

DIRECTIONS

Miles Davis

by Michael E. Veal

JAZZ IN TRANSITION, 1968 - 1971

In the evolution of modern jazz, Miles Davis is central but controversial. From his arrival in New York City in 1945, Davis participated in the bebop movement alongside Charlie Parker, helped initiate the 'cool' jazz movement in the mid-1950s, helped pioneer 'modal' jazz in the



late 1950s with John Coltrane and the 'First Great Miles Davis Quintet', and stretched the boundaries of jazz composition and improvisation in the 1960s with the 'Second Great Miles Davis Quintet'. But when he began to integrate electric

instruments and elements of popular songs into his music around 1968, Davis initiated a bitter debate among musicians, scholars, critics, and audiences about the relationship between jazz and popular music. Was Davis pandering to commercial trends, or was he merely updating jazz's long-standing tradition of refashioning popular songs as vehicles for improvisation?

Even though the era of "jazz-rock fusion" had effectively

ended by the early 1980s, the debate has persisted to the present. Fusion intensified the conflict generated by Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and other creators of 'free-jazz' in the 1960s. Jazz has arguably never recovered from the schism produced by the fusion and free movements. Both innovations combined to lay waste to what might be thought of as the 'linear historical narrative' of jazz, which in most accounts stretches from New Orleans around 1900, through Kansas City in the 1930s, to New York in the 1950s.

The stereotypical narrative of fusion music holds that when Davis began to change the sound of his music during 1968 and 1969, all of his former bandmembers in the 'Second Great Quintet' (with the exception of bassist Ron Carter) followed suit, and went on to form commercially-motivated fusion bands to great economic success and tragic aesthetic consequences. In this narrative, the success of former Davis pianist Herbie Hancock's 'Chameleon' (1974) and Weather Report's 1975 'Birdland' (the group was co-founded by two former Davis sidemen, Wayne Shorter and Josef Zawinul) came to epitomize the commercial highs and aesthetic lows to which the jazz tradition had been dragged by the mid-1970s. This same line of reasoning can be applied to Davis himself; although he fell short of the commercial successes of his former sidemen while avoiding their artistic compromises, his gestures became progressively less subtle by the time he went into semi-retirement in 1975. The music and ensemble playing on albums like *Agharta* and *Pangaea* (both 1975) remained brilliantly inventive for those willing to follow Davis into his dark, foreboding soundscapes of heavily distorted Afro-funk, but Davis's own playing seemed spent of energy — devoid of much of the grace and understatement that listeners had long associated with him.

This narrative places fusion music and acoustic jazz in direct opposition. On one side stands an ideal of aesthetic purity revolving around a constellation of canonized African-American aesthetic traits, and on the other stands a degenerate hybrid, based upon marketplace calculations and the ephemeral fashion trends of American youth culture. This dualistic view of the relations connecting jazz, popular song, and electronic instrumentation has prevailed for years, ignoring the subtleties and gradations of what was in reality a fluid process. A more illuminating perspective might articulate these connections as a complex interplay between the two styles, resulting in various fusions from the most commercial types of easy-listening jazz, to the most rarefied types of experimental, improvisational pop music.

The persistence of the critical divide is evident in recent appraisals of fusion music and its place within the broader scope of jazz history. Prominent voices in the debate have included the neo-conservative music critic Stanley Crouch, who dismissed Davis as a 'sellout' in and on the pro-Davis side, the *Village Voice* columnist Greg Tate, who sparked the



The Art of Miles Davis, *All My Brothers and Sisters*



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revisionist appraisal of Davis's electric music in 1983 with his two-part article in *Down Beat* titled 'The Electric Miles'. In 1995, Peter Watrous linked 'A Jazz Generation and the Miles Davis Curse', arguing in the *New York Times* that Davis's electric experiments had resulted in the wasting of an entire generation of jazz talent. The British jazz historian, Stuart Nicholson took a less melodramatic view. He conceded that many of the creators of fusion had admirable aesthetic motives initially, but that the movement's radical promise was blurred by a lack of conceptual clarity, on one hand, and the gradual commercialization of the genre, on the other.

Conspicuously absent in much of the fusion debate has been much substantial discussion of the music itself. The situation gradually began to change with the publications of Tate's articles, Jack Chambers two-volume epic *Milestones* (1985), a host of articles and liner notes accompanying the gradual reissue of Davis's electric work, and most significantly, the publication of Paul Tingen's recent *Miles Beyond* (2001), which focuses exclusively on Davis's electric music. But developments outside the world of scholarship and criticism have also inspired the reappraisal of his 1970s work.

One such catalyst has been the emergence of a younger (and mainly African-American) generation of 'neo-conserva-

tive' jazz musicians (such as the Marsalis brothers) who have attempted - with much corporate support and spin control - to legitimate jazz by grounding it in a classicized version of African-American aesthetics. The neo-conservative triumph has led to the increasing institutionalization of the music, to the creation of repertory bands around the country, and has allowed jazz to be given its proper due as 'America's classical music'. But the original works emerging from this movement are unlikely to be judged as historically significant. Conceived within a narrow conceptual vacuum and largely severed from the folk roots of the African-American community, they pale when compared to the most innovative works of the 1960s and 1970s (including some works produced by free and fusion musicians), when African-American musicians were striving to redefine musical and cultural reference points, contribute their music as a solution to the challenges confronting society, and/or even to make a buck in a particularly novel way. Those who criticize fusion for its commercialism fail to note that the corporate music agenda underwrites the neo-conservative movement in a much more insidious and destructive way. Hindsight may allow us to laugh off some of the excesses of free and fusion, but it is doubtful whether we will laugh at the way the music mega-corporations have effec-



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tively killed jazz as an organic African-American art form by marginalizing the innovators of the last 40 years (a process scandalously confirmed in Ken Burns' recent PBS documentary). Yet the very stodginess of the neo-conservative revival has galvanized the impulse towards innovation among younger musicians. The canonization of classical jazz has stimulated a search for alternate reference points, including those found in the music of the last four decades — much of which is yet to be integrated into the accepted language of jazz practice.

Apart from the reaction provoked by neo-conservative classicism, another musical trend has directly promoted the reassessment of Davis's music (and other free and electric music of the period). In recent years, a host of popular styles have either fused the improvisational impulse with electric and/or electronic instrumentation, or used the recording studio as a creative tool, combining improvisation with advanced (usually digital) studio manipulation. Into this continuum fall an array of genres and sub-genres as diverse as rap/hip-hop, the types of improvisational 'post-rock' played by rock bands that have emerged in the wake of the demise of the Grateful Dead (Phish, Medeski, Martin & Wood, Aquarian Rescue Unit, Isotope 217, Tortoise), so-called 'electronica' composers (such as Squarepusher, Aphex Twin, and Photek),

and various experimental rock artists (Sonic Youth, Keiji Haino, Elliott Sharp, among others). In combination, these styles have mounted a substantial challenge to jazz as the cutting edge of contemporary improvised music. They have also stimulated a reappraisal of music which can be considered a stylistic precursor. One of the most important is the electrified jazz of the 1970s.

These recent trends suggest that the 'fusion' label may be ultimately little more than a marketing tag which is inadequate to describe a complex process of stylistic interplay. Contemporary musicians realize that, in fact, there is much to be learned from at least some of this frequently scorned music and, most importantly, much that can be profitably reconciled with the jazz tradition. But why has this realization taken so long?

The destruction of the linear jazz narrative and its relatively stable reference points made it difficult for audiences, scholars, and critics to appraise fusion music, even in retrospect. The languages of bebop, cool jazz, modal jazz, and post-bop did not provide critics with the necessary conceptual tools to decode the complex chain of references in the music. Further, the appraisal of jazz in the fusion era - and of music of that period in general - is not a purely aesthetic issue; the

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musical innovations of the period were intimately tied to volatile social and political currents. Consider three musicians of the 1960s who influenced Davis: Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane, and James Brown. One cannot separate the guitar virtuosity of Hendrix from the spectacle of his feigning sexual intercourse with his guitar before destroying it by fire at the Monterey Festival in 1967, a ritual suffused with race, rage, and sexuality. One cannot appreciate Coltrane's position as the reigning jazz virtuoso of his generation without confronting his later work, in which he deconstructed every conceivable norm of the jazz tradition through the influences of world music, an ecstatic, pan-religious spirituality, hallucinogens, and the politicized free-jazz innovations of the younger generation. One cannot appreciate Brown's innovative synthesis of funk music elements

of African, Afro-Cuban, gospel, and jazz, without also considering the furor raised by his embrace of politicians such as Richard Nixon, or the extortion he allegedly suffered at the hands of the Black Panthers.

The music of the 1960s and 1970s reflected a period, an era when Americans grappled with several extremely volatile internal crises, a historical moment which has subsequently been caricatured in public discourses as right-wing ideologues seek to exorcise the demons of counter-cultural politics. Resuscitating the music involves the partial re-opening of social wounds which have never completely healed, and which many Americans are reluctant to revisit. This is one probable reason for the dearth of scholarship on the fusion era.

With respect to Davis's music in particular, another obstacle to serious reflection is the weight of his legend. Mapping Davis and his work onto the cultural conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, one might argue that his remaking of his music paralleled his remaking of his personal image in accordance with the flamboyant models suggested by Hendrix, Brown, and Sly Stone. But if it is true that Davis's musical transformation gradually provided the soundtrack for his notorious and prob-

lematic relationships with women, drugs, crime, and blackness, it is also true that this was a gradual process. Between 1968 and 1971, Davis was, by all accounts, healthier than he had been in years - largely abstaining from meat, drugs and alcohol, travelling with a personal trainer and health food cook, and arguably playing the strongest trumpet and most provocative music of his career.

Still, Davis's electric legacy raises a fundamental musicological question: Is it possible to take the small-band jazz conception as it existed in 1968, reconcile it with the influences of musicians such as James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone, Ravi Shankar, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and arrive at a result which can still be considered part of the jazz tradition? The answer requires a preliminary set of distinctions between per-

formances which use the technical virtuosity of jazz to produce a technically-sophisticated popular music ('jazz-rock fusion'), jazz-based performances which aspire to compete with pop songs in the commercial marketplace ('instrumental pop'), and performances which utilize electric instruments and integrate popular elements according to the established procedures of modern jazz ('electric jazz'). This idea of electric jazz also centers around the practice of collective (rhythm section) improvisation, an important distinction between serious jazz and its more commercial variants.

This last category is most effective in the evaluation of Davis's music of 1968 - 1971, a period of astonishing, compressed activity for him. The 'electric jazz' appellation is admittedly arbitrary and amorphous but for my purposes, it helps to underscore a crucial point. While electric jazz relies on electric instrumentation, it retains the traditional small-band emphasis on improvised interaction among the members of an ensemble. This practice can be traced all the way back to the roots of jazz in turn-of-the-century New Orleans.

Although the approaches Davis took on *Filles de Kilimanjaro* were prefigured by earlier quintet tracks such as

'Eighty-One', 'Fun' and "Stuff," the recording was a clear point of departure. Both Davis's band and his music were in a state of transition, clearly working toward the integration of pop song materials and electric instruments by combining the elastic interpretation of the second quintet with the repetitive structures of rock and rhythm and blues. The first half of the recording ('Felon Brun', 'Tout de Suite', 'Petits Machins') continued the elliptical approach of the second quintet, but the second side was a clear point of departure. 'Mademoiselle Mabry' is Davis's (and an uncredited Gil Evans') reharmonization of Jimi Hendrix's 'Wind Cries Mary'. The track is at once bluesy and abstract, a somewhat more cerebral version of the music Cannonball Adderley was recording at about the same

time, on albums such as *Country Preacher*. *Kilimanjaro's* title track combines a proto-rock backbeat with a modular, free-time melody that floats above the rhythm and provides an abstract interpretation of the folk material underneath. On this LP and the other studio tracks recorded during 1968, the focus shifted from composing horn themes on top of chord structures, to composing rhythm section patterns with melodies assuming an almost secondary role at times.

The promise here was that the repetitive structures of rock, and rhythm and blues could simultaneously provide new source material for the abstractions of the quintet, while grounding it in the earthier, vernacular idioms of the street. *Kilimanjaro* and the other transitional studio pieces of 1968 (found on albums such as *Water Babies*) reflect the promise of the early experiments in electrified jazz, had they not become misguided by unrealistic market expectations and dreams of pop stardom.

Several months later, Davis produced *In A Silent Way*. The album jacket proclaimed "Directions in Music by Miles Davis" and the music contained within certainly represented a clear change in direction. There are four significant stylistic departures on *In A Silent Way*. First is the sense of harmonic

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stasis; both of the side-long pieces are built on one-chord vamps in which a droning tonal center (played mainly by electric pianos) is emphasized over the more standard cycle of moving chords. More than anything else, this probably reflects the subtle (and then-popular) influence of Indian music. The second important change is the foregrounding of the electric guitar, played here by British guitarist John McLaughlin. McLaughlin plays in a style completely unrelated to the standards of jazz guitar in the 60s (players such as Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall, and Joe Pass would be the foremost exponents), garnishing the music with finger-picked melodies which recall the most traditional forms of blues and folk music, as well as the Indian influence. The third departure is Tony Williams's drumming; uncharacteristically, he propels the music with his cymbal work alone, eschewing his usual combative, interruptive approach. Although Williams' restraint was later attributed to

a dispute with Davis in the studio, the cymbal-heavy work provides a suspended, atmospheric element that is unlike most jazz of its time, and more akin to the reflective tendencies of some psychedelic music. Finally, the overall mood of the music is more pastoral than anything else — emotionally and existentially, a clear departure from the "blues impulse" at the roots of much jazz music.

More than *Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew* (1970) is a landmark, not because it was the highest-selling jazz album of its time, but because it successfully transmuted the influence of world music traditions, and the more general mood of 1960s psychedelia, into jazz via the influences of modal jazz and rhythm-and-blues. For the most part, the album adopts the same atmospheric approach that characterized *Silent Way*. The songs themselves are mostly built from the same types of modal vamps as the earlier LP, but these structures are elaborated here by the increased chromaticism of the playing and the more active drumming of Jack DeJohnette, who replaces Tony Williams. The album's visionary but irreverent qualities were reflected in the way the post-production deconstructed the illusion of the recorded jazz performance as a real-time performance document, in the way Abdul Mati Klarwein's cover

illustration offered a post-modern vision of tribal Africa refracted through the lens of Afro-inflected psychedelia, and in Davis's resolutely secular take on the brand of jazz mysticism that had been associated with John Coltrane — hence the album's title.

Essentially sonic collages, both *Bitches Brew* and *Silent Way* are notable as works of studio post-composition in which the role of the studio is foregrounded through audible splices and tape loops. In this sense, the works prefigure electronica in the use of the recording studio as a creative tool and an audible component of the creative process. Crafted by producer Teo Macero from hours of studio jams, these albums partially reflect the producer's training in the tape-splicing procedures of experimental classical music. Macero's work essentially fuses the best moments of these jams into a new composition and as recent, expanded editions of these LPs abundantly illustrate, little of the newly-issued (and unedited) raw material can compare with the previously-available music.

The recently issued *It's About That Time (Live at the Fillmore East, March 7, 1970)* presents the famed (and under-recorded) 'lost quintet' (saxophonist Wayne Shorter, electric pianist Chick Corea, bassist David Holland, and drummer Jack DeJohnette, augmented here by percussionist Airtó Moreira). This group is considered by some critics to be Davis's 'third great quintet', though others have criticized the 'third ...' tag, arguing that unlike the first and second great quintets, the third quintet band created no original repertoire of their own to stake their place in the canon of recorded jazz works. But this is not entirely true, since this group was actually a paired-down version of the studio ensemble that Davis had used for the recording of *Bitches Brew*. In concert, they played music previously recorded and performed by the first and second quintets, as well as music that was unique to their configuration.

The Fillmore recording demonstrates that the strength of this band lay not merely in their original compositions, but in their powers of interpretation. The radically deconstructive treatments of previously recorded works belong to a process which Davis and his second quintet had gradually redefined since their famed sets recorded at Chicago's Plugged Nickel in 1965. The difference is that if the second quintet stretched song form to its breaking point, the third quintet pushed the same material past that point. Shorter offers the elliptical thematic and improvisational statements traceable to the same Plugged Nickel dates, on which he stretched himself far beyond the boundaries of the quintet's studio dates. Corea offers an overwhelming density of ideas, made articulate through his astonishing technical virtuosity. Holland (alternating between upright and electric bass) infused the music with a sense of rock and r&b, his funky bass ostinati abstracted into minimalist gestures, while drummer Jack DeJohnette shows why he was Davis's ideal drummer in the early 1970s. He alternately provides a soundstream of abstracted rhythm in the manner of Tony Williams, or holds down the groove with the Buddy Miles approach that had so captivated Davis upon

hearing Hendrix's *Band of Gypsies* set. Meanwhile, Moreira provides an eclectic range of coloration in a style that prefigures the broader integration of world percussion traditions into American music.

Then there is the electric element. On the same Fillmore stage where Hendrix and his *Band of Gypsies* had completely redefined the possibilities of the electric guitar three months earlier (for example, in 'Machine Gun'), the group matched Hendrix's intensity with a fierce set of abstracted, electrified jazz. Whereas the studio *Bitches Brew* set was as much a creation of the studio as it was a document of an actual performance, the band used the Fillmore gigs to show the way this music could be handled live. A more explicit engagement with the language of free-jazz than Davis had previously allowed in his groups, the free element is filtered through electronic experimentation to produce some of the most provocative live jazz ever recorded. Unedited and untampered by the post-production, the Fillmore recording is by far the best set of live Miles from the 1970s.

After this period, Davis would field one last great band drawn primarily from the ranks of jazz players, with saxophonist Gary Bartz, pianist Keith Jarrett (making a one-time appearance on electric keyboards), and a rhythm section anchored by DeJohnette, ex-Motown bassist Michael Henderson, and percussionists Mtume and Don Alias. Their work can currently be found on Davis's 1971 recording *Live Evil* (Columbia C2K 65135) but a comprehensive, multi-disc overview of their live work is said to be in production.

The use of electric instruments and pop song structures facilitated the integration of new textures and a new generation of folk materials into jazz. This, of course, is what modern jazz had historically done - subjected materials from the folk and popular traditions to the improvisational processes of high art abstraction. But the split that fusion created among jazz musicians damaged this long-standing interpretive pattern. Since the fusion era, jazz musicians attempting to straddle these divisions have produced heavy-handed efforts which themselves only reflect the hardening of commercial, social, generic, and ideological borders. The precarious equation of modern jazz, free-jazz, experimental music, world music, and popular music that prevailed in the 1970s was effectively lost without the detailed manipulations of form, texture, and dynamics which were central to jazz's refashioning of the pop song. And those textures were themselves reflections of a broader social texture, the texture of a society willing to question some of its fundamental premises, and to fashion novel responses in art. Still, we can hope that a revisiting of this music will allow musicians, critics, scholars, and audiences to ponder the relevance of the procedures Davis set into motion to the long-term evolution of the jazz tradition, and to open a space for a body of musical strategies that could prove crucial to a stagnant art form. GR