

Miles davis as the influence of jazz essay

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Miles Davis was one of the greatest and most important figures in jazz history. Miles Dewey Davis III was a musician, composer, arranger, producer and bandleader all in one. Davis was at the forefront of almost every major development in jazz after World War 2. He was one of the most influential and innovative musicians of the twentieth century along with Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong.

His versatility landed him at the forefront of bebop, cool jazz, modal, hard bop and fusion (Kirker, 2005: 1). His sound went on to influence many other newer forms of music today such as pop, soul, R&B, funk and rap. As one of the last trumpet players, Davis employed a lyrical, melodic style that was known for its minimalism as well as introspection (Kirker, 2005: 1). Davis's influence also extended as far as his ability to assemble great up-and-coming musicians and nurture their creativity within his many bands.

Miles Davis and his music is the epitome of jazz, symbolizing jazz as innovative, cool, complex and unpredictable (Kirker, 2005: 1). Born in Alton, Illinois and raised in East St. Louis, Davis was given his first trumpet at the tender age of thirteen. By the age of fifteen, he was playing in public with bandleader Eddie Randall and studying under local trumpeter Elwood Buchanan. His teacher advised Davis to develop a straight, vibrato-less tone unlike popular trumpeters of the period like Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge.

The playing without vibrato became his clear signature tone throughout his career and a characteristic of the 'cool' sound which supplied overtones similar to vibrato (Kirker, 2005: 1). In 1944, Davis was accepted into the

Juilliard School of Music. However, he was more interested in locating Charlie Parker who was his idol.

Parker introduced him to other musicians and soon they were playing gigs at nightclubs alongside Fats Navarro, Freddie Webster and J. J Johnson who were the future leaders of the bebop revolution. Bop or bebop was a rebellion against the big bands, commercialism, racial injustice and the restrictive harmonic framework of jazz during that time (Kingman, 1990: 385). It was also during his participation in the Parker quintet that Davis perfected his approach to difficult melodic lines and rhythms that were played at breakneck speed (Merod, 2001: 72).

Davis was soon finding his own voice, exploring the harmonies and phrasings of bebop, and contributing cautious but pure-toned solos (Kirker, 2005: 1). His first attempt at leading a group came in 1949 and was the first of many occurrences where he would take jazz in a new direction. Along with arranger Gil Evans, he created a nonet (9 members) that used non-traditional instruments in a jazz setting such as the French horn and Tuba (Judden, 2001). An emphasis was also placed on a diminished use of vibrato in both reeds and brass, producing a drier, 'cool' sound. Davis and Evans were searching for a big band sound outside the confines of swing and bebop which would lead to the birth of cool jazz later. Cool jazz has followed closely behind bop that it has the same dispassionate objectivity, complexity, and careful avoidance of the obvious that almost tends to obscurity (Kingman, 1990: 388). However, these features were exhibited in a music of understatement, restraint and leanness.

They signed on Capitol Records which led to the release of their album “ The Birth of the Cool”, a movement that challenged the dominance of bebop and hard-bop (Sony Music, 2010). “Boplicity” is an example where the tempo has been slowed but the bop characteristics still remain intact. The light style of drumming, with emphasis on cymbal, bass keeping the beat and an important bop characteristic, the unison playing at the beginning of the piece (Kingman, 1990: 388).

Davis challenged the fundamental premises of bebop by creating music of haunting tonal qualities without relying on speed, an idea that he had already pioneered while playing with Charlie Parker. This approach dramatically altered the balance between the improviser and the arranger (Scaruffi, 2006). “ Walkin”, was a swaggering blues piece informed by the extended harmonies of bebop was a shift from cool jazz and announced the arrival of hard bop (Sales, 1992: 171).

Hard bop was the evolution and development from bop during the 1950s and 1960s, often regarded as a reaction to the restraint and intellectualism of cool jazz (Kingman, 1990: 389). With the installation of the Miles Davis Quintet, Davis picked up where his late forties sessions left off. Eschewing the rhythmic and harmonic complexity of the prevalent bebop, Davis was given space to play long, legato and essentially melodic lines, where he would begin to explore modal music, his lifelong obsession. Modal jazz is a new venture for jazz both harmonically and structurally, it no longer used the chord progressions of standard tunes as the basis for improvisation replaced by a succession of scales on which the performer improvised instead

(Kingman, 1990: 390). Davis had definitely gone a long way in his trumpet playing since collaborating with Parker. No longer dependant on bebop phrasing, he chose a minimalist approach instead. Ornate phrasing gave way to a smattering of tones. He was also utilizing a Harmon mute, sometimes adding reverb, which had a whisper effect and personalised his sound.

Elements of texture and silence between notes were becoming more dominant (Kirker, 2005: 2). By 1958, he had freed himself by using modal scales and slower moving harmonies. “ Milestones” portrayed this example as musically it encompasses both the past and future of jazz. Davis showed he could play blues and bebop but the centrepiece is the title track centred on the Dorian and Aeolian modes and featuring improvisatory modal style that Davis would make his own.

The album ‘ Kind Of Blue’ also best exemplifies the sound. Released in 1959, it had been called the perfect jazz album. Miles introduced the music to musicians and provoking modal improvisation by using scales instead of chords as a springboard for solos (Kirker, 2001: 2). Kind Of Blue not only popularised modality in jazz, it made jazz accessible to a variety of listeners. Davis followed down a path that led to the most productive yet controversial phase of his career between 1969 and 1975. In the face of the ascendancy of rock and roll, he began introducing electronics and a rock aesthetic. Electric keyboards were added in and a wah-wah effect pedal for his trumpet, and he took on musicians with rock experience into his band (Svorinich, 2001: 100). 1972’s On The Corner made the influence of modern composer Stockhausen more evident.

This transition required Davis and his band to adapt to modern, electric instruments in both performance and studio. *Bitches Brew* for instance, is a case study in the use of electronic effects, multi-tracking, tape loops and other editing techniques. In *A Silent Way*” and its successor “ *Bitches Brew*” was the first truly successful amalgamations of jazz with rock music, laying the groundwork for the genre that would be known as fusion. From 1967’s *Nefertiti* to the landmark 1969’s *Bitches Brew*, a rapid and direct transition can be observed.

In “ *Nefertiti*” Davis uses a conventional quintet of all acoustic instruments, with the trumpet and saxophone as front line, employing much of the unison playing that was a legacy of bop, against which is some highly individualistic playing on piano and drums (Kingman, 1990: 395). A more significant change is the rhythmic basis of music. In “ *Bitches Brew*” the rhythmic basis and new role and sound of the rhythm section for jazz-rock are established. The rhythm section players are increased, playing mostly Latin instruments, and two electric pianos.

The beat is now distinctly the ‘ square’ beat of rock with no ‘ swing’ to it. The electric bass lays down the familiar, insistent, highly repetitious ostinato of rock. The transition to jazz-rock also portrays the complete adoption of the electric versions of piano, bass, guitar and the use of devices such as echo effects (Kingman, 1990: 396). Many of the players on these Davis recordings of the late 1960s were to become important in further developments in the jazz-rock fusion of the 1970s including pianists Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Joe Zawinul, guitarist John McLaughlin and saxaphonist Wayne Shorter

(Kingman, 1990: 396). By now anyone would have noticed that Davis never settled into one style, every few years he created a new line-up and format for his groups. Each phase brought denunciations from critics; each except for the most recent one has set off repercussions throughout modern jazz.

Specific aspects of his style includes Davis's unmistakable, voicelike, nearly vibratoless tone- at time distant and melancholic at others assertive yet luminous (Pareles, 2009). Jazz singers around the world till have imitated these qualities today. His solos, whether ruminating on a whispered ballad melody or jabbing against a beat, have been models for generations of jazz musicians. Other trumpeters play faster and higher, but more than in any technical feats Davis's influence lay in his phrasing and sense of space (Pareles, 2009). His genius was centered on an ability to construct and manipulate improvisational probabilities, selecting and combining compositions, players, musical styles and other performance parameters (Smith 1995: 41).

Davis has inspired and influenced many jazz players and his legacy will continue even 25 years from now, changing the face of jazz music and what it has become today.