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Miles Ahead!

MILES DAVIS

Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, Horace Silver,
John Lewis, Walter Bishop Jr., Percy Heath,
Charles Mingus, Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones
and Max Roach.



PRESTIGE HISTORICAL SERIES

Original **1953-54** Recordings



Miles Ahead! MILES DAVIS

Before anyone gets exercised and starts claiming that Prestige stole the title of this album from the Miles Davis-Gil Evans collaboration on Columbia let me remind them that this *Miles Ahead* was done in 1953 and the other in 1957. It belonged to Prestige first. I ought to know because in addition to A&R'ing the sessions in those days I also had to make up many of the titles and that was one of them. If you really want to become confused consider that this *Miles Ahead* is based on the changes of *Milestones*, a Davis composition that Miles recorded for Savoy (with Charlie Parker on tenor sax) in the 1940's. Later, for Columbia, he did another *Milestones*—different changes and melody—with Cannonball and Coltrane. That *Milestones*, which became more famous than the first one, was really called *Sid's Ahead* because the one called *Sid's Ahead* in that same album was nothing but *Weirdo* which Miles had done previously for Blue Note. And *Weirdo* was nothing but a minor-key version of *Walkin'*. Anagrams anyone?

Let us conclude that there was much befuddlement during this period. This carried over to the authorship of certain songs. To this day there are musicians who claim that *Compulsion* and *The Serpent's Tooth* are Jimmy Heath's and that Eddie Vinson wrote *Four* and *Tune-Up*. We'll probably never know but I do remember asking Miles who *When Lights Are Low* belonged to and he said, "Me." I wasn't familiar with Benny Carter's song then and had to be straightened out a few days later. Anyway, the bridge in this version is Miles'.

All of this is history, and since this is the Historical Series I can say for the record that whatever the title or whomever the writer, Miles Davis was making significant music as he always has and continues to do. It's no accident that he has captured the young audience today. He has it and he's always had it—even when he didn't have it.

January 30, 1953 was not a happy day for Davis. Caught in the pursuit—he being both pursued and pursuer—of a pre-occupation, Miles was late for his date. (We almost did a Walter Bishop, Jr. trio album that day.) When he finally arrived so did the gin and beer I had ordered. Parker wanted some gin and I couldn't refuse my idol. I also thought that everyone would have some and chase it with the beer. Who figures that a man is going to chug-a-lug a fifth of Gordon's? Result: one cackish Bird, who when he did awaken was a bit sluggish. This made Miles, who was in a bad mood, even crankier. Then I nearly finished things completely, callow, hero-worshipping youth that I was. Usually I adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude, content to serve as buffer between the company and the engineer on one hand and the musicians on the other. I'd offer helpful suggestions and supervise takes but for the most part the musicians knew what they were doing and I had enough sense to know when they were doing it right. But on this day I wanted to snap Miles out of a groove that had him into one false start after another.

I walked out of the control room into the studio. "You ain't playing shit," I told him. Instead of the positive shock I had hoped for it created a pouting scowl. He began to pack his horn. The others questioned him in disbelief. "Cat

MILES DAVIS, trumpet; SONNY ROLLINS, tenor sax;
CHARLIE PARKER, tenor sax; WALTER BISHOP, JR., piano;
PERCY HEATH, bass; PHILLY JOE JONES, drums
(Recorded January 30, 1953)

Side A

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1. COMPULSION | 5:56 |
| 2. 'ROUND MIDNIGHT | 7:31 |
| 3. THE SERPENT'S TOOTH (Take 1) | 7:13 |
| 4. THE SERPENT'S TOOTH (Take 2) | 7:29 |

MILES DAVIS, trumpet; JOHN LEWIS, piano;
CHARLES MINGUS, piano*; PERCY HEATH, bass;
MAX ROACH, drums
(Recorded May 19, 1953)

Side B

- | | |
|------------------------------|------|
| 1. TUNE-UP | 3:59 |
| 2. WHEN LIGHTS ARE LOW | 3:32 |
| 3. SMOOCH* | 3:10 |
| 4. MILES AHEAD | 4:38 |

MILES DAVIS, trumpet; HORACE SILVER, piano;
PERCY HEATH, bass; ART BLAKEY, drums
(Recorded March 15, 1954)

- | | |
|------------------------------|------|
| 5. FOUR | 4:07 |
| 6. THAT OLD DEVIL MOON | 3:26 |
| 7. BLUE HAZE | 6:20 |

says I'm not blowing shit," he said and continued preparations for leaving. (Looking back on it now I see that maybe he wanted an out.) All I saw was my job walking out the door so I became genuinely humble and after some pleading and cajoling he decided to stay.

It was not an easy day. As it progressed Miles' chops became weaker and everyone became more and more fatigued. Not that the ensemble is perfect on *Compulsion* but it swings and there is good blowing by Miles, Parker, Bishop and Sonny Rollins for two choruses apiece with riffing going on behind Miles and Bird.

The first take of *The Serpent's Tooth* contains some cooking Miles, quoting from *Blacksmith Blues* and *Heart and Soul* along the way; imaginative Rollins; and Parker, hip as only he could be, away from his customary alto and making that tenor sound almost like a baritone. Then after a lively Bishop chorus, Miles and Philly Joe trade "fours."

Take 2 of *The Serpent's Tooth*, slightly faster than take 1, is raggedy from the start. Miles again quotes *Heart and Soul* but has neither in it. Rollins again rises to the occasion in his disarmingly oblique style. At one point in his second chorus he quotes *Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better*. I wonder if that challenge came out of his subconscious to be heard by his main inspiration, Bird, who was sitting next to him. On this take he was better as Charlie stumbles a bit, puts one foot over the edge a few times but never really falls into the chasm. This time the saxophones join in the "fours" with Bird first and Sonny second.

At this point I believe I delivered my tirade against Miles who was angry with Bird for goofing. (Did he think I was going to put Bird down?) After the air had cleared quite a bit more time had elapsed. It was now 5:30 p.m. The regular engineer, Bob Lee, who hadn't been much help, left and someone I had never seen before took over the controls, informing us that at 6:00 everyone would have to go. We tried *Well You Needn't* a few times but it was obvious that nothing was going to happen. Miles' chops were slowly disintegrating. At a quarter to six we decided to have a go at *'Round Midnight*. After one false start they got into it, Miles playing the melody and Bird the obligatos. When this session was first released on the *Collector's Items* LP (Prestige 7044) I gave credit, in the notes, to Charlie Parker for the opening and closing bridges of the song. It was not until Danish writer Erik Weidemann pointed out that it was, in reality, Rollins, that I realized my mistake. In the years between the recording and its actual release, I had forgotten something that I probably had specifically asked for in the studio. Parker and Miles invest Monk's melancholy air with much hurt and sadness. As everyone was packing up to go, Miles turned to Bird and quietly berated him for falling asleep, etc. "I never did that to you on your dates," he said.

The Buddha-like Bird now fully sober, turned and, as Miles was leaving, called to him down the long hall in stentorian tones: "All right, Lily Pons," and offered him some deliberate clichés, including, "To produce beauty we must suffer pain" and "From the oyster comes the pearl." *'Round Midnight* proved him right.

As trying as was January 30, so was May 19 serene. Even the unforeseen difficulties that can bedevil a record date were solved almost as quickly as they occurred. When Kenny Clarke didn't show up, who should appear because he just happened to have business to attend to in the WOR Building, but Max Roach. He immediately went home and got his drums. When, later in the afternoon, John Lewis was called away by an emergency, Charles Mingus' *Smooch* was recorded with the composer at the piano.

Miles was in a humour to match the beautiful spring day outside the studio and, believe it or not, the entire session went down in four takes.

I didn't A&R the March 15, 1954 session but I was there. If the tunes weren't done in one take apiece it was nevertheless a relaxed date. For *Blue Haze* all the lights in the studio were turned off and the only illumination came seeping out of the control room. Percy Heath sets the mood and Miles really stretches out on a slow blues.

These dates contain the Miles Davis that the critics were sleeping on until the Newport Jazz Festival of 1955. His colleagues weren't snoozing however. After he did *Old Devil Moon*, both Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae recorded it. That's Davis the trend-setter. *Miles Ahead!*

Notes: Ira Gitler (September 1970)
(Author of *Jazz Masters of the 40's*, Macmillan)
Supervision: Ira Gitler (Side A, B1-4)
Bob Weinstock (B5-7)

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