

Miles Davis – A timeline by Brownman Ali

1926 – born Nov 18, East St. Louis, son of dentist

1944 – Billy Eckstine was playing West St. Louis. The young Miles would go see them often. This band featured both Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. They invited Miles to play 3rd trumpet in the band and he was incensed by this crazy music history would later call “bebop” – frenetic, energized and fiery.

1944 Sept -- moves to NY to go to Julliard and spent weeks trying to find the illusive Charlie Parker. He befriended saxophonist Coleman Hawkins then and would end up many nights at the jams at Minton's and getting to know the future leaders of the bebop revolution – Fats Navarro, Kenny Clarke, JJ Johnson.

1945 – finally finding Parker, he replaced Dizzy in the quintet. A very different trumpet player than Dizzy, he didn't have his range or his fire – but his dark, centered tone was a welcome alternative to Dizzy's approach by bebop fans of the time. He would tour heavily with Parker, the world discovering him – until 1948 when Parker's erratic behavior – much of it ascribed to his heroine use – caused Miles to leave the band after a confrontation with Parker at the Royal Roast (a NYC club on Broadway).

1948 – he met and grew close with Canadian large ensemble orchestrator Gil Evans and met pianist John Lewis, and baritone sax player Gerry Mulligan who were unhappy with the increasingly virtuoso instrumental techniques that dominated the bebop scene. This cabal of players ended up forming a nonet that featured strange instrumentation including a tuba and a French horn – and Gil Evans arrangements.

1949 - The result of this exploration was the Capital records recording “Birth Of The Cool” and the beginning of a movement that history would later call “cool jazz”. This would represent a turning point in the jazz world that Miles knew was a powerful one – so much so that he turned down a job with the Duke Ellington orchestra in order to pursue this project. It would be 20 years before historians would be able to trace back the early days of “cool jazz” to this ensemble.

1950 – 1954 -- While “cool jazz” was raging on the West coast... but Miles was in NYC badly addicted to Heroine during this period. Crazy story about Miles stumbling onto the bandstand with Max Roach and Clifford Brown with his horn in a paper bag, playing a bit of My Funny Valentine, and then stumbling back out into the rain. He kicked heroine by '54. However despite these personal challenges these years would be very fruitful artistically

Between 1950 and 1954 Miles would meet Bob Weinstock of Prestige Records and sign a 4 year contract and make several notable recordings – Dig, Bags Groove, Miles Davis with the Modern Jazz Giants, Walkin.

With these recordings, Davis assumed a central position in what is known as hard bop. In contrast with bebop, hard bop used slower tempos and a less radical approach to harmony and melody, often adopting popular tunes and standards from the American songbook as starting points for improvisation. Hard bop also distanced itself from cool jazz by virtue of a harder beat and by its constant reference to the blues, both in its traditional form and in the form made popular by rhythm and blues. A few critics go as far as to call *Walkin'* the album that created hard bop, but the point is debatable, given the number of musicians who were working along similar lines at the same time (many of whom recorded or played with Davis).

He became known in the Prestige studios for being distant, cold and withdrawn. Coupled with a contempt for critics, he was hard to work with. These years included some well publicized conflicts including one near-fight with Thelonious Monk during the recording of *Bags Groove* that received wide exposure.

1955 – Miles has an operation to remove polyps from his larynx and some yelling post-surgery in a conflict lead to him damaging his vocal chords permanently. Between his whispery voice and his attitude he would earn the moniker “The Prince of Darkness” that year. But he had kicked heroine by now and was looking at the future.

1955 – 1958 was another incredible period in Miles history.

In 1956, he would put together what would later be known as the 1st Great Quintet (Red Garland, Paul Chambers (19), Philly Jones, and the then unknown tenor titan John Coltrane). Miles would be long, legato melodic solos which would be contrasted by Coltrane energized sheets of sound approach. He then signed to Columbia Records (and later that year would put out “Round About Midnight”), but before he could do any of that, he had to finish out his contract with Prestige – which lead to 2 sessions in May and Oct of 1956 where this group recorded enough material for 4 recordings – which were then released slowly by Prestige over the course of years, and are now remembered as some of Miles greatest work with this quintet – *Cookin'*(57), *Relaxin'* (58), *Workin'* (59), *Steamin'* (61).

That primordial quintet was shortlived and disbanded in 57.

1958 – Davis would recruit Cannonball Adderley, re-hire Coltrane , Philly Jo, Paul Chambers and Red Garland – that sextet would record the album “Milestones”... then Miles fired Red Garland immediately after the recording and Philly Jo. He would hire Bill Evans and Jimmy Cobb to replace them and THAT sextet would tour extensively over the next year and record “the 58 sessions”.

While the sextet was doing it's thing, Miles was still hanging out with Gil Evans through 58 and 59 – which led to Porgy and Bess, Sketches of Spain and Quiet Nights – all featuring Gil's incredible arranging. Picturesque, evocative and serene are all terms that get used to describe this music...

1959 was a big year for Davis going in to the studio to record his magnum opus with the sextet – KIND OF BLUE. The tunes were bare skeleton structures so the individual personalities of each of the players were highly showcased – from Miles' minimalist approach to Coltrane's muscular ever-searching flurries of notes to Cannonball Adderly's soulful bluesy take. This record was named the “best selling jazz album of all times” (Recording Industry Association of America) and in 2009 the US House of Representatives voted 409-0 to honor this recording as an American national treasure. It is the single most studied recording in jazz schools around the world.

1960 – Coltrane would leave the band, but would be persuaded to return for one final recording in “Some Day My Prince Would Come”.

Losing Trane was hard on Miles and for 4 years he cycled through tenor players for years – Jimmy Heath, Sonny Stitt, Hank Mobley, George Coleman... none of them were what Davis was looking for.

1963 – the long-time rhythm section of Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb departed., and that year he put together 17-year old Tony Williams with 22-year old Herbie Hancock and 27-year old Ron Carter. This rhythm section would become the backbone of the next phase of Miles' musical explorations, and can be heard starting to gel on “Seven Steps to Heaven” which featured George Coleman on tenor.

1964 – Coleman left in the spring of 64, never really comfortable with what was going on in the rhythm section... so the hunt for a tenor player continues... Miles takes Sam Rivers to Europe that year – and fires him as soon as they come back.

And then in the Summer of 64 it happened – Miles persuaded Wayne Shorter to leave Art Blakey's band and join him and this insane rhythm section. Miles FINALLY had the tenor player he wanted – and these musicians would then form what would be called the 2nd Great Quintet.

From 64 to 68 this quintet of Miles, Wayne, Herbie, Ron and Tony would devastate the world. They were explorers like the world had never seen before... fearless. It's my personal favourite period of Miles' career. They recorded Miles Smiles (1966), Sorcerer (1967), Nefertiti (1967), Miles in the Sky (1968), and Filles de Kilimanjaro (1968)... but the most indicative recording of that period is a 2-night Chicago performance recorded by the Legacy label – but wasn't released until 30 years later! And when it was released, it was released as a box

set called LIVE AT THE PLUGGED NICKEL. It spans 2 nights – Dec 22 and 23, and covers 3 sets the 1st night and 4 sets the 2nd night... and is the most insane playing I've ever heard.

Historians would later call their approach to improvisation came to be known as "time no changes" or "freebop," because they abandoned the more conventional chord-change-based approach of bebop for a modal approach. Interesting Davis' group would continue to do this, even through his major stylistic change into fusion right up until his 5 year silence in '75.

1968 – Davis started experimenting with more rock-oriented rhythms and groove, turning away from the “swing” feel that had previously defined jazz. On the second half of “Filles de Kilimanjaro” he replaced Herbie and Ron with Dave Holland and Chick Corea, and now he was really into experimenting with the tonalities of electric guitar – so we see John McLaughlin appearing in Miles bands... we see Jack DeJohnette replacing Tony Williams... we see Joe Zawinul and Keith Jarrett on keys... there were a lot of new players making appearances doing crazy things psychedelic things in those days leading to a string of electric recordings marking a phase in jazz history later to called “Jazz-Rock fusion”

1969 – In A Silent Way

1970 -- Bitches Brew, Live at the Filmore East, Black Beauty

1971 – Live Evil

1972 – On The Corner

1973 – Black Beauty, Jazz At The Plaza

1974 – Big Fun

74-75 – 3 double LP recording – Dark Magnus, Aghartha, Pangea

“This was music that polarized audiences, provoking boos and walk-outs amid the ecstasy of others. The length, density, and unforgiving nature of it mocked those who said that Miles was interested only in being trendy and popular. Some have heard in this music the feel and shape of a musician's late work, an egoless music that precedes its creator's death. As [Theodor Adorno](#) said of the late [Beethoven](#), the disappearance of the musician into the work is a bow to mortality. It was as if Miles were testifying to all that he had been witness to for the past thirty years, both terrifying and joyful.”

— [John Szwed](#), on [Agharta](#) (1975) and [Pangaea](#) (1976) – director of jazz studies Columbia University

At this point Miles was nearing a physical breakdown, doing a LOT of narcotics and alcohol. He did one last performance in Sept '75 then withdrew almost completely from the public eye for 5 years. He had a special retainer with Columbia Records that allowed him to stop playing. The movie that came out last year “Miles Ahead” starring Don Cheadle fictionalizes what might have happened during that 5 year silence.

Columbia would release recordings they had in the vaults to try and make some money from a signed artist that wasn't recording – that resulted in the release of Water Babies, Circle In The Round and Directions were all compilation releases of outtakes of other sessions they had in the vault.

1981 – he rebuilt his chops, and recorded “The Man With the Horn”, playing mostly wah-wah pedal with a very young band. This comeback record sold well, but was panned by the critics as Miles having sold out to commercial music.

But Miles couldn't care less... and from 81 to his death in 91 – this is what he explored – often produced by Marcus Miller. Some historians call that decade “The Marcus Miller years”, as Marcus was often at Miles' side on stage or producing his records.

1981 – We Want Miles (intro. Mike Stern)

1982 – Star People (intro. John Scofield)

1983 – Decoy (feat. Branford Marsalis on soprano & Bill Evans on soprano)

1984 – Your Under Arrest (feat. Micheal Jackson's “Human Nature” and Lauper “Time After Time”
That was his final album for Columbia and signed in 1985 to Warner Brothers

1986 – Tutu

1989 – Amandla

1991 – Miles then obsessed with the sounds of hip-hop pouring in his window from the streets of new york called Russell Simmons and asked him for a young producer who could help create this kind of music. This lead to “Doo-bop”, produced entirely Easy Mo Bee, and marked yet another move into a new musical realm – hip-hop. I believe strongly that if Miles had lived longer we'd have seen him playing with Guru's Jazzmatazz and Tribe Called Quest.

His last recording before he died was “Miles & Quincy Live at Montreaux” which – for the 1st time in 30 years, Miles performed the songs arranged in the 1950's by Gil Evans (it was recorded in 1991, but released post-humously in 1993)

Miles Died on Sept 28, 1991.

No single artist in jazz, and arguable music as a whole has influenced the direction of a genre so often and so completely as Miles Davis. And every where I go people have their favourite periods of his career. But regardless of whether or not you LIKE the output – I feel it's of paramount importance that we stop and acknowledge the courage, the fearlessness and the genius of a man who could never stop exploring. Whether you like the music or not, Miles stands as one of the most towering examples of what a true explorer of this artform can do.

And it's for that reason alone he's MY greatest influence.

Thanks for having me.