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Electric Miles Davis

In 1990-91, I wrote a book on the music of Miles Davis from the period 1968 to 1975, and I called it simply “Electrique”. I should like first of all to explain what made me write this book. I am not a European critic, but just a musician who occasionally finds himself out of work. According to my mood of the moment, I use these periods of inactivity in various ways, ranging from sleep cures to the study of subjects that fascinate me. One such subject, one that has for long intrigued me, is the “electric” period of Miles Davis.

As I’m sure you know the Miles Davis biography better than you know mine, let me give you a brief résumé of my career. I was born in 1955, thirty-three days after the death of Charlie Parker and fifty-four days before the “Green Haze” session for Prestige with Red Garland, Oscar Pettiford and Philly Joe Jones. In the mid-sixties, somewhere between the Antibes concert and “E.S.P.”, I discovered the Beatles, and they had a profound effect on my adolescence. By the outset of the seventies, I was immersed in pop music and what was sometimes called “progressive rock”. One day in 1973, when I was eighteen, I came across an advert for a Miles Davis concert in Paris. It was to take place on July 11th at the Olympia Theatre, and, for reasons I can no longer explain, I decided to go. I had heard virtually nothing by Miles, and at that time I must have had a very confused mental picture of his music, certainly closer to “Kind Of Blue” than to “Live Evil”. To this day, I can still see Miles stooped over the wa-wa pedal, and that buddha in dark glasses hunched over his wailing guitar. I didn’t understand a thing of what was going on, but did notice that at the end of each piece, the audience applauded and sincerely seemed to like the music on offer. So I told myself something interesting must be happening, even though I myself felt excluded from the secret. But after that concert, things moved ahead fast : I discovered some records, probably “Porgy & Bess” and “In A Silent Way”, and I soon caught a bug from which, happily, I have never been cured. I thus decided to go and see Miles again when he returned to Paris with the same group in the November of that same year, and this time, I was absolutely knocked out by what I heard. And I have remained absolutely captivated by this music ever since.

I was thus into the music of Miles Davis, yet still felt somewhat out of phase. For Miles’ music of this period by no means enjoyed unanimous acceptance, and there were numerous specialist voices proclaiming it was nothing compared to what the trumpeter had been playing in the fifties and the sixties. As I was totally ignorant about matters jazz, I simply told myself that this electric music of Miles’ appealed to me because of my past fondness for rock and pop. In a word, I may have been wrong but I liked it all the same. And the best thing was just to enjoy it and keep quiet.

I thus belong to that generation of Miles fans brought up in deprivation, because at the very time I was getting to know and appreciate his music, he disappeared from the scene. Every new record release produced a feeling both of excitement and relative disappointment, since the music it offered was never the most recent. And this precious source of pleasure became increasingly parsimonious, since one found oneself waiting two or three years between the issue of such albums as “Water Babies”, “Circle In The Round” and “Directions”. Luckily, life finally returned to normal with the release of “The Man With The Horn”. And then came that wonderful moment of reunion when Miles played the Châtelet

Theatre in Paris on May 5th 1982. This trumpet sound that had been emerging from my loudspeakers for thousands of hours, now suddenly became a physical reality. From that day on, I must have seen and heard Miles about once a year until that Paris appearance at the Zenith on November 3rd 1990.

Throughout those nineteen-eighties, my knowledge of jazz was developing. And, like everyone else I suppose, I was beginning to go through the painful experience of revising my ideas on music that had once greatly appealed to me. The electric Miles had also led me into the music of Weather Report, Mahavishnu and Lifetime. Now, a lot of the things I have loved when I first heard them, seemed to me to be aging, some of them even sounding frankly out-dating. In stark contrast, my appreciation of the source, the electric music of Miles, remained undiminished. Indeed, it was even growing. And by this time I had also acquired some of the knowledge that would enable me to put this music into perspective, whether in relation to Miles' earlier periods or to other jazz styles of the day. I now no longer had to bow to the pressure of erudite critics telling me my tastes were wrong.

And then it occurred to me that, as far as I knew, there was no book that covered in detail the Miles Davis of this particular period. I had read the books of Bill Cole, Eric Nisenson, Ian Carr and Jack Chambers. But I now decided to write one of my own, an in-depth study of Miles' electric period.

The first thing I had to do was to define the time limits of this so-called electric period. Unfortunately, the end date was not difficult to pin-point : it corresponded with Miles' withdrawal from the scene. In discographical terms, it took place on February 1st 1975 in Osaka with the albums "Agharta" and "Pangaea". But the starting date was another matter altogether, and the task of defining it highlighted that absolutely fascinating characteristic of Miles' work : it is among the most evolutionary in the entire history of jazz, and yet, clear breaks with the past are rare. The evolution is rapid, yet very smooth and progressive, and above all, logical. There are often tiny changes from one session to the next, from one concert to the next, but they occur in a precise order, the logic of which becomes clear after the event. It is like looking out of a train window, watching the countryside stream by, a countryside that doesn't seem to change. And yet after a while, you suddenly realise you are in the mountains, whereas you had set out from beside the sea.

So, where do we pick the start of this electric period ? "Bitches Brew" ? Of course not, for "In A Silent Way" has clearly anticipated it. Oh yes, and "In A Silent Way" is just as clearly a logical continuation of "Filles De Kilimandjaro". And "Filles De Kilimandjaro" pursues what was started with "Miles In The Sky". And "Miles In The Sky" is out of "Nefertiti". Only two years separate the recordings of "Nefertiti" and "Bitches Brew", and yet stylistically the two albums are poles apart. But it seems to me impossible to pin-point where and when the break occurred. Quite simply because there is no break. Evolution yes, startling evolution, yet regular and above all, logical. A process perhaps best summed up by Miles himself : "I'm never in something new. What's the evolution ? In music, you take out what you don't like anymore, and what's left is what you like. And you've got to keep doing that.

Having established that, I was not much further on : it remained for me to define a starting-point, and if possible a not too arbitrary one. I thus decided to go for the session of December 4th 1967, at which "Circle In The Round" was recorded. For this was the first time

Miles had played around with instrumentation (here adding a guitar to the quintet and getting Herbie Hancock to play celeste). A move that was going to have enormous consequences for the future evolution of his music. If you put aside his experiments with Gil Evans, you suddenly realise that Miles had always remained faithful to the traditional bebop line-up. The trumpet-saxophone-piano-bass-drums quintet may sometimes be augmented by a second saxophone, but this typical combo had nevertheless been Miles' chosen format.

So where was Miles at, by december of 1967 ? Since the renaissance of 1955, he had been one of the leading lights of the world jazz scene, his means of expression for the main part being just three bands : the first quintet with John Coltrane, the sextet with Cannonball Adderley and Bill Evans, and the second quintet with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams.. His work with Gil Evans earned him further glory, it's true, but it remains apart in the development of his music. The three combos brought transitions, but in general terms, one can say that the musical logic is the same, albeit constantly developed and ultimately carried to its extreme limits. It is a logic that sprang from the bebop of Parker, Gillespie, Monk and the rest. In very broad terms, one can say that the first quintet gave a different poetic vision of bebop while still respecting his forms. The sextet introduced the modal alternative. And the second quintet transfigured bop by carrying each of its formal elements to the utter limit. Indeed, at the end of 1967, was it possible to go any further in the allusive expression of harmony that did Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter ? Was it possible to play polyrhythms more complex than those laid by Tony Williams and Ron Carter ? Was it possible to render theme in a more quintessential manner than did Wayne Shorter and Miles ? I sincerely believe Miles now found himself facing a problem to which he did not yet know the answer, but to which he was going to have to set about finding a radical solution. A few years ago, at the end of the fifties, he (and several others) had realised they could not go on endlessly adding chords to the chord progressions of standards. What more was it possible to do, for example, after Coltrane's "Giant Steps" ? Miles' solution then had been to go in exactly the opposite direction by coming up with "So What" : two chords instead of thousands. Now, at the close of 1967, a new problem demanded a new solution. Miles fully realised he had reached a limit and that changes had to be made. But what changes ?

It was the chronology of these changes that I was seeking to catalogue, starting with the December 4th 1967 "Circle In The Round", and finishing with the February 1st 1975 "Gondwana". Drawing up an inventory of what was then available in the Miles Davis discography, I came up with a list of one hundred and four pieces recorded between these two dates, either in studio or live performance. These pieces were spread over twenty-two albums, namely : "Circle In The Round", "Directions", "Miles In The Sky", "Filles De Kilimandjaro", "Water Babies", "In A Silent Way", "Bitches Brew", "Double Image", "Big Fun", "Isle Of Wight", "Live-Evil", "Jack Johnson", "Black Beauty", "Get Up/With It", "At Fillmore", "In Sweden, 1971" "Hooray For Miles Davis, Vol.3", " On The Corner", "In Concert", "Dark Magus", "Agharta", "Pangaea". I opted to undertake an essentially musical study, leaving to one side the biographical aspects already amply covered by existing literature. I also resolved to steer clear of all stylistic argument, yet without attempting to hide my own tastes or sometimes even my preferences. I wanted to consider the music and possibly only the music, and to attempt to understand, if not its deeper meaning, at least how it was constructed. To do that, I took my list of one hundred and four pieces and I began listening to them in chronological order - blind. That is to say, I carefully avoided reading the liner notes or any discographical references. I listened to each piece, first of all trying to establish the

instrumentation and who was playing. I then compared my conclusions with available discographies, a move that enabled me to discover some interesting discographical problems. I then tried to note, objectively, what the music consisted of. After the instrumentation, I noted the playing time, the structure of the piece, its harmonic nature, its rhythm, its metre, the existence or not of a theme, the number of times the theme was played, the order of solos, and so on and so forth. By studying nothing more than the evolution of these different parameters, a complete map of the music emerged, the results highly revealing. I do not claim that this method could be fruitfully applied to the work of just any jazz musician, but I do think that for a musician like Miles Davis, the formal evolution of whose music is so rich, it is a good point of departure.

I am not here going to give the detailed results of my studies, of course. I shall just try to give a brief summary of my conclusions, arranging them under six key headings : instrumental means, structure, melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound.

1. Instrumental means

As I said, at the end of 1967, Miles saw his extraordinary band gradually disintegrating, and he knew he had to work at producing a different kind of music, even if he could not yet hear it in his head. So he took a gamble - for him at first : that the answer might lie in a change of instrumentation. On December 4th 1967, he added a guitar (in the person of Joe Beck) and asked Herbie Hancock to play celeste. In this way, he opened up two new avenues. The first was a change of relationship between instruments, the fact of adding a guitar modifying the whole balance of the rhythm section, as well as a change of relationship between rhythm section and soloists. And the second was a change in the overall sound of the band. These two avenues Miles would now explore intensively over the next seven years.

Much has been made of the introduction of electricity as the crucial element in Miles' music of this period, and that is of course correct. But we must not forget that it was only one element among others. The whole idea of the format of the band, and the way best to exploit it, is in my view the key to Miles' thinking at this time, an indication of the direction in which he was seeking to take his music. It had, it's true, become electric ; but more important, it had increased in diversity of means. The line-up was notably enlarged to seven, eight, ten and sometimes (for example in "On The Corner") even thirteen musicians. The sound of the band had of course changed radically, but so too had its way of operating. It was now much more difficult to draw the line between rhythm section and soloist, and often you could not really tell who belonged to which section.

2. Structure

The typical bebop structure of theme-solos-theme had already been abandoned on certain occasions by the second quintet. Think, for example, of "Nefertiti", where the theme is ad-libbed more than ten times over. There is no trumpet or saxophone solo, but a sort of permanent solo by the entire rhythm section. Here is a characteristic example of the inter penetration of different elements of the music : the simple notion of changing structure (here the repetition of the theme and the suppression of the solos) results in a change in the way the instrumental means are exploited. In that case, it is no longer the rhythm section that supports the soloists, but rather the reverse, with the consequence that there is an inversion of the primary and secondary layers of sound.

This challenging of traditional structure would become systematic from 1968 onwards, the switching between “theme” and “solos” assuming totally unpredictable patterns. But the tendency would be towards a progressive dissolution : a dissolution of the link between theme and solos (ultimately meaning you can’t tell one from the other), a dissolution of themes themselves, and finally a dissolution of structure. In “On The Corner” for example, it is the same fragment that is used perpetually. Here is a raw block of music in which one can distinguish no theme, nor even a beginning or an end. In live performance, the structure would be more or less improvised as the concert went on, the unit apparently the whole set of one hour or more, during which usually very brief motifs alternate with long solos. It is Miles who interrupts these solos, launching a new motif, etcetera.

3. Melody

Whether a matter of cause or effect is open to question, but melody, too, had a tendency to disappear during this same period. Is it because Miles no longer heard the same melodies that he dispensed with structure, or is it because he felt freer without structure that melody was finally sacrificed ? Difficult to say. What is certain is that Miles’ playing itself became more and more “fragmentary”, his phrases shorter and his articulation more nervy. We sense that here, too, there is a preoccupation with sound. Even during his solos, Miles seems to be seeking to produce a sound rather than melodic lines.

4. Harmony

Miles’ use of modality does not date from this period. He was one of that small band of musicians who introduced modality into jazz in the late nineteen-fifties. On the subject of modal music, it is important to emphasise one particular point. Playing modally does not necessarily mean, as we so often read, doing away with chord progressions altogether and playing on a single chord. It means that chords are no longer ruled by the rules of tonality. But you can still play very complex progressions of chords that bear no tonal relationship to each other. By the seventies, Miles was producing virtually no tonal music. As for the density of harmonic texture, we can identify two phases. In similar fashion to his exploration of structure - and this goes to show that everything is linked -, during the earlier years Miles explores all possible variants between no chords at all and numerous very restricting chords, while subsequently we find that chords have disappeared virtually altogether.

5. Rhythm

It is in this domain that change is most noticeable. But the subject is much more complex than generally realised. People often sweep it aside by saying that Miles was now playing rock, which is a quite blatant over-simplification. I have often experimented by playing “Agharta” to genuine rock fans, and it is very rare that they feel at home with it. They hear a lot of things, but rarely rock. Also, a few months ago, I played “Doo Bop” to some schoolboys rap fans. But again to no avail. To them it was similar, but hardly the real thing. Which goes to show that we must be prudent about our perception of other people’s music, and about the way we think other people perceive music. How many jazzmen, for example, have gone drastically wrong playing the music they wanted to play and thinking it was commercial ? But that is another story...

What is certain is that straight-ahead jazz rhythm rapidly went out of the window in Miles’ music, almost never to return. But, in my view, Miles was not seeking diversity ; on

the contrary, he seemed to be wanting to get to the very heart of a rhythm he himself called “black rhythm”. With the exception of “Great Expectations” in 7/4, he rarely ventured into the field of complex rhythms. What Miles seems to have been after was what we call a “groove”.

6. Sound

Here is the second domain in which Miles’ efforts were most decisive. Not only did he totally change the sound of his band, but he changed his own sound as well. Once again, it was at first a question of seeking his way, his explorations ranging from the very austere sound of “In A Silent Way” to the multiplicity of highly colourful sounds in “Bitches Brew”, with its sitar, percussions, bass clarinet and so on. Subsequently the sound would grow simpler and “blacker”, until it arrived at a sort of modern quintessence of the “jungle” sound with “On The Corner”, and at the harsh, relentless sounds of “Agharta” and “Pangaea”.

Although it is always dangerous to determine degrees of importance in music inspired by so many different things, I do not hide that, for me, it is the first four elements - instrumental means, structure, melody and harmony - that provide the means to the end represented by elements five and six : rhythm and sound. It seems to me that Miles was never aiming, during either this or any other period, to revolutionise instrumentation, structure, melody or harmony in jazz. I believe he had in his head a sound and a rhythm, and that he was seeking ways of attaining them.

Miles Davis, who in my opinion is among those who have spoken best on the music of Miles Davis, once pronounced this enigmatic judgement concerning the “Jack Johnson” recording : “Then the question in my mind after I got to this was, well, is the music black enough, does it have a black rhythm, can you make the rhythm of the train a black thing, would Jack Johnson dance to that ? I think it is correct to interpret this quite literally : Miles is talking of rhythm in the real sense of the term, and of the black community. But I believe that we can also read a second meaning into it, by which he is referring to the colours that rhythms can assume. Now, colours in music are materialised by sounds, and there is an intimate relationship between sound and rhythm, just as there is between melody and harmony. When I listen to “On The Corner”, I feel I understand why Miles talked of his quest for a “black rhythm”. But let us be frank : we are now into the field of conjecture, so we are also open to error.

In closing, I should like to raise a point not directly related to the period covered here. It concerns the relationship between Miles, his music and all the sidemen who played it. I never met Miles Davis personally, even less ever played with him. But during my investigations and all the repeated and attentive listening, I got the impression of being intimately involved in his music. And the topic that really intrigues me now is the mystery surrounding Miles’ musical destiny. In brief, to what extent did he control this destiny ? Or, on the contrary, to what extent did he simply follow it, as best as he could ? I have been fascinated by the strange duality in his relationship to his music, a music which he seems to be creating and following at the same time. And the duality in the relationship to his musicians also, on the one hand leading them, and on the other, pillaging their ideas. It has often been said what a great maker of bands Miles was, and the prestigious musicians present

today who played alongside him must surely have a lot to say on that subject. I personally sometimes get the impression that his genius in this area was to succeed in incarnating a music he couldn't yet hear through the bands he formed, by asking the musicians to play the music of Miles Davis, without himself knowing exactly what that music was ; that his genius lay in his ability to get each member of his group to imagine himself a part of Miles Davis, and in so doing to help reveal the new Miles Davis to himself.

I trust you will excuse the confusion of my thinking on this subject, but my ideas on it are not as yet very clear. I shall surely need to come back and talk to you again in a few years time, after perhaps making a little more progress. In the meantime, my sincere thanks to you all for listening to me today.
