



Miles Davis

LUKE TOWNSEND
 Librarian, Wynberg Library

Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis was an undoubted musical genius, an extraordinary musician whose constant innovation is unmatched in any artistic field. His prolific recording career stretches from the mid-1950s until his death in 1991. The only constant throughout his musical life was his amazing ability to change and adapt, in fact, Davis once said that his need for change was 'like a curse'.

While Davis was capable of creating great beauty in his art, his personal life was often filled with negativity, ugliness and self-indulgence. Throughout his career he used narcotics extensively and his relationships with people and especially women were often abusive.

Yet it's this very negativity that contributes to much of the magnetism and the greatness of his music which is very rarely conventionally 'pretty', some would even characterise it as ugly. The very sound that he emitted from his trumpet was considered to be thin and not brassy enough at the beginning of his career. But persisting with this vibratoless sound he created a unique approach to the trumpet that was utterly personal and could be both poignant and unsettling at the same time. Drummer and fellow jazz-rock innovator Chico Hamilton said: 'Miles Davis is a sound - the whole earth singing!'

Further, Miles placed his



Miles Davis in the early 1970's

trumpet sound within musical contexts that were layered with unsettling moods and shades of darkness and light. The music exists in a realm of its own, beyond categorisation. The music could be full of danger and risk and yet Miles, through his profound courage and inner resolve, always maintained the focus.

South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s was a terribly oppressive and repressed society



and for many of us music was our sanctuary. Davis' music was the antithesis of the bunk being forced down our throats by the state-controlled media in this country during those hateful days.

I first heard the double-album **Bitches brew** during my first year of university and the world was never the same for me again. It was as if I

had been observing the world through dark glasses for years and someone had just lifted them from my face.

Even though I was listening to this music for the first time more than a decade after its conception, this was something so new sounding. The music was multi-coloured, multi-faceted and impossible to describe. Each listening brought a new perspective and there was (and still is) always something new to discover.

While on the surface, to the uninitiated listener, **Bitches brew** might sound at times raucous, incoherent and even formless, for many of us this recording will never grow tired.

The music constantly shifts between moods and textures - now placid, then turbulent, then eerie - as each musician contributes one unhindered and fresh idea after the next. The constant ebb and flow is beautifully controlled and sustained, taking one on an hypnotic journey into a world of brooding voodoo invocations, the Pharaoh's Dance and, of course, blues and funk.

Bitches brew is a multi-cultural experience as it incorporates a

multitude of influences from African and Eastern musics to Avant Garde and Psychedelic Rock and it opened our eyes even more to the absurdity of the situation that surrounded us. For most this music is just too 'far out', but back then loving **Bitches brew** and the flood of Davis albums that followed it in the early 1970s, such as **Live/Evil** and the primal funk of **On the corner** and **Agharta**, was like having secret knowledge of some other more sensual and fragrant world. Sometimes it felt like without this world there was only oppression and ignorance.

On its release in 1969, **Bitches brew** evoked a great deal of hostility from many critics and jazz fans alike and even today it can still evoke similar reactions. This is primarily because the music contained therein still sounds as cutting edge and original today as it did back in 1969 and a whole new generation of musicians continues to fall under its influence. As the saxophonist on that date Wayne Shorter says, 'Miles was hipping the younger generation to themselves.' (**Downbeat**, December 1999.)

Davis had been at the forefront of every major development in jazz since World War II from Bebop and Cool Jazz in the 1940s and early 1950s through the Third Stream and Modal Jazz of the late 1950s and 1960s. Ten years prior to **Bitches brew** the masterpiece of acoustic jazz **Kind of blue** was released and like **Bitches brew** continues to exert its influence today.

Featuring a brilliant cast of instrumentalists, this recording is unequalled in its cross-generational appeal to jazz fans.

Hauntingly beautiful, **Kind of blue** is consistently appealing and demanding listening at the same time. All the participants from Davis on trumpet to pianist Bill Evans and the saxophonists Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane contribute exquisite statements on their respective instruments.

Kind of blue has an almost Zen-like purity and this partly due to the 'modal' quality of the pieces, most of which were mere sketches that were fleshed out during the actual recording session. Modal jazz is relatively simple in structure, consisting of just a



The Berlin Festival, 1969. Left to right: Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette and Miles Davis

few key centres and lends itself to an unhurried and meditative feeling.

All the participants on this legendary performance went on to become major figures in jazz during the 1960s. The impact of John Coltrane, in particular, was enormous, primarily as the greatest improviser on tenor and soprano saxophones that jazz music has seen. Further, his influence in establishing the avant-garde and so-called 'Free Jazz' was immense and he was also one of the first jazz musicians to explore and incorporate music from India, Africa and the Middle East into his music.

By 1969, however, Miles Davis' bands bore little resemblance to the earlier acoustic units. **Bitches brew** featured an assortment of electronic keyboards, electric guitar and bass, as well as non-Western percussion instruments and two drummers playing drum kits. The younger musicians on this session such as British guitarist John McLaughlin and Czech keyboardist Joe Zawinul all brought different influences from psychedelic rock to experimental and folk music.

In assembling this band Davis was creating a kind of electrified 'World' music which alienated jazz purists, but would bring him into contact with a whole new audience and generation of musician.

Many of these of the gifted young improvisers that emerged through the electrified bands that Davis put together over the next two decades also went on to become major figures in jazz music. Keyboardists Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and Herbie Hancock and guitarists Mike Stern and John Scofield are just a few. Davis' policy of never looking back, always moving forward by surrounding himself with younger cohorts reached its creative zenith on **Bitches brew**. As he said some years later 'I never look down or talk down to any musician because he's nineteen or something. I don't sell nobody short. Yesterday's dead.'

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