

Miles Davis: A Paradigm for the History of Modern Jazz

Peter Bouffard (December 1999)

Abstract

Miles Davis holds a unique place in the history of jazz. He started his career alongside the most important figures in bebop and, although he did not invent entire jazz idioms himself, Miles Davis organized bands of key innovators at early moments in the development of cool jazz, hard bop, modal and freer jazz, and electric jazz-rock fusion. More importantly, he invented an original and distinctive trumpet style that fit the sound of each of his bands. There is a profound and fundamental relationship between the development of Miles Davis's personal style and the development of modern jazz.

Most jazz history texts subdivide modern jazz into smaller stylistic periods or genres that roughly coincide with each decade: Bebop of the forties, Cool and Hard Bop of the fifties, Modal and Free jazz of the sixties, and Jazz-rock fusion or "electric jazz" of the seventies. Of course this is a rather narrow and simplistic delineation. The typical approach to investigating the music of each era is to examine individuals whose mature style genuinely personifies a particular genre of jazz—what Scott DeVeaux refers to as "the narrative sweep of jazz history, so self-consciously modeled on that of European music in its succession of stylistic 'periods' and the pantheon of master musicians."

The major weakness of attempting to simplify this history by dividing time into clearly marked periods becomes obvious when one thinks of the ways in which the limits are confused by individuals or events that inconveniently overlap different eras. Miles Davis embodies this apparent weakness. On initial consideration, it is clear that Davis, his music, and the development of his improvisational style cannot be "pigeonholed" into a single stylistic period of modern jazz.

However, on closer examination, we find that this so-called weakness might be used to our advantage. Rather than viewing the history of jazz as isolated phases of a musical tradition, the opportunity to study a single figure who has played a profound role in each phase could allow us to examine each genre inextricably linked to a larger category called modern jazz.

While Davis's music in each period could represent a sound model to further our understanding of the particular genre (including musical characteristics that could be considered classic examples of the genre), many of his prototypical stylistic attributes occur "out of order." For example, his cool, introspective tendencies can be heard in the midst of his important bebop recordings with Charlie Parker. Conversely, some of his improvisations on the famous "Birth of the Cool" sessions are representative of mature bebop. Within one particular stylistic period, Davis displays musical characteristics common to many different genres. Furthermore, there are stylistic elements that remain constant throughout his "merging of contrasting approaches and sounds." Davis seems to contradict the conventional historical progression from the more primitive and simplistic to the more advanced and complex. In other words, his progress seems to echo further and further into the past—what I label his "progressive-regression." This is particularly apparent in the development of his blues vocabulary but can be seen as a general trend throughout his career.

Miles Davis was able to absorb and build upon the fragmentation of jazz styles in modern jazz. Indeed, his musical career and stylistic development embodied a proliferation of styles. Davis was firmly entrenched in the aesthetics of bebop, cool, hard bop, free, and fusion; and his degree of influence on others in each style is incalculable. Today, more than fifty years after the beginnings of modern jazz, musicians still attempt to absorb these varied styles. Rather than being left to our own devices to make some sense of this history, which has in many cases "generated few norms and countless exceptions," we can look to Miles Davis to provide a continuity and coherence—a constant point of reference within the fragmentation of styles. Davis's career, music, and stylistic developments can act as a filter through which we can realize a simpler, more meaningful conception of modern jazz—the Davis paradigm.