



PROFILE

Miles Davis

Some time in the late 1940s, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, the two most influential jazz musicians of the last 50 years, were travelling together in a taxi on New York's 52nd Street. The great alto-saxophonist Parker had just shot up on heroin and a white woman was giving Parker a blow job while he consumed fried chicken and swigged whiskey. Parker saw Davis looking askance and asked, "Is this bothering you, Miles?" The teenage trumpeter replied, "Yes, it's bothering me."

It's impossible to imagine the same story being told about Don Burrows and James Morrison. These contemporary Australian jazzmen seem to belong to a different moral universe. In his autobiography, Miles Davis summed up, "Bird (Parker) was a greedy motherfucker, like most geniuses are."

There is no shortage of stories about Davis' own misuse of women and drugs. The world might be a better place if geniuses were less anti-social. Certainly, when people discuss Miles Davis nowadays they talk more about his charmless behaviour than about his heartbreakingly lovely, introspective ballads. Or the way his ideas tore apart and rearranged the mainstream of jazz, time after time, from bebop to cool-school, to hard-bop, to the use of complex modernist orchestral charts, to modal jazz, to the use of electronic instruments, to jazz-rock fusion. Or

the way he discovered and made famous musicians like John Coltrane, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Philly Joe Jones and John McLaughlin.

Davis did not help matters by giving a series of outlandish interviews in the last years of his life. And his scatological and acerbic verbal skills make his 1989 autobiography, *Miles* (transcribed from tapes of Davis free-associating), a kind of lexicon for bad-ass musicians. It is hard to reconcile the author of *Miles* with the melancholy soloist on records like *Porgy and Bess* (1958), *Sketches of Spain* and *Kind of Blue* (both 1959). Davis was not so naturally gifted a trumpet player as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro, Clifford Brown or even James Morrison, all of whom



could (or can) improvise solos of carefree magnificence. But Davis transcended his technical limitations by playing with a uniquely poignant tone. If a Dizzy Gillespie solo could sound like magnesium sketches on the night sky, Davis' playing reminded one more of fiercely glowing embers.

This is not to say that his work was always sad. He could express anger, elation or spirituality, but whatever he had to say, his playing had a wry, slightly mournful tone. It was not accidental that he produced his finest work with his legendary first quintet, where his mordancy contrasted with the exuberance of John Coltrane's saxophone playing. When he formed the quintet in 1955, Davis was its only musician of established reputation. Now it is regarded as the finest small group; in jazz history, and the players in it—Coltrane, Red Garland, Paul

Chambers and Philly Joe Jones—became the aristocracy of post-bebop jazz.

He had come back to regular performing after years of heroin addiction and pimping. He quit his habit, cold turkey, because it had become too expensive. Often he would play with his back to the audience and, after finishing his own solo, would leave the stage. In hospital after minor throat surgery he was told to keep quiet, but couldn't resist yelling at the staff, and for the rest of his life he could only speak in a throaty whisper. His style could be aloof. At the end of a rehearsal he told the drummer of his second great quintet, Tony Williams, to play more of "that Rat Patrol shit"—which, the group discovered, meant that he was after a more martial drum sound. Williams' consequent playing of sticks-on-snare gave the group a whole new sound.

In the late 1960s, Davis' admiration for Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone led him to jazz-rock and the astonishing soundscapes of albums like *Bitches Brew*. But in the 1970s, Davis entered a period of artistic decline, linked with cocaine abuse. When he died in October this year, he had not made a really satisfying record for perhaps 20 years. At least, he was never so impressed by his own past masterpieces that he didn't explore new music. In a 1986 interview, he recalled:

"All this shit about me being better in the old days...music being better. That's reactionary thinking from pitiful motherfuckers who weren't even there...In the old days...jazz was made by this breed of musician...creative guys but weird, idiosyncratic cats...I'd book a session...Hell, half the cats wouldn't be there!...Running around these fucking dives looking for the drummer...say, 'cos he's probably off somewhere scoring dope!...Meanwhile the sax player, he's pawned his God-damn horn! That's the old days, far as I can recall."

MICHAEL CONATY is a devotee of bad-ass jazz musicians.