

Miles Davis



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- Miles Davis (1926–1991) was born in Alton, Illinois, and grew up in East St. Louis. He began playing trumpet at age thirteen and two years later he was working in Eddie Randall Blue Devils, a local band.
- In 1944, he moved to New York and enrolled at the Julliard School of Music. However, he spent most of his time on Fifty-second Street, where he met Charlie Parker and other great bebop jazz musicians. Soon Davis was enmeshed in the New York jazz scene. He played with big bands led by Benny Carter and Billy Eckstine. He was a sideman in many Parker-led recording sessions from 1945 to 1948.
- From 1948 to 1950, he was involved in the *Birth of the Cool* sessions that influenced the cool/West Coast style with its emphasis on composition and its understated sound featuring solos woven into the texture of the arrangements (see Chapter 14).
- From 1950 to 1955, Davis performed and recorded with many significant jazz musicians including Sonny Rollins, Art Blakey, J. J. Johnson, and Horace Silver. However, his playing suffered due to a heroin addiction problem he finally kicked, in 1953.
- Davis was one of the most significant and innovative bandleaders and composers of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. A large portion of modern jazz history is recorded on Davis-led sessions during this time. The sound of his bands constantly changed, and these continual innovations influenced the direction of post-1950 jazz.
- The first Miles Davis classic quintet, with Philly Joe Jones on drums, Paul Chambers on bass, Red Garland on piano, and John Coltrane on tenor sax, epitomized the mid-1950s hard bop-derived sound.
- *Kind of Blue*, recorded in 1959, was important in the development of modal improvisation and represented a move away from the sound of hard bop. The Davis group had expanded to a sextet with the addition of Cannonball Adderley and replaced Red Garland with pianist Bill Evans and later Wynton Kelly. Drummer Jimmy Cobb also appeared on a few of the selections. Their sound influenced the next generation of jazz musicians.
- The second Miles Davis classic quintet, with Herbie Hancock on piano, Ron Carter on bass, Wayne Shorter on tenor and soprano saxophone, and Tony Williams on drums, redefined rhythm section concepts and led the way for the development of the post-bebop acoustic sound and later the electric sound of the 1970s. This band was considered modern in the 1960s and they continue to sound modern today.
- *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* were albums that broke new ground as Miles looked to the sounds of popular dance music for inspiration in forming one of the early jazz-rock fusion bands. Many members of his fusion groups later led some of the most influential fusion bands of the 1970s and 1980s such as Weather Report, Return to Forever, Tony Williams Lifetime, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Herbie Hancock's Headhunters.

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- Although Davis was not personally responsible for all the ideas and innovations produced at these sessions, he was the overseer, and therefore has been credited with many significant developments in modern jazz.
- Miles Davis, like Duke Ellington, had an innate ability to recognize talent and hire some of the most important and influential musicians in jazz to play in his groups. He always had an ear for musicianship and at crucial times chose musicians who were, or would later become, leading innovators in jazz. Some of these Miles Davis sidemen include John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Bill Evans, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, Chick Corea, and Keith Jarrett.
- As a trumpet player, Davis's early playing shows the influences of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Clark Terry, and Freddy Webster. It must have been quite intimidating for the young nineteen-year-old to be playing with Charlie Parker, filling in for Dizzy Gillespie in 1946.
- One should not be obsessed with the limitations of his playing; he used them to his advantage. The fact that he missed or cracked notes did not detract from the beauty of his playing. His lines were more varied and original than those of most trumpet players.
- Miles was always a melodic soloist whose work was characterized by skillful timing and dramatic construction of line. As a master of self-restraint, he never wasted a note or relied on special effect. His trumpet playing was unique, personal, and easily identified by the following:
 - His use of silence (or space) in his solos allowed them to *breathe*
 - The Harmon mute, which gives an esoteric, far-off sound one immediately recognizes
 - His flugelhorn playing; he was one of the first jazz musicians to popularize this instrument
 - The use of little or no vibrato, a characteristic of the cool style
 - His playing is generally confined to the middle register of the trumpet
 - His ability to phrase well-known compositions/melodies in such a distinctive and original manner that he could often make them sound like new compositions
 - His redefinition of the tempo of a jazz composition in the mid-1950s; he generally avoided very fast tempos and adhered to medium tempos
 - His avoidance of musical cliché.
 - His alteration of pitch and tone color, and the bending of pitches
 - His ability to play notes at unexpected places
- All of the above characterize much of what we associate with Miles's playing, especially in the 1950s. As his playing changed in the mid-1960s, he began playing with a brighter, more sharp-edged tone and began to utilize the high register more often. As he struggled with the trumpet on his late 1940s recordings; he realized his limitations and used them to establish his own unique voice and way of playing. His approach was somewhat of a novelty when compared with the cascades of notes coming from Clifford Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, and Fats Navarro.

- The **first classic quintet** consisted of Red Garland on piano, Philly Joe Jones on drums, and Paul Chambers on bass. Initially Miles Davis wanted to hire tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, but due to previous commitments, he was not available. Davis instead hired John Coltrane. Five albums were released on Prestige between 1954 and 1956 containing some of the most exciting combo work of the 1950s. Especially important was the appearance of the Miles Davis Quintet at the 1955 Newport Jazz Festival. It was one of the most important events in reestablishing Miles's dominance on the jazz scene. When Miles left Prestige, he was signed by Columbia, and he added alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley to the group. He chose his sidemen to contrast with his spare style of playing.

Bebop/Cool—1945–1954

Major Influences

- Freddy Webster
- Clark Terry
- Dizzy Gillespie
- Charlie Parker

Important Recordings

ALBUM	YEAR	PERSONNEL
<i>Birth of the Cool</i>	1948–1950	Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan, arrangers; Miles Davis, trumpet; J. J. Johnson, Kai Winding, trombone; Sandy Siegelstein, French horn; Bill Barber, tuba; Lee Konitz, alto sax; Gerry Mulligan, baritone sax; John Lewis, piano; Nelson Boyd, Al McKibbon, bass; Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, drums
<i>Dig</i>	1951	Sonny Rollins, Jackie Mclean, Walter Bishop Jr., Tommy Potter, Art Blakey
<i>Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants</i>	1954	Milt Jackson, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Percy Heath

1956–1963

Major Influences

- Gil Evans (collaborator)
- Ahmad Jamal
- John Coltrane
- Bill Evans

Important Recordings

ALBUM	YEAR	PERSONNEL
<i>Steamin'</i>	1956	Chambers, Jones, Garland, Coltrane
<i>Workin'</i>	1956	Chambers, Jones, Garland, Coltrane
<i>Cookin'</i>	1956	Chambers, Jones, Garland, Coltrane
<i>Round Midnight</i>	1956	Chambers, Jones, Garland, Coltrane
<i>Milestones</i>	1958	Chambers, Jones, Garland, Coltrane, Adderley
<i>Kind of Blue</i>	1959	Chambers, Jones/Cobb, Evans/Kelly, Coltrane, Adderley
<i>Miles Ahead</i>	1957	Gil Evans (arranger and conductor)
<i>Porgy and Bess</i>	1958	Gil Evans (arranger and conductor)
<i>Sketches of Spain</i>	1959–1960	Gil Evans (arranger and conductor)
<i>Someday My Prince Will Come</i>	1961	Chambers; Cobb; Kelly; Hank Mobley/Jimmy Heath, tenor sax
<i>Seven Steps to Heaven</i>	1963	Ron Carter, bass; Tony Williams, Frank Butler, drums; Victor Feldman, Herbie Hancock, piano; George Coleman-tenor sax

Gil Evans

- In 1957, Davis renewed his association with Gil Evans. They produced four albums of music arranged by Evans for an expanded jazz orchestra. Evans used the orchestra to feature Miles as a trumpet soloist much in the same way classical concertos feature soloists. The instrumentation included extensive use of woodwinds, French horns, and other brass instruments.
- Compared with other big band writing of the 1950s and 1960s, Gil Evans's arrangements were more reflective and almost third stream (classical and jazz) in nature. Evans mastered the effective use of shading, color, and programmatic technique. He wove open solo sections for Davis into the texture of his startling arrangements. Evans freed himself from formula writing and voiced freely across sections, weaving improvisation into the framework of each arrangement.
- On *Miles Ahead*, Davis plays flugelhorn throughout. On *Porgy and Bess* Evans arranges songs taken from the popular George Gershwin folk opera. On *Sketches of Spain* Evans uses Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concerto for Orchestra and Guitar* as the basis for many of the arrangements. Another similar Davis/Evans collaboration was *Quiet Nights*.

Kind of Blue

- Most pre-1959 recordings were either popular tunes, bebop, or hard bop tunes. Each player on *Kind of Blue* had already contributed or would soon contribute to a new approach that

would significantly influence jazz for many years afterward. The construction of some tunes was remarkably different because the improvisations were based on modes. (Sometimes referred to as “church modes,” this concept goes back as far as ancient musicians from Greece.) The influence of pianist Bill Evans is apparent because of his interest in modes at that time and the fact that he wrote or cowrote some of the compositions on the album. For example, all one has to do is listen to Bill Evans’s recording of “Peace Piece” on his album *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* to hear the similarity to “Flamenco Sketches” on *Kind of Blue*.

- Before the late 1950s, jazz used chord progressions as the basis for harmony and improvisation in any given tune. A typical jazz composition would use a series of different chords, each one lasting a specific number of beats. “So What” was constructed as the antithesis of this approach. It used only one harmony (D-minor seventh) for the A section of an AABA form tune. The B section used a slightly different chord (E-flat-minor seventh). Therefore, there are only two chords used for the entire selection.
- In addition, two modes (one for D-minor seventh, the other for E-flat-minor seventh) were used as the basis for all the improvisation in “So What.” This approach was unprecedented and, in the past perhaps, not considered sophisticated enough to warrant validity. However, “So What” provided over eight minutes of exciting yet accessible jazz. Practically anyone, musician or not, can hear and understand what is happening at any given point in the tune; yet musicians as advanced as John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, and Miles Davis were conveying improvisation in deep and convincing ways.
- Another modal selection on *Kind of Blue*, “Flamenco Sketches,” was constructed with five preset modes as the basis for improvisation. The soloist would progress from one mode to the next only when ready to go on. For Miles Davis, who already had made a point of simplicity, modal compositions were a perfect vehicle.
- With “So What,” “Flamenco Sketches,” and other modal selections, a door was suddenly opened for all jazz musicians to take a new approach to jazz improvisation and composition. Much post-1959 improvisational music employed some of these alternatives first used by Davis, where frequent chord changes were rejected in favor of performances based on only one or two chords. Of all the musicians who performed on *Kind of Blue*, John Coltrane was the most comfortable with this new approach, and modal improvisation would manifest itself in many of his recordings released with his own quartet in the 1960s.

Miles Davis Quintet—1964–1968

Major Influences

- Bill Evans (1959–1961 Trio)
- Herbie Hancock
- Wayne Shorter
- Ornette Coleman

Stylistic Characteristics

- Advanced and modern harmonic knowledge/complexity
- Advanced and creative concepts of rhythm and melody
- More freedom in playing
- Songs with few chords—modal tunes or complex structures
- Little use of mutes
- Performance of mostly original material
- Music is still swing oriented, but sometimes the even eighth-note rhythmic feel is used
- Miles's trumpet playing becomes more aggressive than his 1950s recordings

Important Recordings

ALBUM	YEAR	PERSONNEL
<i>Four and More</i>	1964	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>My Funny Valentine</i>	1964	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>E.S.P.</i>	1965	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>Miles Smiles</i>	1966	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>Nefertiti</i>	1967	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>The Sorcerer</i>	1967	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter
<i>Filles de Kilimanjaro</i>	1968	Ron Carter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter

Wayne Shorter/Tony Williams/ Ron Carter/Herbie Hancock

- In 1963 Miles had two rhythm sections: his Los Angeles based group and his New York group. The album *Seven Steps to Heaven* was interesting in that he used both rhythm sections on different selections.
- In 1964, Miles hired the New York group as his permanent rhythm section; this young group featured drummer Tony Williams (only seventeen years old at the time), bassist Ron Carter, pianist Herbie Hancock, and saxophonist Wayne Shorter. Shorter was probably the most experienced, having already spent some years with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. The interaction of this rhythm section was comparable with that found in the Bill Evans Trio. Both the Davis and Coltrane rhythm sections consolidated the innovations of modern jazz

- up to that point. Then the Davis rhythm section moved to the next level.
- Davis's trumpet sound changed from the well-known dark, introspective sound to a more bright and edgy sound. He began to play more in the upper register of the trumpet and moved away from boplike swinging rhythms.
 - This group could play at very fast tempos and in the context of slow tunes avoid stating the tempo in an obvious manner, which gave the renditions a floating, dreamlike effect. Their rapport allowed them to change rhythms, textures, and moods spontaneously; their versatility and quick responsiveness were extraordinary. The freedom and flexibility they displayed influenced jazz for the next two decades.
 - Most of the compositions Davis played in the 1950s fit conventional song forms except for the groundbreaking work with pianist Bill Evans on *Kind of Blue*. After the departure of Evans and prior to Wayne Shorter joining the band, Davis did not explore much new territory in the area of song forms. With the addition of saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter, however, Miles stopped recording standard jazz repertoire from the 1950s. Instead, he recorded new material composed primarily by band members Shorter and Hancock. Much of the new material did not fit into the category of conventionally constructed music. Some compositions were more modal in nature, while others had no preset harmonic sequence. Some of the compositions exhibited a transparent texture. Hancock's piano comping style changed to reflect this new style by playing sounds on the piano for mood, color, and dramatic effect.

Wayne Shorter. © Mosaic Images/
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