

## **The Electric Jungle Grooves of Miles Davis**

Lars Mjøset

A cultural revolution swept across the Western world in the second half of the 1960s. Large cohorts of young baby-boomers were searching for their own identities, distinct from the older generation, in music, clothing, and attitudes. Within the Anglo-American cultural sphere, rock music emerged as young, white musicians reworked African-American blues, which until then, was mainly popular within the black community. In parallel fashion, African-American popular music developed, as Motown hits, R & B and funk to some extent crossed over to white audiences. It did not last long before the most aesthetically high-brow African-American music style - jazz - was also influenced by these trends. One of USA's most crucial post-war musicians, trumpeter Miles Davis, was a key person in this transformation.

As a part of this cultural revolution, electric instruments were introduced into musical genres that had thus far mostly used acoustic instruments. Within the American folk music scene, a bitter split emerged when Bob Dylan performed with an electric band at the 1965 Newport festival. Jazz had long known the electric guitar, but the response was similarly polarized among jazz enthusiasts when the spread of rock music inspired jazz musicians to introduce a rougher guitar sound, electric bass and electric keyboards.

Miles Davis was not the first jazz musician to go electric, but he was probably the most established. He had made his debut 19 years old with Charlie Parker in 1945. He had founded cool jazz with his Birth of the Cool orchestra in 1949. He had crossed over, conquering broader white audiences

with the grand Gil Evans arrangements of *Sketches of Spain* in 1960. At the same time, he played modal jazz on *Kind of Blue* (1959), emphasizing rhythm and melodic lines rather than complicated chord changes and routinized phrases. He played energetic acoustic hard-bop with Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane as his sidemen. Since the mid-1960s, he took this kind of (still acoustic) jazz in more experimental, sketchy and searching directions, cooperating with younger musicians such as Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and Wayne Shorter. In the mid 1960s, Miles was the leading figure of jazz, but this only made him more eager to break further barriers.

In 1967, he experimented in studio with two electric pianos. On his album *In a Silent Way*, released February 1969, he had extended his band with two Rhodes electric pianos, a Hammond organ, as well as guitar. Recording his double album *Bitches Brew* in August 1969, the studio ensemble had been further enlarged: bass clarinet, several electric pianos, electric guitar, electric bass, double bass, two drummers and two percussionists. Three out of the four album sides contained just one track each, lasting between 17 and 27 minutes. The music was floating, often with no clear beginning or end, few chord changes, conveying entirely new tonal colours, and a rhythmic drive that owed much to rock music. Themes and improvisations, however, were along the lines of modal jazz and the Spanish sounding scales of his two classic 1959/1960 albums.

Miles had recorded acoustic music in several jazz styles, so it was no surprise that conservative jazz critics discarded his electric music as a submission to commercialism. One of them even stated that hearing *Bitches Brew* made him feel as if somebody held his hand against a table, hammering spikes through each of his nails to the rhythm of the bass. The *Bitches Brew* album earned Miles' his first gold record and a Grammy in 1971. He came to

play huge rock venues, including an audience of 600,000 at the British Isle of Wight festival in August 1970.

Rowdy as he was, Miles did little to reject the commercialism charge. He had few problems appearing as self-seeking, known for his relationships with women, periods of drug abuse, and as a splendid man of fashion with a flamboyant wardrobe of tailor-made suits and shoes. Above all, he had an unfortunate habit of claiming sole responsibility for musical accomplishments that were clearly due to his interaction with producers (like Teo Macero) and arrangers (like Gil Evans). He could even talk about earlier fellow musicians with quite some disrespect.

But his electric jungle music was no simple business plan. His new world of timbres fit the cultural reorientation of the late 1960s youth movement. Many younger jazz-fans responded like the British arranger and cellist Paul Buckmaster. Interviewed for the documentary *Miles Electric: A Different Kind of Blue* (2004), he recounted his first encounter with Bitches Brew, "I thought I was gonna climb the walls and climb across the ceiling. I was on the floor beating my hands and feet. I could hardly take it. It was so intense. It was everything that I had imagined some kind of future music to be. Everything that I had hoped to hear was revealed in Bitches Brew. It was everything that I had hoped for."

There was more to Miles' move than just cultural reorientation. He had quit Julliard School after one year, noting that even if he had completed his study, he would have had no chance of being hired as the lead trumpeter in an American symphony orchestra. That was a reference to race. And the U.S. ghettos exploded in the second half of the 1960s. Between the recording of *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, riots had broken out after the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968. Miles's cover art at the time clearly refers to the African-American search for an autonomous identity. The follow-up to

Bitches Brew was A Tribute to Jack Johnson, recorded in April 1971, composed for a documentary about the African-American boxing legend, Jack Johnson. On the first album side, Miles improvised around a riff borrowed from Sly & the Family Stone's "Sing a Simple Song", and on the other side, one can recognize parts of the bass line from James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud".

At this time, both African-American and white movie directors made "Blaxploitation" movies, complete with soundtracks played and composed by leading figures of the funk music movement (Curtis Mayfield, Roy Ayers, Isaac Hayes, James Brown). Many of the rhythms and timbres of Miles' electric move converge with this style. He was also inspired by his then wife, Betty Davis, who herself recorded a couple of energetic soul-funk-albums. Rather than selling into commercial rock and pop, Miles' project was part of a broad search for an independent African-American identity.

Miles was not driven by commercial opportunism. He was even less driven by political idealism. Like many prominent artists, he had continuous and direct daily life experience with discrimination. One well-documented history stems from August 1959, as Miles was smoking on the street with several others outside a studio where he had just recorded half an hour of music for the U.S. Armed Forces Radio Service. Three police detectives started the encounter as they considered the crowd gathering too large, ordering them not to block the sidewalk. Miles answered that he was working there, and ended up beaten and arrested. In his biography of Miles (So What, 2002), John Szwed notes that this was yet another one of those "classic urban encounters" that was making U.S. "race relations even worse than usual" at the time.

But above all, Miles was a musician. He was not just influenced by rock and funk. Already in November 1969 he recorded the composition "Great

Expectations". The electric band was here enlarged by well-known Indian instruments: sitar and tablas. Since 1971, Miles live bands always included at least one percussionist in addition to a drummer. Among the percussion instruments, particularly the congas convey an African and Caribbean influence. Just as much as Miles had "gone electric", one may claim that he was moving in a percussive, polyrhythmic direction. Pakistani tablas-player Badal Roy played on several Miles-albums, and also in his live band in 1973. When John McLaughlin brought Roy - then a statistics student and restaurant worker - to Miles' studio session, Miles who told him: "Play like a n\*gger!"

It should also be noted that "Great Expectations" reverses the age-old standard of jazz improvisation. Throughout the whole 27 minutes recording, the solo instruments repeat a fixed melodic line, while the rest of the band pursues rhythmic, collective improvisation. This inversion of jazz's traditional focus on the singular soloist was clearly a modernist move.

Together with many elements of ethno-funk, Miles' electric music also contains elements of contemporary modernist music. In the spring and summer of 1972, Paul Buckmaster, the British arranger mentioned above, was invited to live in Miles' rather chaotic house on West 77th street in New York. Together they sketched the brief arrangements for Miles' next recording, *On the Corner*. Buckmaster brought along recordings of electro-acoustic art music composed by European modernists. Miles was particularly taken with Karlheinz Stockhausen's avant-garde compositions *Gruppen*, *Mixtur* and *Hymnen*. He later claimed that his band played the same music as Stockhausen, only better. He noted that Stockhausen was the inspiration that had led him on to his idea of "music as a continuous process", the constitutive idea of his creative activities throughout the period 1968-1975. The two of them actually met in a New York studio in 1980, but it is not clear whether anything was recorded.

In 1970-72, Miles's live bands always used one, but sometimes two, electric keyboard instruments, played by Chick Corea and/or Keith Jarrett. Miles had wished to play with Jimi Hendrix, but attempts to arrange a joint session had failed. After Hendrix's death in 1970, Miles began to use a contact microphone, sending his trumpet signal through a wah-wah pedal, a device that had recently become known as a guitar effect. Before that, he had himself always played acoustically in live settings, using an external microphone. Now the trumpet was made directly "electric". Miles shifted between acoustic and electric sound in his instrument. Again, this frustrated many jazz critics, who forgot that the wah wah sound was well known from jazz. It may be produced acoustically by moving a rubber mute in the bell of the trumpet. The effect can be heard, for instance, in Ellington. Miles invented a whole new set of trumpet timbres, creating an extension of the Kind of Blue style: simple melody lines and long notes, the sound of which was manipulated by the wah-wah pedal.

In 1973, Miles introduced a new line-up in his electric band: a heavier arsenal of percussion, two guitars (on some occasions even three), and no keyboards except screaming dissonant chords on a Yamaha YC45-D electric organ that he played himself. His music these years had even stronger elements of rock and funk. The themes became increasingly minimalistic. They create images reminding of paintings by Klee or Miro. The debt to Stockhausen is obvious, he too used both trumpet and wah wah effects, notably in his *Sternklang*-composition. In a 1980 interview, Miles ironically pesters a dumb music journalist by noting that "the only interesting composer out there is Stockhausen in Germany". He then closes the interview by demanding that the journalist go listen to Stockhausen before he asks any more questions.

In musical terms, there are some parallels with the "jungle music" developed by Duke Ellington in the late 1920s, one of which is the wah-wah

effects. However, Ellington's jungle style was shaped by the racial politics the mobster-run Cotton club, which only admitted white, mostly upper-class New Yorkers who went "slumming" in Harlem. Miles' jungle music should rather be seen as an encounter between a black artist with a reflected relationship to European modern music, and a youth culture of both blacks and whites challenging the musical tastes of U.S. post-war mass consumption culture.

Each of his 1970s concerts was a continuous stream of music, starting in one rhythm, with Miles cuing entry into other grooves by playing small signal themes, themes he never played very precisely. Even for the same theme, both tempo and timbre would differ from concert to concert. The quality of Miles' own improvisations was deteriorating. He was physically weakened after breaking his leg, he was in pain because of his hip and ulcer problem, and he was psychologically unstable due to an excessive intake of medicines and cocaine. However, this made him avoid lines with lots of fast notes, improvising instead around ultra-simple themes, emphasizing variability in sound, making much use of the wah-wah effect.

A series of official and bootlegged concert recordings are available from this period. A small group of enthusiasts regard these concerts as a high point in the search for African-American self-expression in 1970s music. A growing number of them can today be heard on YouTube, although the sound quality is often mediocre.

The first half of the 1970s was the last period through which Miles was working in the frontiers of jazz evolution. In 1975, he locked himself up in his New York apartment, remaining there for four years, a wreck in both physical and psychological respects. He could easily have suffered the fate of Hendrix, Jackson, Houston or Prince. But eventually, he managed to return to the music business in 1980. He still played electric. But while his first electric period was marked by analogue sounds, the electric sounds since his comeback in 1980

were digital ones. On this new platform, Miles was no longer able to be a leading innovator. He returned to more traditional and somewhat shorter tunes, missing the innovative creativity of that characterizes the work he did between 1968 and 1975.

Miles' preferred saxophone player in the 1973-4-bands, Dave Liebman, once stated that he played in a band that presented "a bizarre polyphonic combination of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington and James Brown". Miles himself (as quoted in Szwed's biography) stated that his band explored one chord for each tune, testing timbres and polyrhythms: "There's a lot of intricate shit we were working off this one chord."

*Lars Mjøset*

(A shorter version of this text was published in 2012 in the Norwegian daily newspaper Klassekampen to promote Prosjekt MD's first gig in Oslo. Thanks to Paul Austerlitz for comments and language corrections.)



PROSJEKT MD / LIVE AT 'THE ORGAN CLUB'

BRYNJULF BLIX *Hammond B3 (1-4), Rhodes (5-6)*  
 PAUL AUSTERLITZ *bass clarinet (7)*  
 ARNE KOLLANDSRUD *trumpet (1-6)*  
 TROND MATHISEN *alto sax (1-3,5,6)*  
 LARS MJØSET *bass clarinet (1,2,4,9), alto clarinet (3,5,6,9)*  
 SJUR BRÆIN *Rhodes (1-4,9), Hammond B3 (5-7), synthesizer (7-8)*  
 SIGURD JOVIK BRÆIN *guitar (1-9)*  
 JON DEVIK *bass (1-9)*  
 HANS MARIUS INDAHL *drums (1-7)*  
 CHARLES MENA *drums (1-6,9), percussion (7)*  
 STEIN STOKNES *percussion (1-8)*  
 KETIL STOKNES *percussion (1-6), drums (8,9)*  
 PER ESPEN STOKNES *Rhodes (7-8)*

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PROSJEKT MD / LIVE AT 'THE ORGAN CLUB'

- 1 **DIRECTIONS** (*Zawinul*) 5:27
  - 2 **IN A SILENT WAY** (*Zawinul*) 3:53
  - 3 **FUNK** (*Davis*) 12:45
  - 4 **IFE** (*Davis*) 16:55
  - 5 **CALYPSO FRELIMO** (*Davis*) 9:59
  - 6 **BLACK SATIN** (*Davis*) 5:59
- Bonus Tracks*
- 7 **I'VE ALREADY STARTED (FUNKY CLARINET)** (*Austerlitz*) 4:23
  - 8 **WEDDING JAM** (*Bræin/Stoknes*) 3:41
  - 9 **IFE IN BLACK SATIN** (*Davis*) 11:37

SOUND ENGINEERING AND MIXING: SØREN PEDERSEN  
PRODUCED BY LARS MJØSET

1-6 Live at 'The Organ Club', Cosmopolite, Oslo, Norway, April 23, 2014  
7 Live at Dattera til Hagen, Oslo, May 31, 2013  
8 Live at Ånglagård, Asker, August 17, 2013  
9 Live in Oslo at the Dalheim summer party, June 21, 2014

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