

Davis... still miles ahead

By Benson Idonije

The latest re-issues of Miles Davis works by Fantasy Records goes to prove one point. He was so enigmatic and his music intense that his profile is limitless.

Miles Davis was not esoteric, but he was deep. His music was not in the avant-garde mould in the strict sense of this term, but it was always evolving and reaching out to higher levels of performance, with time. Miles Davis was perhaps the most sought-after jazz musician that ever lived, but instead of reciprocating this gesture, he made himself unapproachable and kept to himself, not caring what the critics said. This Davis was miles ahead!

Dizzy Gillespie kind of established the bop sound on trumpet in the forties, but different approach. The sound that Miles produced was personal, intimate, and almost speech like. And it went past all considerations of harmony and rhythm. Miles was an incompletely formed soloist.

Little wonder he became Charlie Parker's first partner and associate. Parker must have chosen him for reasons other than mere potential, at the time. The human qualities in his playing, the visions of beauty and loneliness contrasted with Parker's ecstatic, mercurial expressions made Miles an ideal foil for Parker. And with Parker he built on his natural gift for harmonic innovation.

Miles absorption of harmonic theory after he arrived New York in 1947 to play with Charlie Parker was remarkable. He studied at Juilliard, but he came across as though he had been performing on stage. And by the time he recorded the Birth of the Cool sides with a ten-piece band in 1949 and '50 he was, at 23, a master of subtle harmonic expression.

Davis developed through to the fifties. He began to add a new voice to the modern jazz movement of that decade, coming up with quintets and sextets that later included some of the most powerful and influential pianists, drummers and horn-men. Notable among them are Wynton Kelly, Red Garland who was known for the creation of block chords, Philly Joe Jones, Julian Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane from 1958 to 1959 when he seemed to have taken jazz to a high peak.

In the sixties, Miles became the epitome of modern jazz and gathered around himself all the adventurous young stars including Herbie Hancock and George Coleman who played piano and tenor saxophone respectively. Then came the 70s and Miles went electronic, playing loud, rock-oriented music to packed halls soaked with whistling, stomping and standing ovation.

This was the era in which Davis played such strange hits as Funky Tonk, What I say, Sivad, Little Church, Double image Gemini, Nem um Talyez among many others. It was the era in his musical career when he worked with such sidemen as Jack DeJohnette, drum, John McLaughlin, guitarist; Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, Herbie Steve Crossman, saxophone.

The rock press acclaimed Davis as a daring innovator who seemed to be able to get away with any musical experiment, no matter how far out. The Rolling Stone re-viewer at the time proclaimed Miles the Maria Mulour of the trumpet, capable of reaching into history and recreating styles long since forgotten.

This reviewer got it all wrong. Miles Davis did not look back, was not governed by nostalgia. His turf was always contemporary music. Jazz critics fussed and turned because Davis would not recreate the past, would not go back to 1953, 63, '73. He would not jam at Newport anymore with the likes of Dexter Gordon, the tenor saxophone virtuoso noted for tripping his audience with long-winding solos and beautiful phrases. Miles would not associate with Art Blakey, Cannonball Adderley, Red Garland, Bill Evans and all the musicians he used to cherish.

Miles Davis refused to subject his music to the explanation of liner notes. "Don't write about the music," he often said, "The music speaks for itself."

If there were any set of people Davis hated in those days, they were critics. He did not listen to them, neither did he reckon with their opinions: "Critics write whole columns and pages of big words and still ain't saying nothing. If you have spent half your life getting to know your business and the other cats in it, and what they are doing, then you know whether a critic knows what he's talking about. Most of the time they don't. I pay no attention to what the critics say about the good the bad or me. The roughest critic I got, and the only one I worry about myself. My music has to get past me and too vain to play anything I think is bad.

Miles Davis never saw anything wrong with his two-chord megawatt milieu of the mid-seventies. For him he was taking jazz ahead of time. He was advancing the art form forward. He was only demonstrating an amazing capacity for change and self-renewal.

From the seventies till his death in 1991, he became the major force in contemporary popular music. To any one who knew Miles Davis even slightly, it was unreasonable to believe that he had abandoned his flinty artistic integrity to achieve his immense popular success. His image as a personality was often negative and might well be calculated; he was a master of the put-on. And so it would be out of character for him to be cynical about his music.

However, jazz fans still finds early Miles Davis more like it. Kind of blue has become a reference point even though for Miles, it was only a passing phase. Davis would not look back in terms of recreating the past. But thanks to Fantasy Records who have come out with the abundance of Miles Davis reissues.

Take the double record set called Dig for example. It spans Miles works from the forties to the sixties-decades that are today still being looked upon as Miles Davis best jazz times. Yes, because his taste was flawless, his emotional commitment totals, his time perfect, his tone something else. He had one of the fairest senses of swing in jazz. His warmth, inventiveness, and humour were burningly personal. And his assimilation of the history of his music was unsurpassed.