

Michael Ullman

## Miles Davis in Retrospect

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When "Miles Davis in Retrospect" appeared in spring 1981, Davis was only weeks short of ending his nearly six-year sabbatical from public performance. The piece thus provided a perceptive and fair-minded overview of Davis's career through 1975, when he went into seclusion. During the trumpeter's long hiatus, there was intense interest both in and beyond jazz circles about when—or if—he would resume his career, and "Retrospect" subtly reflects that curiosity.

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Few musicians have brought as many new sounds and sights to the jazz world as Miles Davis. An intense, ambitious musician, he has managed to

make a limited instrumental technique suggest infinite possibilities. As one of the great leaders in jazz, Davis, like Ellington and Charles Mingus, consistently assembled groups that sound remarkably better than their individual parts. In the 1950s the trumpeter changed the manners in jazz performance when he turned his back on audiences and refused to announce his tunes. No Louis Armstrong stage tricks for him. (But when asked a leading question about Armstrong, he lavishly praised the older man's playing: it was impossible for a trumpeter to play things Armstrong hadn't already done, he asserted.) Later Davis helped improve working conditions for jazz artists when he insisted on playing only a couple of sets a night; previously musicians were expected to play forty minutes and take twenty off for as many as six hours.

Davis's accomplishment is all the more impressive given his gruff and withdrawn manner, even among his musicians. Bassist Miroslav Vitous told me that Davis spoke to him only once in the many weeks that he played with him during the early 1970s, and that was to ask his young sideman to rush another group offstage so that the trumpeter could play and go home.

Davis's early development had been swift. When in 1945 at the age of nineteen he first recorded with alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, Davis seemed a somewhat bumbling, insecure stylist without the agility or panache of Dizzy Gillespie, who indeed took over Davis's trumpet for the virtuoso performance of Parker's "Ko Ko." But Davis's tentative phrases contained the germ of an idea: two years later he would record for the same company four of his own tunes, and this time Parker would be a sideman on tenor saxophone. Clearly the twenty-one-year-old who could make a tenor player out of Charlie Parker knew what he was doing. Unable to play as fast or as high as other bebop trumpeters, Davis developed an intimate, round, almost vibratoless tone as far from the brash, extroverted sounds of Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge as from the bright fluidity of the bopsters. And he found the proper setting for that sound on compositions like "Milestones" and "Sippin' at Bell's." Darker in texture than comparable Parker arrangements, Davis's pieces reflected his simpler strengths. He seemed intent, serious, restrained: "cool" is what the critics called him, and a series of 1949–50 recordings led by Davis with arrangements by Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan, John Lewis, and John Carisi was dubbed *Birth of the Cool*.

In his memoirs Dizzy Gillespie warmly describes Davis's approach in the late 1940s: "Miles ushered in an innovation that the press immediately

smearred with the term 'cool' jazz. . . . The record was called *Birth of the Cool* because the guys in California sort of played not hot but 'coolish.' They expressed less fire than we did, played less notes, less quickly, and used more open space, and they emphasized tonal quality. . . . I liked to fill up a bar myself—the Charlie Parker school—to take advantage of every space that's there instead of just leaving it to go over into the next bar. Miles had wide open spaces."

Wary of other members of the cool school, Gillespie praised Davis for the guts in his music, for his ability to play the blues. And Davis acknowledged in a typically backhanded way the influence of Gillespie: "He could teach anybody, but me. No, man—the shit was going too fast. I mean that was a fast pace, man. . . . Freddie Webster and I used to go down every night to hear Diz. If we missed a night, we missed something. We'd go down to Fifty-Second Street to hear Diz and get our ears stretched." Trumpeters Webster and Davis could play a game while listening to Diz: one of them would throw a coin in the air, and the other would have to identify the note Gillespie was playing when the coin hit the bar. Davis said that he couldn't learn from Gillespie, but later he contradicts himself. "My style wasn't any different [from Gillespie's], I just played in a low register."

Davis's developing style was something more than Gillespie's played lower or slower. Soon, Davis could do some things Gillespie shied away from. By the 1950s his blues had a rich, down-home quality: on cuts like the 1951 "Bluing" (reissued on *Chronicle*), Davis manages to sound sophisticated while suggesting a chaste intimacy unparalleled in modern jazz. "Miles is deep," Gillespie has said—deeper into the blues than Gillespie himself. Dizzy was once criticized for his thin tone; from the beginning Davis's was vibrant and intense. Gillespie is for many listeners an acquired taste, while Davis's music seems to arouse instant passion. Gillespie's trumpet, one might say, dances before your eyes, and Davis's breathes down your neck.

As critic Martin Williams has pointed out in *The Jazz Tradition*, many artists would have been sufficiently content with the *Birth of the Cool* to have spent the rest of their careers copying that achievement. Davis has maintained the outlines of his early trumpet style, but he has repeatedly transformed the size and sound of his groups until in the 1970s he would, to the dismay of older fans, attach his trumpet to a wah-wah pedal and lead something like a rock band. While fans talked darkly of coercion by CBS president Clive Davis, the trumpeter simply announced that he would

assemble "the best damn rock band" in the world. The rock-influenced *Bitches Brew* sold half a million copies in its first year, and Columbia's public relations office started calling Davis "the Prince of Darkness."

A critical reaction was inevitable. In his history of jazz, James Lincoln Collier reproaches Davis for the paradoxes in his career, calling him "a man who possessed only a relatively modest natural gift, but who by dint of intelligence and force of personality made himself one of the major figures of jazz." Besides lacking Beiderbecke's sense of musical line, Lester Young's rhythm, and Armstrong's drama, Davis is, according to Collier, "a limited instrumentalist with a poor high register and a tendency to crack more notes than a professional trumpet player should." (I am reminded of Whitney Balliett's description of Armstrong's early style, which he asserts is typified by the trumpeter's tendency to fluff every fifth note.)

Those of us who find Davis's cracked notes more electrifying than other trumpeters' ringing tones should be thankful that so many of the recordings remain readily available. *Chronicle: The Complete Prestige Recordings, 1951-1956* begins with some sessions showing Davis still toying with the cool sound and ends with Davis's most celebrated quintet, featuring John Coltrane on tenor sax, Red Garland on piano, Paul Chambers on bass, and Philly Joe Jones on drums. Never before assembled in a single package, these recordings include some acknowledged classics in modern jazz: the two takes of "Bags' Groove" and "The Man I Love," the "Walkin'" and "Blue 'n' Boogie" session. Recordings from this period also introduced to a wider public some of the brightest names in the music: Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, John Lewis, Thelonious Monk, Jackie McLean, Milt Jackson. They demonstrate Davis's uncanny ability to create the perfect context for his improvisations.

Despite the seeming informality of these early dates, Davis was concerned with the quality of the overall sound. In his notes to an album recorded in 1971 by pianist Joe Zawinul, Miles Davis comments admiringly on the Austrian pianist's arrangements: "All these musicians are set up. Joe sets up the musicians so that they have to play like they do, in order to fit the music like they do. In order to fit this music you have to be 'cliché-free.'" One can never prevent determined sidemen from playing clichés, but Davis makes it difficult, both by his example and by the explicit demands he makes on his musicians.

These recordings from the 1950s demonstrate his concern for group sound. Uncomfortable with pianist Thelonious Monk's irregular accompaniments, Davis had Monk lay out during the trumpeter's solos. A renewed

feeling of intimacy with the listener, appropriate to Davis's sound, resulted. Davis instructed pianist Red Garland to imitate the lightweight touch and chic harmonic sophistication of Ahmad Jamal—and Garland's reward was his feature "Ahmad's Blues" (reproduced on *Chronicle*). The blend in the quintet first recorded in 1955 was ideal: Garland's feathery strokes were offset by drummer Philly Joe Jones's aggressive polyrhythms. Bassist Paul Chambers held steadily to the beat behind the two horns, Coltrane and Davis. Where Davis might play one note, bend and develop it, finding a pulse within a single tone, Coltrane would surge up and down a scale in a heroic attempt to play everything at once. A striking contrast, engineered purposely by the trumpeter.

But if Davis resisted musical clichés, he also, like Louis Armstrong before him, had a penchant for redeeming the banal. In *Chronicle* one can hear him work his magic on songs like "It's Only a Paper Moon" and "Surrey with the Fringe on Top." The foolishly jogging rhythms of the latter open up deliciously when Davis runs through and over them, and he makes "It's Only a Paper Moon" round and elegant while paying more than casual attention to its melody. In the 1960s when he performed many of his hits night after night, his method was to increase the tempos. A hackneyed phrase at a moderate tempo might become a tour de force when speeded up.

Many of the *Chronicle* cuts are marred by bad moments: on his second date with Davis, Sonny Rollins's interesting contributions are cut short by a squeaky reed. The reunion of Davis and Charlie Parker—the latter again on tenor saxophone—was weakened by Davis's moodiness and Parker's drunkenness. (After entering the studio, Parker reportedly downed a quart of gin and promptly fell asleep. When he woke up he felt sluggish, but as producer Ira Gitler noted, only Parker would have awakened. Davis complained, and Parker responded, "Lily Pons, beauty must come of suffering," identifying Davis with the sweet, light voice of a popular opera singer.) *Chronicle* is indispensable, however, for Davis's playing of blues and ballads, and for incomparable solos such as Monk's eerily timed choruses on "Bags' Groove." In *The Jazz Tradition* Martin Williams announced that everything came together for Davis in 1954. Certainly Davis and his groups became more consistent about that time, but several of my favorite performances—"Bluing," "It's Only a Paper Moon"—come earlier.

Davis signed with Columbia in 1955, although he taped a few more sessions for Prestige. The most celebrated of his CBS recordings remain in print, including the seminal *Kind of Blue* recorded in March and April 1959—a collection of five sketches, primarily modal, filled out stunningly

by Davis with Cannonball Adderley, Coltrane, Chambers, drummer Jimmy Cobb, and pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly. (The choice of the lyrical Evans is instructive. From Garland to Evans to Herbie Hancock, his pianist from 1963 to 1968, Davis has shown a preference for pianists with a light, even fragile touch.) Experimental though it was, *Kind of Blue* sounds as natural as breathing.

Davis shifted toward rock gradually. The quintet of the 1960s included Wayne Shorter, whose lazy melodies with their infrequent harmonic changes often lacked a second theme or bridge. The languorous sound and monolithic quality demanded new rhythmic energy in the drums and new textures, soon provided by an electric piano. Davis was used to being in the vanguard of music, but jazz was being left behind in the rock-oriented 1960s and 1970s. Davis wanted to make more money—he has one of the most flamboyant lifestyles in the business, buying expensive sports cars, it would seem, only to crack them up. And surely he saw more than economic possibilities in rock rhythms and electronic sounds. Rock may have piqued his longtime interest in salvaging the banal.

The transitional *Miles Smiles*, with three Shorter compositions, was deservedly well received: not so some of the later recordings, which alarmed critics while delighting larger and younger audiences. Onstage in the early 1970s, Davis was a sight: stalking about, wolflike and thin, dressed extravagantly—a family of four could survive for a year on what he's spent on sunglasses—he remained in perfect control, calling out rhythms to a variety of percussionists, an electric bassist, a couple of guitarists, and occasionally to as many as three electric keyboardists. In fact, this was a difficult music to record, and few of the heavily edited records that CBS released captured the excitement of the Miles Davis show. In 1975, amid speculations about his health, wealth, and possible dissatisfaction with his music, Miles withdrew at what seemed the height of his popularity. He hasn't reappeared since; nor has he stated the reason for his apparent retirement.

Unable to offer more current recordings by their jazz star, Columbia Records has been searching its vaults for Davis material. *Circle in the Round* and *Directions* collect primarily unissued recordings dating from 1955 to 1970. Most come from the transitional period of the late 1960s. Certainly the most satisfying material does: after one listens to the awkward "Round Midnight" on *Directions*, one knows why other versions were preferred. *Circle in the Round* is valuable for its side-long title cut, for the 5/4 blues "Splash," and for a wrenching nine-minute version of Wayne Shorter's "Sanctuary." A less important release, *Directions* includes a short addition

to the Davis-Gil Evans canon, "Song of Our Country"; "Fun" and "Water on the Pond" by the Shorter-Hancock-Carter-Williams quintet, joined by guitarist Joe Beck on the latter; and a spacious recording of Joe Zawinul's floating "Ascent," featuring three electric instruments (two pianos and a bass) played by Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and Dave Holland.

By the time he retired, Davis's solos, seemed a series of disjointed gestures, dramatic and striking in themselves but not the patient constructions of earlier years. Nevertheless, during this period he was much praised for his impact on younger musicians. The man who had allowed John Coltrane to explore and develop, who had defended Philly Joe Jones's aggressive drumming, in the 1970s promoted the work of young, white saxophonists Dave Liebman and Steve Grossman, pianists Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, and Keith Jarrett, and guitarist John McLaughlin. Davis may not have talked to Miroslav Vitous, but he—albeit unconsciously—helped the bassist's career. After the stint with Davis, says Vitous, his phone would not stop ringing. Davis's spare but passionate playing has influenced trumpeters from Detroit's Donald Byrd to Tokyo's Terumasa Hino. Less beneficial has been the impact of his image. Impressed by the Davis lifestyle, Tony Williams and Herbie Hancock formed aesthetically uninteresting fusion bands in an attempt to reproduce Davis's financial success. Hancock and Chick Corea told Leonard Feather that Davis discouraged them from practicing: both realized later that the advice was harmful.

And what of Davis's own achievements? Can we, with Collier, pass off the Davis recordings as the inspired ramblings of a "limited instrumentalist"? All musicians have limited techniques, and all artists adapt in some way their art to their technique. More important, in the late 1940s the trumpet players who imitated the virtuosic Dizzy Gillespie simply flattered him; the few who recognized that he was inimitable paid him a realer kind of tribute. Davis was neither intimidated by nor envious of Gillespie. He knew he had to do something else, and from the time of his first sessions with Charlie Parker, we see him working to find a new music appropriate to his talents. Davis is, as Collier implies, one of the great opportunists in jazz. But he has never been one to simply adapt to changing trends in music. When Davis assembled a band in the 1970s that included a British rock guitarist, an Indian tabla player, and a Fender bassist straight out of rhythm and blues, he was creating for himself and for his players new musical problems. These newly issued recordings contain some of his solutions from the past, and they sound as fresh and original as when they were first recorded.

## Pat Harris

# Nothing but Bop? "Stupid," Says Miles

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If this is not the very first published interview with Miles Davis—it probably is, but I can't say for sure—it's surely among the first, and a good one. Written by the Chicago-based *Down Beat* writer Pat Harris—the Chicago area, then as now, was the magazine's home base—the article gives a detailed account of Davis's early life and career. Harris generally gets the facts right, with three notable exceptions: Davis was never legally married to Irene Birth, mother of three of his children; he left Juilliard in the fall of 1945; and he used trombonist Michael Zwerin, not Ted Kelly, at his second booking at the Royal Roost.

Harris, incidentally, was a woman and a quite capable journalist. I mention this because *Down Beat* in the 1940s and early 1950s was a decidedly male-oriented publication with lots of cheesecake photos of girl singers. (Many of these singers literally *were* girls still in their teens.) To have been a female jazz writer at that time must have been an interesting challenge.

The piece ends on a rather ominous note. What isn't said is that Davis had recently become a heroin addict; he would remain one for four years.—Ed.