

# *Miles the Mercurial*

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IN THE SUMMER of 1975 Miles Davis was sequestered in his Upper West Side brownstone, talking to himself in the dark, taking drugs, and not playing, or even picking up, his horn. It would become a six-year musical blank, a period surrounded with rumors of total dissolution: Miles getting beaten up by drug dealers, various others getting beaten up by Miles, reports of a woman being pushed from a third-story window, and full-blown dependency on cocaine, alcohol, and prescription barbiturates bringing Miles more than once to the brink of death. There were herculean acts of wooing and diplomacy on the part of Columbia Records to get him out of seclusion and back into recording, including the delivery to his home of a new nine-foot Yamaha grand piano. When the truck arrived with the gift, Miles refused to open the door. In his thorough and informative biography *So What*, John Szwed compares Miles during this period to Norma Desmond, and Don Cheadle starts his kooky biopic *Miles Ahead* here, dressed as Miles in the height of outlandish seventies fashion. Where Miles could pull off goggle-sized sunglasses and suede flares, Cheadle in his various getups ends up looking like a minor wizard from *Dungeons and Dragons*, all of a piece with the film's broad-strokes caricatures of clueless record execs and shaggy-haired sycophants. When a reporter from *Rolling Stone* gets roped into helping Cheadle-as-Miles buy cocaine from a student in a college dorm room, Miles agrees to sign the kid's copies of *Sketches of Spain* and *Birth of the Cool*, but only after the reporter shames him by asking the kid, "How many times have you gotten laid to this man's records?"

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The upper-middle-class son of a St. Louis dentist, Miles Dewey Davis III arrived in New York City in 1944 at nineteen, ostensibly to attend Juilliard, but he spent most of his time searching for his

hero Charlie “Yardbird” Parker. He found Bird at the height of his powers soloing at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem and was soon playing trumpet alongside him in clubs like The Three Deuces and The Onyx on Fifty-Second Street, hired to fill in for the just-departed Dizzy Gillespie. Bird, Dizzy, and pianist Bud Powell (among others) were the architects of a new kind of jazz, but it was Parker above all who defined bebop virtuosity. To look at one of his solos transcribed—say, “Billie’s Bounce” from a side he recorded for the Savoy label in late 1946—is to see music of eerie design: complete compositions with counterpoint and motivic call and response, made in real time at a lightening tempo. Night after night Miles stood next to Parker and like everybody else felt he had to prove himself by running through the changes. He often played badly and was eventually relegated to the role of musical director and even personal assistant to the heroin- and alcohol-addicted Bird.

Yet Bird’s staggering agility and articulation as a player were consequential for Miles’s finding his own voice, since Miles would soon reject conspicuous virtuosity in favor of what Szwed calls a “calculated lyricism.” Other players on the scene in the mid-forties were doing something similar. After having mastered Harlem stride-style piano (brought to technical heights by players like Art Tatum), Thelonious Monk pared his playing down to an angular, almost cubist, attack and phrasing. Though Monk offered an alternative example, Miles’s escape from the imposing influence of Bird had more to do with his meeting the self-taught Canadian arranger Gil Evans. Miles met Evans in the latter’s basement apartment on West Fifty-Fifth Street, where Gil turned jazz players on to Stravinsky and Hindemith and encouraged them to study recordings and scores. One of those present, Max Roach, remembered that Miles had been “fascinated by orchestration,” taking particular interest in Stravinsky’s Ballets Russes period, scores of which Gil had lying around. During one of these salon sessions Miles and Gil arrived at the idea of a nine-piece band complete with instrumentation atypical for jazz (French horn and tuba) and arrangements that gestured to the Claude Thornhill orchestra Evans had previously worked with. The nonet ended up cutting only two sides for Capitol

Records, but they became the monumental *Birth of the Cool* LP released in 1954. “Boplicity,” a Miles and Gil tune (credited to the pseudonymous “Cleo Henry”), is a good example of *Birth*’s compositional logic: a swinging, harmonized melody played by alto and baritone sax, trumpet, French horn, tuba, and trombone, whose mellow buoyancy is leavened with a tensile sharpness, as if the parts were lithographed or etched. The music is almost neoclassical, with bebop lines in admixture with a version of the orchestrated jazz of previous decades. A key element in the nonet is tenor player Gerry Mulligan, who wrote and arranged about half the tunes. “Cool” was not Miles’s word, but Capitol Records’ publicity department was not wrong: Miles had begun to mute the “hotness” of players like Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie in favor of banked intensity and restraint.

Turning Bird-worship into the *Birth of the Cool* was an amazing knight’s move and one Miles would keep making, in one way or another, for the next forty years. Ralph Ellison identified this restlessness as in part a refusal to play to the crowd, noting how both Bird and Miles “struggled. . . to escape the entertainer’s role.” Parker, Powell, and Monk’s way of being artists (rather than background music for a cocktail party) was to write intricate bebop licks that sounded like the preceding era’s dance bands cut up and stuck back together at severe angles; but from *Birth of the Cool* onward Miles’s way was to play by implication, to elide and subtract, to move elliptically in and out of song structure, and, above all, to shift styles from record to record.



After hearing Miles’s set at the Newport Jazz Festival, George Avakian signed Miles to Columbia in July 1955 and made a recording of the quintet with John Coltrane on tenor saxophone the following October. A portion of that session ended up on *Round About Midnight*, not released until 1957. The reason for the delay was Miles’s contractual obligation to Bob Weinstock’s Prestige Records. Miles suggested to Avakian that he hang on to the masters of an initial recording for Columbia while he fulfilled his contract with Prestige, adding, shrewdly, that Weinstock would then benefit from

Columbia's promotion. Such magnanimity appealed to Avakian, and he and Weinstock struck a deal. The quintet then went into Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Hackensack, New Jersey, for the whirlwind, contract-fulfilling sessions that resulted in four LPs—*Workin'*, *Cookin'*, *Relaxin'*, and *Steamin'*—great records by any standard in any genre. Szwed says Coltrane in these sessions is a “foil to [Miles's] introspection,” and Trane's gushing, sometimes manic, playing points toward the freer jazz Ornette Coleman would start making a couple of years later (tellingly Miles will more than once declare himself an Ornette skeptic). The 1957 Columbia record is the same band sounding slightly more polished, on an LP built around the Monk tune “'Round Midnight.” Miles is playing in a smoldering mode through a Harmon mute, a sound that would begin to define him and which he would shed when the time came to move on.

The next Columbia record was another collaboration with Gil Evans, again produced by Avakian. *Miles Ahead* was billed as “Miles Davis +19” and lushly scored by Evans with orchestrations as close to Debussy as to big-band charts. Evans had the idea of using the LP format for suite-like groupings of songs running together without breaks. As long-playing records were starting to out-market singles, artists were increasingly concerned with structuring musical statements as an “album” of songs over two sides of an LP. *Miles Ahead* was as inventive in its use of this commercial constraint as it was in its playing and arrangements. The next year Miles added Julian “Cannonball” Adderly to the five-piece band heard on *'Round About Midnight*, and the sextet recorded *Milestones*, a record full of blazing postbop, including another Monk tune, “Straight, No Chaser,” on which Coltrane especially is in astonishing form, going into Bird-like territory but then doubling down on sheer insistence and attack. On the title track, and a year later on Miles and Gil's arrangement of *Porgy and Bess*, you start to hear a new approach to melody and chordal accompaniment, moving toward, but not yet called, “modal.” It becomes especially clear in the relation between Miles's horn and the orchestra on the latter, which he uses almost to soliloquize on tunes like “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” and “Summertime.”

Miles's culminating statement of the 1950s, *Kind of Blue*, is a landmark recording of twentieth-century music and exhibit A of what is now referred to as modal jazz. The logical outcome of a decade-long turn away from the chord hammering of bebop, modal playing is structured around a single scale or "mode" (intervallic patterns based on the Greek Dorian, Lydian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian modes). Instead of soloists busily searching out a path from one chord to the next, players may stay within a single mode, building lines, exploring what the literary critic Brent Hayes Edwards nicely describes as a "more varied palette of moods." As Miles put it in a 1958 interview with Nat Hentoff, when scales rather than chords become the frames in which the soloist thinks, "you can go on forever, you don't have to worry about changes, you can do more with the line. It becomes a challenge to see how melodically inventive you are."

*Kind of Blue* begins with a spooky, Satie-like prelude, and then Paul Chambers introduces the famous bass figure of "So What," capped by Bill Evans playing two chords—E minor seventh and D minor seventh—voiced on the piano with the seventh at the bottom and the fifth at the top. The root notes—E and D respectively—have been entirely purged from the right hand, and the effect is one of airy, spacious transparency. The distinctive colors of those two chords say a lot about Evans's musical sensibility (as do the liner notes he wrote for *Kind of Blue* where he likens jazz performance to Japanese screen painting). Miles's soloing is by now so unadorned, so far from the chord shredding of Bird and Gillespie, it has become something closer to real-time melody writing. Because modal playing is melodically expressive—because the source of the musical excitement is horizontal rather than vertical—it suited Miles's song-based imagination. Coltrane is still disentangling knots, but also discovering long modal lines, which flutter out in the middle of a solo like huge butterflies. It is an interesting question whether Coltrane's development into a wildly inventive linear player (see the solos on "India" and "Chasin' the Trane" from his 1961 Village Vanguard sets) was incubated within the modal constraints of *Kind of Blue*. Again, Miles treats Coltrane's volubility as a backdrop for his spare melodicism, and from here on out

Miles seems always to have had a notey player flanking him to throw his own playing into sharper relief. On the second track, “Freddie Freeloader,” Wynton Kelly’s free, joyous mastery of the blues sets the listener up for Miles’s almost parodically simple entry—B-flat, B-flat, B-flat played as quarter notes directly on the beat. On the gorgeous, haunting “Blue in Green” Miles takes up his increasingly recognizable role as moody balladeer, making the horn sound like a crooner or like Sarah Vaughan (in an interview from around this time, Miles said he was trying to phrase lines the way she sang).

Soon Miles was back in the studio with Avakian and Gil, putting together his most orchestrally ambitious recording to date around one of Gil’s richest, most colorful scores. The Spanish flamenco experiment *Sketches of Spain* began when Miles’s wife Frances took him to see a Spanish dance troupe, after which Miles immersed himself in flamenco music and did an interpretation of Joaquin Rodrigo’s “Concierto de Aranjuez.” Once again he found a new sound, playing flugelhorn over Gil’s beds of hovering winds and clattering castanets. Miles had made another knight’s move.



In the book he cowrote with Quincy Troupe, Miles said that if “you get the right guys to play the right things at the right time . . . you got a motherfucker.” Miles in the *Autobiography* is legendarily indiscriminate in his use of that last noun, but if we take it here to mean something like “formidable” then nothing truer could be said about the band Miles put together in the autumn of 1964. He hired tenor player Wayne Shorter away from Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, found Herbie Hancock, a twenty-two-year-old piano prodigy from Chicago, and the even younger Anthony Williams on drums who, at eighteen, had to get his parents’ permission to play in the clubs. Williams could steer a whole band with a single fill or cymbal crash, and Miles said more than once that Tony was the real leader of this “second great quintet.” Williams, tellingly, heard what swung in Cream and the Beatles, and, one imagines, his boss took note of the enthusiasm for rock music.

The quick-witted, sometimes skittish recordings made by this band—*E.S.P.*, *Miles Smiles*, *Sorcerer*, *Nefertiti*—are built mostly around Shorter tunes: “Fall,” “Footprints,” “Orbits,” “Prince of Darkness,” “Dolores,” and “Nefertiti” are all his. Miles sometimes sounds like he’s looking at the material from the outside, then coming in with just the right note, the musical equivalent of *le mot juste*. “Dolores” has no piano comps holding the harmony together, and long stretches of drum kit and bass make for a desolate, jagged territory over which Shorter and Hancock stretch out into more and more abstract solos. Here is, yet again, a new kind of Miles Davis music, with bebop rules about tempo and design rebooted to play a totally different game. Sometimes the music surprised Miles, even as it was happening. A session reel from an alternate take of “Dolores” captures him talking to producer Teo Macero and to his bandmates and refining bits of the arrangement, at one point saying, in the scratchy gremlin voice he acquired after a botched operation on his throat, “that’s some funny shit, boy, hey, play that, Teo. Jesus!”

It has been said that the title *E.S.P.* might serve as a description of the second quintet’s uncanny togetherness, an idea (however fanciful) borne out in the performances recorded over two nights at the Plugged Nickel in Chicago in December 1965. The set lists are mostly tunes that had been in Miles’s book for years: “All Blues,” “So What,” “Milestones,” “Round Midnight,” “Oleo,” “Walkin’,” and standards like “My Funny Valentine,” “Stella by Starlight,” and “On Green Dolphin Street” with only one tune taken from what the band had been working on in the studio (“Agitation” from *E.S.P.*). The quintet is brimming with ideas. Hancock moves around in nimble half steps, sometimes lighting up a chord from an unexpected angle, other times exiting the harmony altogether, scratching around on the outskirts of the music. Shorter picks up melodies like an explorer finding mysterious artifacts, playing them this way, then that, like he’s trying to decipher something. Williams drives the arrangements toward meltdown without ever allowing things to liquefy and is so much a continual “soloist” that bassist Ron Carter becomes the default timekeeper. In an interview Carter gently corrected Miles biographer Ian Carr who

suggested that he was the “anchor” in the band, pointing out that an anchor fixes something in place so it can’t move, which is the opposite of what he was doing. If his lines are the pulse, they also give the improvisers tilting frames in which to play. Miles is impish throughout, making the trumpet wheeze, squeak, dive, deflate, sometimes streak off in abrupt jolts, sometimes sputter out like an extinguished spark. The horn is telegraphy for the band, and everyone is listening so hard that the smallest inflection of phrasing can unlock a whole metrical world. Behind it all is the tune itself, a mostly effaced master code against which the players work themselves free, and it is interesting to note that this band could get further out on something like “Stella by Starlight” than they did on material they had just cut in the studio. On “So What” Miles takes his own recording of six years earlier at nearly three times the tempo, while on “Round Midnight” he goes to extremes of implied, broken phrases. It is amusing to listen to the various club goers belatedly realizing what is being played, with hoots of recognition sometimes minutes into a tune. The same effect will come to be a staple feature of Bob Dylan’s live gigs of the eighties and nineties, when it is not until the third or fourth verse of, say, “Like a Rolling Stone” or “The Times They Are a-Changin’” that one hears confused applause ripple through a festival ground or auditorium.

Miles’s intuitive sense of putting musicians together led him to a radically different approach for the record that turned out to be his most dramatic leap into the musical unknown. *In a Silent Way* isn’t jazz, isn’t rock, nor is it film music of the sort Miles had experimented with in Louis Malle’s *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud*, though it has elements of all of these. The record was distilled from a single recording session—18 February 1969 in Columbia Records’ studio on Thirtieth Street—and is a first full embrace of electric timbres (a version of the second quintet made some tentative experiments with amplification on the excellent *Filles de Kilimanjaro* the year before). Hancock was initially skeptical about the Fender Rhodes piano Miles asked him to play—he called the instrument a “toy”—until he sat down at it and realized his touch, far from being smothered, was translated into a dreamy shimmer. Contrary to what most late-sixties rock



players were finding in amplification (overdrive, distortion, feedback) John McLaughlin plays clean, ringing tones on a semihollow-body electric guitar. On the title track, a chart by Vienna keyboardist Joe Zawinul that Miles purged almost entirely of its harmonic information (Hancock says Miles “ventilated” the tune), McLaughlin plays a skeletal folk melody over a pedal E on a Hammond organ. Miles told him to “play like you don’t know how to play guitar,” and McLaughlin tried to follow the instructions. When the guitarist felt he was ready for a take Miles informed him that the tapes had been rolling, and that his tentative attempts were the performance.

Teo Macero had been involved with the avant-garde of electronic music since his days working as an assistant to Edgar Varèse, and his role in arriving at the structure of *In a Silent Way* cannot be overstated. Macero took a stack of tapes and cut them together to make two long pieces of music, each taking up a side of the LP. The reviewer asked to write about the record for the *New York Times* was nowhere near prepared to appreciate this kind of studio artifice and refused to take on the job, complaining privately to a friend that “at one point the identical piece of music is repeated!” That it was entirely deliberate and not evidence of an unprofessional production was part of what made *In a Silent Way* a new kind of music, though such tricks were not unprecedented in jazz. Sidney Bechet had done a “one-man band” experiment already in 1941, Lenny Tristano had manipulated the tempo of certain recordings in the mid-fifties and, closer to Miles’s milieu, Bill Evans made *Conversations with Myself* for Verve in 1963, in which he layered himself in triplicate to produce overdubbed piano-trio arrangements of Monk’s “Round About Midnight” and Alex North’s “Love Theme” from *Spartacus* (among others). Macero would remain Miles’s producer and close studio collaborator for the next decade, and they would continue to refine this kind of record making, treating the studio not as a neutral medium for capturing a performance but as a compositional tool.

Another session from that summer yielded a double LP by another big electric band. The twelve musicians who met in August 1969 to record what would become *Bitches Brew*—part jazz ensemble,

part experimental rock band—worked not so much in head-solo-head frames as in clusters of sound, merging acoustic timbres (like Bernie Maupin’s bass clarinet) with the full spectrum of rock amplification. The electrified tones got Stanley Crouch’s hackles up. He said in a piece about Miles from the mid-nineties that *Bitches Brew* was full of “electronic guitars, static beats, and clutter,” hearing the whole record as a transparently venal pandering to a commercial rock audience. I suspect part of the reason Crouch (and others) left their ears at the door for *Bitches Brew*—oh, those terrible, newfangled “electronic” guitars!—was because on this record Miles broke a rule far more serious than the taboo against overdubbing. At about the eight-and-a-half-minute mark of the opening track, “Pharaoh’s Dance,” Miles’s trumpet shows up heavily saturated with Echoplex, a tape-delay effect heard on rock guitars of the period (notably Jimi Hendrix’s, with whom Miles hung out steadily for a time and whose playing had impressed him). Miles had taken the step of using electronics to alter the tone of his horn: this was for many too tough to take—a rejection of “jazz” *tout court*, with its entrenched pieties about acoustic instrumentation and live performance as the mark of authenticity. Another element in the sound are the three electric pianos spread across the stereo image—Zawinul hard left, Larry Young up the middle, Chick Corea hard right—which creates glittering fields over which Miles spits out the *De-dit De-dit De-dit* trumpet figure that would become a recurring motif for the next five or six years, and which functions on the title track as an incantatory signal to which the band responds in roiling dervishes of sound. Miles is present in the music not only as a player but as a character, audibly snapping his figures in the breaks and whispering instructions, keeping the Harvey Brooks bass line at the tempo he wants. As with *In a Silent Way*, Macero had a key role in structuring the album, cutting up and repasting the sessions into the shapes we hear on the LP sides. This double LP full of recalcitrant, unclassifiable music went on to sell extremely well; more evidence (along with *Kind of Blue* and *Sketches of Spain*) of the mysterious calculus that occasionally yokes artistic ambition with commercial success.

A nice antidote to reactionary dismissals of Miles's electric music is George Grella's perceptive book on *Bitches Brew*, in which he compares the album to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Grella describes all three as "works of craft and imagination that slammed the coffin lid on an old way of doing things and opened up an entirely new universe of aesthetic and technical possibilities. Like those works [*Bitches Brew*] is both carefully organized and roughly made, it borrows from materials and methods that came both before and from outside the tradition." The description is apt. Miles, who never stopped changing styles and continually invited the condemnation of various types of traditionalists, indeed evokes comparisons to the fox-like temperaments of Picasso and Stravinsky. Some years later, when Wynton Marsalis—as clear a candidate for jazz reactionary as ever there could be—was brought backstage to meet Miles, Miles is reported to have said: "So, here's the police."



After *Bitches Brew* the knight's moves continue but become less surprising and less consequential, more and more a working out of directions implicit in the two great records of 1969. *On the Corner* (1970) is a brutally literal extension of minimalist ostinato and planar sidelong structures, dominated by loud auxiliary percussion and a radical studio illusionism (a tabla hit can sound like a gunshot). *Tribute to Jack Johnson* (1971), a soundtrack record Miles made to accompany a documentary film about the boxer, is his most head-on encounter with rock and roll, with Billy Cobham's drumming sounding as close to Charlie Watts's as it does to Blakey's or Philly Joe Jones's or Tony Williams's (Szwed calls it "barroom rhythm"). Williams himself had by this time formed the ferocious jazz-rock band Lifetime and was at the center of a growing fusion scene that included Shorter and Zawinul's band Weather Report. A collection of studio scraps, *Get Up with It* (1974) is notable for the gorgeous, almost liturgical organ piece Miles wrote upon hearing of Duke Ellington's death, "He Loved Him Madly," but the handful of live releases issued by Columbia from

around this time show Miles trying to outdo his ex-bandmates through sheer volume. Sets recorded in Japan like *Pangea* (1975), with their walls of feedback and Miles's trumpet sent through multiple effects boxes, show his musical statements more structured around loud electric jam sessions than any deliberation in the studio, with guitarist Pete Cosey especially unleashing fiery tornados of sound like the outer reaches of Hendrix, but squared or cubed.

And then came the six years of nothing. Touring, drug abuse, and various medical problems (including a hip replacement) had taken their toll, and Miles more or less crashed. It was not until the spring of 1981 that he was back on his feet and playing the trumpet, barely. The first tentative sessions resulted in a record, *The Man with the Horn*, musically a mostly forgettable LP but for some distinctive guitar playing by newcomer Mike Stern, followed by a series of drum-machine-driven funk records, made in close collaboration with bassist and studio whiz Marcus Miller (*Star People*, *We Want Miles*, *Decoy*, *You're Under Arrest*). Live sets started to include covers from the pop charts, such as Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" and Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time," and Miles messed around with an arrangement of Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do with It?" in rehearsal. The first two became staples of his concerts in the mid-eighties and of course invited accusations of capitulating to commercial taste at the expense of musical integrity in ways far worse than the late-sixties leap into electric rock. No doubt the idea of Miles decked out in gold lamé jackets doing Cyndi Lauper covers, in arena settings more befitting a teeny bopper than an auteur with thirty records under his belt, was offensive to many who cared about jazz. But the idea of Miles covering pop ballads was not at all an odd one, given his rise to fame as the lyricist of the Harmon mute on "My Funny Valentine" and "It Never Entered My Mind."

What *was* odd was how the knight's move into arena pop star occurred simultaneously with Miles being awarded the Léonie Sonning Music prize, previously given to Igor Stravinsky, Benjamin Britten, Yehudi Menuhin, and Andrés Segovia, among others. The prize

resulted in a collaboration between Miles and Danish composer Palle Mikkelborg on a fifty-minute suite *Aura* (1985), in which Mikkelborg took an approach that seemed the negation of Miles's flirtations with pop megastardom. Beginning from aleatory, quasi-serialist procedures, Mikkelborg took the letters M-I-L-E-S-D-A-V-I-S, assigned each of them a tone, built themes around the permutations, and then gave each track a color (the song titles are "White," "Yellow," "Orange," "Red," "Green Blue," "Electric Red," "Indigo," and "Violet"). The procedural stringency resulted in a strange, sometimes scary record of high abstraction, and was the most convincing musical statement from Miles since "He Loved Him Madly."

His final knight's move was going back and playing, straight-facedly and with a hint of nostalgia, tunes from his earliest records. When, under the musical direction of Quincy Jones in Montreux in 1991, Miles played shakily through the chart of "Boplicity" from *Birth of the Cool* and various other tracks made in collaboration with Gil Evans, it was the first time he had ever exhibited anything like a musical looking back. Three months later he died in Santa Monica at age sixty-five.



In a 1990 radio interview, Joni Mitchell said her two patron saints were Miles and Picasso,

both monsters, but I love them to death . . . because they are restlessly creative . . . they're long runners, they're lifers. They have the potential until they snuff to reinvent themselves. They have to reinvent themselves. That means they need fuel . . . I think those kind of monsters kind of eat things up around them, in a way, therefore appearing monstrous to others. . . . [Picasso] stirred up trouble . . . anything to keep the flame. But, in the divinity of it all I think they have to be forgiven, because I think they're monstrous in their devotion to their art, which makes them appear to be extraordinarily selfish. . . . it's oddly yin-yang, it's selfish and selfless. . . . it must be done.

Reading Mitchell's description I'm reminded of one of Emerson's many stinging lines in "Self-Reliance": "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall." Does Mitchell mean Miles and Picasso were "great souls" who could afford to shed the consistency less monstrous souls require? There is something unsettling, even dangerous or threatening about people who are genuinely unpredictable, but if the unpredictability results in great art, like the forty or so recordings Miles Davis made between 1954 and 1989, we are grateful the world has been enriched by this particular monster, in that particular way. If the monstrously unpredictable person happens not to make great art, perhaps we are not so happy.

One thing that was not changeable in Miles, not subject to the mercury of whim, was the need to change, even when the changes became less and less convincing. Try to connect the guy who played with Bird to the guy leading the *Birth of the Cool* sessions, the person inventing "modal jazz" to the person playing the gigs in Chicago in late 1965, the person at the center of the electrostorm on *Pangea* to the person covering Cyndi Lauper. They might be different people, even different centuries. Because Miles catalyzed and then presided over at least four distinct eras of music over the course of his life, his relation to musical history is itself mercurial. If he finally took a look back, he would look over entire musical ecologies that had evolved around his own work. "I have to change, it's like a curse," he said, talking about styles of his own invention that had begun to imprison him. When you get to that point, Mitchell is right: it must be done.

## Notes on Contributors

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