



Miles Davis



By Ashley Kahn

Music, like water, finds its own course – ever flowing, seeking what is new and modern. Water is self-propelled; in music, there are those who arrive, push sound and style forward, and, for a few years, define the latest wave and deliver the newest of the new.

Miles Dewey Davis III – trumpeter, visionary, and eternal modernist – was a force of nature. With an ear that disregarded categories of style, he sought out new musical worlds, and generations followed in his footsteps. While the creative rush and experimental charge that come to most musicians in youth eventually run down, Davis held an exploratory edge for most of his sixty-five years. It had to be fresh, or forget it.

Davis was born to and grew up under the sign of jazz during the forties and fifties, and is still celebrated as a member of the bebop brotherhood. But at an accelerated rate that matched the cultural and social progress of the sixties, he plugged in; fused jazz, funk, and other hard-driving rhythms; and ascended to rock-star status. By the end of that dizzying decade, his recordings held a vision of sound that was so new and difficult to define the record label simply printed DIRECTIONS IN MUSIC on his album covers.

Davis once claimed responsibility for changing the direction of improvised music several times in his lifetime – and no one is arguing the point.

Today, the enduring influence of Miles Davis can be found in rock and hip-hop groups, jazz and jam bands. If improvisation is involved, there's hardly a musician who is not benefiting from his innovations, or who does not hold him in the highest reverence. Just ask Carlos Santana or Prince or Snoop Dogg or Joni Mitchell or Dave Matthews or Richard Hell or

Meshell Ndegéocello – or when they were with us, Duane Allman, Jerry Garcia, or Jimi Hendrix. Davis brought together disparate worlds of music – worlds that had viewed one another for years across an abyss of distrust and misunderstanding.

Speaking about his groundbreaking album *Bitches Brew*, the recording that first taught rock and jazz to speak the same language, Davis proudly claimed, “I could have put together the greatest rock & roll band you ever heard.” Far-reaching words for a jazz legend.

The son of a dentist, Davis was born in 1926 to middle-class comfort in East St. Louis. He was a small, delicate, and sensitive soul who created a tough, street-wise exterior that earned him the title Prince of Darkness. He learned trumpet in the fertile, blues-drenched music scene of his hometown. In 1944, he persuaded his parents to send him to music school in New York City, a ploy to locate bebop pioneer Charlie “Yardbird” Parker.

Davis plunged into the deep end, hurtling through the wild chord-based music as the rookie in the saxophonist's band. It was sink or swim, with little help from his idol. “I wanted to quit every night because Bird would leave me onstage . . . you would have to play or die up there!”

For Davis, the next fifteen years defined a headstrong musical journey and a rise to mainstream acceptance and fortune. In 1949, he turned away from the frantic feel of bebop and, with a group of future jazz giants, forged a “cool” alternative that leaned more on restraint and elegance. *The Birth of the Cool* established three defining aspects of Davis's genius that would guide him through the next four decades: first, his reputation for attracting and nurturing talent (his later groups yielded generations of greats, from John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley to Keith Jarrett,

Miles Davis initiates the electric-jazz era, 1969.





Davis with John Coltrane (left) and Cannonball Adderley



Guitarist Pete Cosey, saxophonist Sonny Fortune, bassist Michael Henderson, drummer Al Foster, guitarist Reggie Lucas, percussionist Mtume, Davis (clockwise from top left), c. 1974

Chick Corea, and countless others); second, his knack for manipulating material, often composed by others, and assembling bands that became creative pressure cookers; and finally, *Cool* also began a pattern of delayed credit and influence: The full impact of many of Davis's musical inventions would not be acknowledged until years later.

Through the fifties, Davis developed a signature sound on trumpet, artfully employing space and silence between the notes, often using a metal mute, conveying an acute loneliness and vulnerability. He began to lead his own ensembles and again shifted musically, exploring a spirited bebop-and-blues hybrid that was dubbed hard bop. In 1955, he jumped from independent record labels to Columbia, where marketing and promotion muscle ensured that his music was heard by ears beyond the jazz circle. (There was a downside: Focused attention meant that certain habits – offering no spoken introductions or stage banter, turning his back on audiences while he focused on the music, speaking out about civil rights – began to overshadow his musical accomplishments.)

By the close of the decade, he recorded *Kind of Blue* – defining yet another change in musical direction – and *Sketches of Spain*. The two albums were back-to-back melancholy masterworks that sold at pop-album level and swung Davis's star into an even higher orbit.

Had Davis halted his intrepid drive at this point, an undying, legendary stature and all that came with it – top-bill adulation, well-paying gigs – would have been his for the taking. But his explorations had only begun.

The sixties found Davis again unsettled and searching for another stylistic door. By 1964, his new rhythm section – pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, teenage drummer



FROM LEFT: Davis in the mid-sixties; with Emerson, Lake and Palmer, c. 1972; on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, 1969.

Tony Williams – was blazing. The next year, he added saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter, and soon the quintet boasted an exciting and near-telepathic connection. They took chances with song structure in an approach that was later called free-bop, setting the stage for Davis's next creative thrust.

There were hints of what lay ahead: In 1968, electric guitarist George Benson appeared on one tune, and Hancock played a Fender Rhodes electric piano on another. On the cover of *Miles in the Sky*, Davis posed in striped pants, billowing shirt, boots – gone were the signature jacket and tie of the past. Ever the bellwether, Davis intuited a new wave of rhythmically charged sounds and youthful style. He began to perform on a wider variety of stages – jazz festivals booking rock acts, the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco – digesting rock, funk, and the general experimentalism of the late sixties. His album *Filles de Kilimanjaro* featured him leading two electric bands.

With a growing sense of assurance, Davis rocketed into the next ten years with an unparalleled rate of change, leaving familiar jazz territory far behind while a legion of disgruntled fans pined for his ballad playing of old. Previously, his music had progressed at a pace most could comprehend. Starting in 1969, Davis took radical leaps from one album to the next, at times even track-to-track.

The storm began with the gentlest breeze. *In a Silent Way* featured two side-long tracks, all atmosphere and delicacy, and introduced new sidemen: Joe Zawinul on organ, John McLaughlin on guitar, Chick Corea on keyboards, and Dave Holland on bass. The double album that followed in 1970, *Bitches Brew*, took an even wilder tack, drawing from an impossibly wide palette of textures: James Brown grooves and the psychedelic blues of Jimi Hendrix; Latin and African percussion; saucy jams and ghostly, lyrical solos.

Bitches Brew was controversial, a blockbuster, and attracted another, younger generation whose musical taste had begun with the Beatles and Stones. In Davis's wake came an entire school of electric jazz, soon dubbed fusion. The bands he helped spawn, most led by his former sidemen, defined the sound and flow of the seventies: Weather Report, Mahavishnu Orchestra, Return to Forever.

This part of Miles Davis's career remains his most contentious period. He experimented with electric trumpet and played through a wah-wah pedal. He recruited new sidemen, leaning heavily on funk bassists, percussionists, guitarists, and sitarists. The music revealed the maestro feeling his way through a jungle of sound, layer upon layer: flashes of instru-



Davis with saxophonist Gary Bartz, 1972

mental brilliance against deep, dark backgrounds; rhythm taking over as the leading musical element. Yet when he raised his trumpet, he was still reaching back to the sound and the approach of his earliest days.

"My period with him, the *On the Corner* and *Get Up With It* period, that music is James Brown, Sly Stone – it's got Sun Ra in there," says saxophonist Dave Liebman, who accompanied



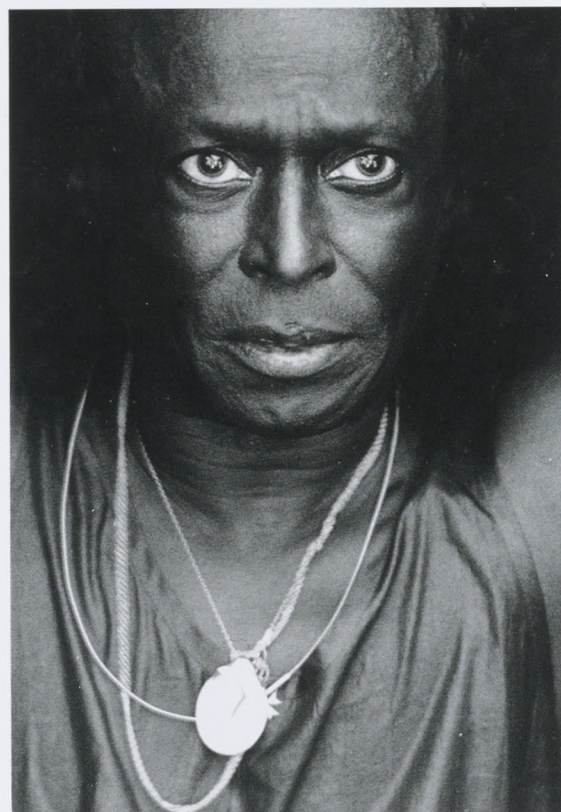
ABOVE: Davis in the eighties with bassist Foley and saxophonist Kenny Garrett. OPPOSITE: Miles in the sky, 1988.

Davis in 1974 and 1975. “But, man, the blues was in his soloing big-time. You can hear it.”

By the end of 1975, Davis was tired and dealing with a number of health issues and personal demons. He reappeared in 1981, and the next ten years served as the coda to his career. True to form, he hired the best new talent around (saxmen Kenny Garrett and Branford Marsalis, guitarists Robben Ford and John Scofield), experimented with new sounds (rap, hip-hop) and technologies (synthesizers, drum machines), and drew inspiration (and tunes) from the likes of Prince, Cameo, Michael Jackson, and Cyndi Lauper.

Through six decades of music making, Davis balanced new and old, surprise and tradition, a wistful sense of vulnerability and a great deal of anger. He had yelled his voice into a whisper in the 1950s, and in 1991, he screamed himself into an aneurysm that killed him. Although he ultimately proved to be a mere mortal, there’s an image of him I can’t seem to shake lose: Miles Davis the superhero, forever charging forward, Superfly shades hiding his face, a bold *M* blazing from his chest. Just like all those other crusaders we’ve grown up with, Davis changed and grew, and even his costumes evolved. Like his music – and like a superhero – he always spoke with an economy of expression. “I don’t want you to like me because of *Kind of Blue*,” he insisted a few years before he died. “Like me for what we’re doing now.”

Above all, Miles Davis had that one defining superhuman ability that distinguished him from all other musical X-men. He possessed an innate ability to intuit the music of the future, and to create the situations that allowed us all to hear it. ←



Davis at the Newport Jazz Festival, 1990

