**Davis, Miles [Dewey III] (1926-1991)**

Keith Waters

Jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer Miles Davis is one of the most significant artists in the history of jazz. He stood at the forefront of most of the post-WWII developments in jazz, including bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, modal jazz, postbop, and jazz-rock fusion. His trumpet playing largely avoided fiery pyrotechnics and was renowned for avariety of timbres, judicious use of space, and focus on the middle register of the instrument. As a bandleader he hired, and often launched, the careers of some of the most important and innovative jazz artists, including tenor saxophonists Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley (in the 1950s), tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock, pianist Chick Corea, guitarist John McLaughlin, drummer Tony Williams (in the 1960s and 1970s), and guitarists Mike Stern, John Scofield, and bassist Marcus Miller (in the 1980s). His 1959 recording *Kind of Blue* remains one of the best-selling, most critically-acclaimed, and iconic jazz albums of all time.

Davis was born in Alton, Illinois in 1925 and grew up in East St Louis. He moved to New York in 1944, originally to attend the Juilliard School, but he soon left school and began performing with bebop alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. Davis made one of his first recordings at the age of nineteen in a 1945 session with Parker. He was a member of Parker’s quintet from 1947-49, distinguishing himself from other bebop trumpeters by using fewer notes and concentrating on the middle register of the instrument. In 1949 and 1950 Davis led a series of recordings with a nine-piece group, using an unusual instrumentation consisting of rhythm section (piano, bass, drums) and paired high-low instruments: alto and baritone saxophones, French horn and tuba, and trumpet and trombone. These recordings were later collectively released under the title *Birth of the Cool*. During the 1950s they became a touchstone for cool jazz, which in many ways reacted against bebop and instead used quiet dynamics, unhurried tempos, and a balance of composed and improvised music.

Davis suffered from heroin addiction during the early 1950s, but he overcame his addiction in 1954. That same year he made several brilliant recordings for the Prestige label, turning out a number of performances (that included tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins and pianist Thelonious Monk) that returned to a bebop orientation, representing a 1950s substyle that later came to be called hard bop. In some performances Davis began using the harmon mute, which gave his sound a distant, brooding quality. During the second half of the 1950s Davis assembled what would be called his “first classic quintet,” with tenor saxophonist John Coltrane. Augmented to a sextet with the addition of alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, the group’s recording *Milestones* helped set the standard for hard bop playing. Their 1959 recording *Kind of Blue* remains one of the best-selling, critically acclaimed, and iconic jazz albums, and is now considered one of the earliest and most important exemplars of modal jazz, characterized by slow-moving harmonies and the use of scales (i.e., modes) for improvisation and accompaniment. In the late 1950s Davis also collaborated with arranger Gil Evans in a series of important recordings, including *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain.*

Following a series of personnel changes, Davis formed in 1963-64 his “second classic quintet,” a group that included pianist Herbie Hancock, drummer Tony Williams, and saxophonist Wayne Shorter. The group remained together until 1968, releasing a series of influential live and studio recordings that combined some elements of free jazz with hard bop. Critics celebrated the group for their near-telepathic interaction and for their ability to shift moods, tempos, and meters on their albums *E.S.P.*, *Miles Smiles*, and *Nefertiti*. By 1967-68, Davis was on the verge of another stylistic shift. He encouraged his sidemen to use electric instruments (electric piano and electric bass) and he began experimenting with using rock, soul, and funk rhythms.

These shifts in instrumentation and rhythms moved his music further from a postbop orientation and toward jazz-rock fusion, a change that characterized virtually the rest of Davis’s career. Many jazz musicians and critics found this change controversial, yet his recordings such as *Bitches Brew* (1969) sold well, and Davis began performing at larger rock music venues and festivals. Davis was not the first musician to fuse rock and funk with jazz—others had already used electric instruments, covered pop compositions, and used rock-based rhythms and simpler harmonic structures. But Davis’s position was pivotal, especially since many popular fusion artists of the 1970s, such as Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, and Wayne Shorter, had worked and recorded with Davis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Davis’s recordings of 1970-75 incorporated electric guitar, electric bass, electric keyboard, soprano saxophone, and Davis frequently used a wah-wah pedal to modify the sound of his trumpet. Due to health problems from cocaine addiction, arthritis, and stomach ulcers exacerbated by alcoholism, he stopped performing in 1975-81.

During Davis’s final decade, he turned increasingly to studio technology on his recordings. His 1985 album *Tutu*used synthesized drum tracks and programmed synthesizers that provided funk grooves beneath Davis’s improvisations. One of his last performances was at the Montreux Jazz Festival in a retrospective of his collaborations with arranger Gil Evans. By the time of his death of a stroke in 1991, Davis had help mold virtually all the major changes in post-WWII jazz styles (cool jazz, hard bop, modal jazz, postbop, and jazz-rock fusion). Much of this was the result of his ability to recognize, hire, and capitalize on the talents of other musicians: as a result he helped launch the careers of many significant jazz musicians.