nephew Godfrey Moody. The original grave marker memorialized Moody but was never inscribed to provide an epitaph for "King" Oliver.

In the State of New York, cemetery monuments are considered the property of the lot owner. When the purchaser of the lot dies, the ownership is automatically transferred to the descendants of the original owner. Permission of the lot owner is required when changes are made to the condition of the lot such as carving an additional inscription onto an existing grave marker or the erection of a new memorial. When changes or creation of a memorial are proposed, the cemetery confirms approval of the lot owner and then reviews the design and inscriptions. Cemeteries have the ability to reject the work should it be deemed inappropriate or difficult to maintain.

The descendants of Oliver's siblings did not provide a memorial for the band leader and a notation on the records of the cemetery, "Do not permit erection of marker without authorization of present owners," documents the intent of the family to protect the memorial to Godfrey Moody and to keep

the fans of “King” Oliver from replacing the original gravestone.

After repeated rejected efforts by individuals and jazz organizations to memorialize Oliver, in 1994 the New Jersey Jazz Society received authorization from Evelyn Payne Davis, the grand niece of Joseph Oliver, to provide a memorial. In her letter to the cemetery, Davis outlined that the new stone is to replicate the original inscription for Godfrey Moody and “for Joseph ‘King’ Oliver, the inscription would be ‘Jazz Pioneer’.” This inscription consists of the legal name of the jazz great and incorporates the nickname that connects him with his recordings.

### Greer

In recent years, The Woodlawn Cemetery established a support organization, the Friends of the Woodlawn Cemetery. The Friends provide tours of the cemetery, assist researchers, organize special events and programs, and raise funds for restoration projects. In 2002, the organization launched the “Entertainers Campaign,” an effort to secure pledges to restore the declining memorials of forgotten entertainers and to provide memorials for the actors, musicians, and other performers at rest in unmarked graves.

For over two decades, the grave of Duke Ellington’s long time drummer, William “Sonny” Greer, was unmarked. The New York Chapter of the Duke Ellington Society brought this to the attention of the cemetery, and the Friends of Woodlawn secured a donation to install a marker on the gravesite.

Greer was buried in Zinnia Plot, a section of the cemetery where only flat markers are allowed. The Friends purchased a granite marker measuring twelve by twenty-four inches, conforming to the guidelines of the cemetery. Several concepts were debated before the inscription was finalized. Part of the discussion focused on the selection of dates, and addressed whether the month, day, and year of birth and death should be inscribed on the stone. In addition, the

Friends' Board considered the importance of identifying William Greer by his nickname and if it was necessary to include the instrument he played on the memorial.

As a result of the discussion, the Friends proceeded with the installation of a marker similar to the footstone memorializing Duke Ellington. The same stone was used—medium Barre granite, an identical font was selected for the lettering, and the nickname was placed above the legal name in quotations in the center of the marker. The years of birth and death were inscribed in the center of the memorial below the legal name. Precedent was set by the Board to provide memorials for unmarked graves that were simple, void of symbolism, and without epitaph.

#### Hampton

Six months prior to his death, a representative of Lionel Hampton, the "King of the Vibes," contacted The Woodlawn Cemetery and expressed an interest in purchasing a lot "as close to Duke as possible." A two-grave lot was purchased in the Fir Plot, directly across the road from the Ellington lot. Hampton was interred on September 7, 2002.

Lionel Hampton was known by several nicknames. The Press and music promoters identified him as "Hamp" throughout his career; Hampton titled his 1989 autobiography *Hamp*. Members of the jazz community also knew the vibrophonist as "Gates." Both nicknames were incorporated into Hampton compositions such as: "Hamp's Boogie-Woogie," "Hamp's Got the Blues," and "Gates Gone Blues."

During the course of his life, Lionel Hampton was a generous philanthropist, funding housing projects in Harlem, establishing a Jazz School in Idaho, and providing financial assistance for other public causes. Hampton's estate continued the performer's commitment to his charities but left no provisions for his memorial.

Approximately a year after Lionel Hampton's death, the Friends of Woodlawn took on the responsibility to mark the gravesite. The Hampton lot was designed to accommodate

a center memorial and two footstones, which allowed for identification of the family name and the ability to provide additional life details on the twelve by twenty-four inch footstone.

As it was Hampton's request to be buried near Duke Ellington, the Friends decided to purchase a monument quarried from the same source as the granite crosses that flank the Ellington lot. A similar font style was used for the inscription, which reads:

HAMPTON  
*Flying Home*

Because the central memorial marks the resting place of Lionel Hampton and his wife Gladys, whose remains were later moved to Woodlawn, the Friends decided not to place any of the vibraphonist's nicknames in the inscription. The title of Hampton's signature song, "Flying Home" was selected for inclusion on the gravestone, because for those familiar with his music, it linked the musician to his career. The song title also seemed appropriate as it communicated the hopeful concept of the spirit ascending to heaven.

#### Jacquet

Directly opposite the Hampton memorial in the Hillcrest Plot is the newest memorial for a jazz musician. Illinois Jacquet—a tenor saxophone player who is best remembered for his solo performance with the Hampton band on *Flying Home*—is remembered with a nine-foot black granite monument. The sizable plinth contains two etched portraits of Jacquet with his saxophone and an image of spiritual chants emerges from a third saxophone on the side of the memorial.

Jacquet was promoted as "The Texas Tenor" but was not known by any other name than Illinois Jacquet. His fellow musicians called him "Jacquet" but he received no nickname identifying him with his playing style, physical appearance, or stature in the jazz community.

## Davis

There is a second sizeable black granite monument situated in between the lots of Duke Ellington and Illinois Jacquet. The sarcophagus containing the remains of acclaimed trumpet player and bandleader Miles Davis sits on a lot identical in size to the Ellington space but designed to accommodate the remains of one individual. The face of the sarcophagus is approximately four feet tall and nine feet in length. Etched on the surface is the following inscription:

In Memory of  
Sir Miles Davis  
1926 – 1991

At the base of the granite slab are the opening bars of Davis's composition "*Solar*." On the right side of the front of the sarcophagus is a trumpet pointing down, as though it is at rest. Miles Davis was known for holding his trumpet down while playing, so for those familiar with his performance style the symbol of the trumpet has a double meaning.

The title "Sir" is confusing to the thousands of tourists and fans who visit the gravesite each year. In several articles and books about Davis, the explanation for the inscription is that Davis was a member of the Knights of Malta, a fraternal organization, and as a member he was awarded the title of "Sir."

Miles Davis was always known by his legal name and never identified in recordings, promotional materials or by magazine and newspaper articles by any name other than "Miles" or "Miles Davis." In his autobiography, he talks about being called "junior" by his family and hating the nickname (Davis, 1989). Performers in the Miles Davis sextet knew him as "Chief." This name appears in some references but was never popularized and only used by members of the band. On May 26, 2001, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Miles Davis's birth, several floral arrangements arrived at gravesite and among those one bore a card with a note, "Happy Birthday

Chief.” This is the only physical reference to this nickname associated with the cemetery.

The original design for Miles Davis’s memorial depicted a trumpet flying through the clouds and did not include the title “Sir.” Davis’s attorney and executor of his estate submitted the drawing of the proposed sarcophagus to the cemetery. When the memorial was installed there was no explanation provided by the monument maker for the changes in design and the revision of the inscription.

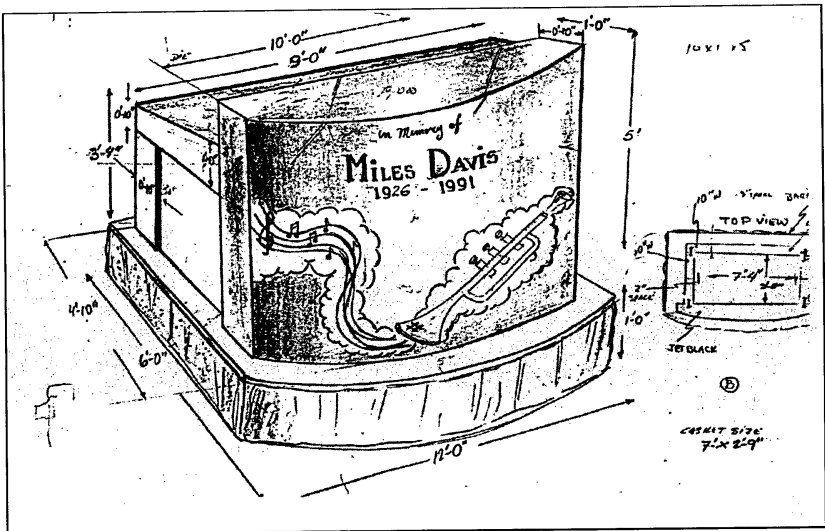


Figure 3 Proposed Design Miles Davis Memorial Monument Maker’s Sketch

In Fred Goodman’s recent book, *The Secret City: Woodlawn Cemetery and the Buried History of New York*, he offers his theory about the inscription.

“Davis is interred in a sarcophagus mounted on a low pedestal that stands behind a large slab of polished black stone upon which two measures of music and the perplexing inscription ‘Sir Miles Davis’ are carved. To my knowledge it is an honorific Davis never used while alive and seemed to know

very little about, mentioning it just in passing in his autobiography. The title was bestowed in 1988 in Spain by the Knights of the Grand Cross in and for the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta—a successor to the 1900-year-old order of the Knights of Malta.”

After detailing the history of the Order, Goodman goes on to say: “I don’t think it insults the order’s good works to suggest that employing it to put ‘sir’ on your tombstone is a little like inscribing ‘president’ over your grave because you were head of the Rotary Club.

“So what to make of this? Did Miles Davis really care what everybody thought after all? It’s possible, but I prefer to subscribe to another theory: Davis who had more than a bit of the devil in him, could have done it to break Ellington’s chops, to lampoon and one-up the Duke. I’m not aware of any bad blood between the two and whenever Davis mentions Ellington in his autobiography he invariably attaches the highest accolade in his lexicon, which is to say, he repeatedly and unswervingly calls Duke ‘a bad motherfucker.’ But Woodlawn is a big place—four hundred acres of graves. The odds that Duke just *happened* to wind up right across the road from Ellington are about the same as Davis coming back to life and hosting a fund-raiser for Trent Lott” (166).

Although Goodman’s theory is entertaining, it serves to promote legend and lore as is customary when relating the history of jazz musicians and their nicknames. Miles Davis had no role in the selection of his final resting place or the inscription on his memorial. His only daughter, Cheryl, directed her father’s executor to purchase the lot in Woodlawn. She had read an article in the paper about the cemetery and was aware that many famous members of the jazz community were buried there. She wanted her father to rest among his peers.



**Figure 4 Miles Davis Sarcophagus**

The reason the song “Solar” was selected had no relation to the significance of the composition in Davis’s body of work. Miles Davis’s nephew, Vince, helped his cousin select the song and it was chosen because the title reminded them of the sun, and they wanted Davis to bask in sunlight. The title “Sir” was awarded by his daughter, as she used the opportunity to place her father among the royal court of jazz legends: Count Basie, Duke Ellington and King Oliver.

#### Conclusion

By far, the most important consideration that has to be made when understanding the significance of the name inscribed on a memorial is the sentiment of the individual selecting the text. Grave markers are permanent and public displays of information. The selection of the name identifies the individual at rest, but for many of the jazz greats of The Woodlawn Cemetery, the inclusion of a popular nickname on the memorial makes a connection with the lovers of jazz and to insure that memorable artists will not be forgotten.



## Notes

1. A lot is a burial space designed to accommodate a minimum of four interments. The Woodlawn Cemetery buries double depth; traditionally, the remains of two individuals occupy each grave space.
2. Plots are traditionally two- to five-acre areas in the cemetery identified primarily by plant and flower names. Each Plot is divided into lots that are 44 to 10,000 square feet.
3. A grave space or grave consists of a rectangular space measuring three feet by eight feet.
4. A footstone is a small marker placed at the base of the grave. According to cemetery guidelines, these markers are consistent in size and conform to a design for the lot. By mid-twentieth century, the standard size and style for a footstone in The Woodlawn Cemetery was flush or flat markers measuring 12 inches by 24 inches.
5. A headstone is a marker placed at the head of the grave and varies in size and design style. The Woodlawn Cemetery regulates the size of a headstone based upon the square foot dimensions of the lot.
6. A central monument in The Woodlawn Cemetery is placed at the head of the graves in the center of the lot. Traditionally, the focal point of these markers is the last name of the original lot owner inscribed in the middle of the memorial.

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