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Abstract

The paper details Miles Davis's influence in the counterculture rock and roll movement through his development of jazz fusion and his personal connections with rock musicians of the period, as well the overlap in musical ideology that occurred when both rock and jazz began to incorporate elements of each others' styles.

Keywords

Jazz, fusion, Miles Davis, rock, 60's counterculture

Disciplines

Music

Comments

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Fracturing Jazz, Freeing Fusion:

Miles Davis's Role in Counterculture Rock

Blake Thatcher

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FYS-118: Why Jazz Matters

Introduction

The influence Miles Davis had on American music is incalculable; his exploration of a vast variety of genres and styles solidified his work as a continual source of inspiration for music's constant evolution. While pinpointing a single facet of his presence in jazz is a challenging task, his foray into electric music that occurred in the late 1960's and early 70's represents the emergence of a close relationship between Davis's jazz and the complex, improvisational rock music that was popular during that time period. Beginning in 1969 with *In a Silent Way*, Davis began to push his stylistic explorations outside of the traditional jazz song structures and instrumentations that had characterized his music for the majority of his career. On this album, Davis left behind acoustic instruments and regular chord progressions for electric guitars and rambling, modal jams. In the years surrounding Davis's electric debut, artists like the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Neil Young, and others had performed shows and recorded albums that contained similar stylistic principles. Jazz fusion had been born, and the unique mixture of rock and jazz, spearheaded by Davis, would become a foundation for music of the 1970's. Miles's forays into electric, highly improvised music in the 60's and 70's were stimulated by the improvisational pop-psychedelia that was emerging in rock at the time. Since the two genres' styles were beginning to overlap within the genre of fusion, Miles's later works were not just inspired by, but included as an integral part of the counterculture rock movement; they were a reassertion of the jazz principles that had helped create it.

Earlier Fusion Works

Miles had already set a precedent for pushing his music outside of what was considered true jazz even before the release of *In a Silent Way*. Working with his second quintet, Davis had already begun to pursue new creative directions on two albums, *Miles in the Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro*.¹ Truly, the new direction was almost completely led by Davis: he composed nine of the fifteen songs that were recorded for these albums.² The starkest example of the quintet's new direction came with the track "Circle in the Round." Featuring an electric guitar and described as "modal to the point of exhaustion" by John Szwed, the song was a distinct slackening of the usual jazz principles and song structures.³ Instead of soloing over a set chord progression with predictable harmonic changes, Davis had created a more open-ended structure by allowing his musicians to collectively improvise entire songs around a single modal scale. This released the rhythm section from its previously established role, making their parts open to more personal interpretation. The Princeton University music department's website details the differences between modal and bebop or hard bop structures.⁴

"The bassist, for instance, does not have to 'walk' from one important chord tone to that of another in order to make each chord change sound, as is the case in conventional bebop or hard bop compositions; rather, he or she is free to improvise bass lines within a specific mode. In modal jazz, bass lines are often constructed in four or eight bar phrases with an emphasis of the root or the fifth degree on beat one of such phrases. Similarly, the comping instrument is not confined to play the standard chord voicings of the bop lexicon, but rather can play chord voicings based upon differing pitch combinations from the parent mode."

¹ Tingen, Paul. Miles Beyond: the electric explorations of Miles Davis, 1967-1991 New York, Billboard Books, 2001

² Ibid.

³ Szwed, John. So What: The Life of Miles Davis New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002 266

⁴ Princeton University. "Modal Jazz" http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Modal_jazz.html Accessed November 29, 2013

“In modal jazz, with its lack of conventional bop chord changes, the soloist can create interest by exploring the particular mode in rhythmically and melodically varied ways. Modal jazz is, in a sense, a return to melody.”

Modality was certainly not a new concept to Davis. He had used modes on his albums *So What* and *Milestones*, amongst other instances. In fact, Davis had been able to discuss modality in great detail with George Russell, one of jazz’s foremost theorists, who later created an entire philosophy built around modal improvisation.⁵ Although dramatic surges toward electric instrumentation were yet to paint these tunes a shade different from his previous work, Davis was already expressing an inclination towards heavy amounts of experimentation. According to Paul Tingen, these sessions were the first time that the sixties counterculture was directly acknowledged in Davis’s music. Interestingly, he also claims that Miles had shown tendencies towards genre fusion as early as the 1950’s.⁶ In any case, it was clear that Miles Davis was ready to expand his repertoire, even if it meant bending and breaking the limits of jazz; attempting to mold it into something that kept the pace with rock and funk’s popularity. He could not have picked a better time: a significant portion of popular music was beginning to adopt similar techniques that Miles had already developed.⁷

Jazz Influence in 60’s Rock Prior to Electric Miles

Multiple rock and roll artists of the 60’s were infusing jazz elements into their music, which provided Miles with the palate on which to construct the unique brand of fusion he was pioneering in the late sixties and seventies. Jazz had been contributing to rock since its

⁵ Griffin, Jasmine and Washington, Salim. Clawing at the Limits of Cool New York, St. Martin Press, 2008 175-9

⁶ Griffin, Washington. Clawing at the Limits of Cool, 178-9

⁷ Everett, Walter. The Foundations of Rock: From 'Blue Suede Shoes' to 'Suite: Judy Blue Eyes' Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009 150-3

formation. Rock keyboardists were often trained in jazz or otherwise drew significant stylistic influence from it, jazz bass techniques had appeared in rock arrangements, and many concepts of jazz improvisation were blended into rock bands' styles.⁸ Most notably, jazz had become an integral influence in the psychedelic, improvisational brand of rock that populated San Francisco FM radio stations and music festivals in the late sixties.⁹ Rock artists of the counterculture movement were beginning to include elements of jazz rhythm, harmony, and form in their music during these years.¹⁰ Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, The Byrds, and other musical giants such as the Beatles had been incorporating chord progressions, melodies and instrumentation cut directly from the jazz cloth in their music in their recordings and shows in the years preceding Davis's *In a Silent Way*.¹¹ A Blogger post made on deadessays.blogspot.com, entitled "The Dead and Jazz," cites transcripts from a radio show in which members of the Grateful Dead, a rock group formed in 1965 known for their affinity for extended jam sessions in their live concerts, claimed heavy influence from jazz musicians of the bop, hard-bop and cool jazz movements. In a 1967 interview, when asked if his methods of melodic improvisation incorporated components of jazz phraseology, Jerry Garcia, lead guitarist, vocalist, and composer cites Charles Lloyd as an inspiration. Having shared the stage with Lloyd several times prior to the interview, Garcia no doubt had significant exposure to jazz idioms. Garcia's contact with Lloyd is especially significant because of Lloyd's affiliation with a group of New York jazz artists who were experimenting with adding rock elements into their music from 1965-66.¹² Additionally, in a 1981 interview, bassist and composer for the Grateful Dead, Phil Lesh, directly labels some of

⁸ Ibid, 30-33

⁹ Zimmerman, Nadya. Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco (E-book) Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008 114-115

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Everett, Walter. The Foundations of Rock 206-7

¹² Tingen, Paul. Miles Beyond 50

the band's work as homage to Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*. Lesh declares a 2/14/68 jam as the band's "*Sketches of Spain* take." In the same interview, Lesh labels the album as being a classic in his mind. Both Lesh and Garcia also included songs by Charles Mingus and Charles Lloyd in a guest DJ session on a San Francisco radio show that featured some of the band's favorite music, and both artists confirmed that they drew upon facets of jazz for their improvisation and composition.¹³ Davis was set to inject his new brand of jazz into a generation of rock that was already heavily under the sway of jazz's musical vernacular. With the release of his next two "electric" albums, Miles was going to be working almost exclusively inside the fusion genre, bringing his work even closer into contact with popular music culture.

Electric Davis and Further Inclinations Towards Fusion

In a Silent Way was Davis's first electric album, it was a work that pioneered the jazz fusion genre and linked his music even more closely with rock music. Paul Tinggen details the injection of rock elements into the first sessions for *In a Silent Way*. The most distinct departure from his earlier two albums was marked by Davis's use of guest musicians and an increased emphasis on post-production techniques. In addition to some of his quintet musicians, Miles added keyboardists Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, and English jazz and rock guitarist John McLaughlin. Even before any music was recorded, Davis had broken down precedent from any of his previous recording sessions by seriously altering his traditional instrumentation. Another indication of Davis's radical intentions came when the session musicians began to work on a composition contributed by Zawinul, later to become the album's title track. Davis outwardly declared that when editing the composition, he wanted it to "sound more like rock." To

¹³ The Grateful Dead Live at KMPX Radio Show. KMPX-FM, San Francisco. April 1' 1967. Radio Broadcast.

accomplish this, Davis eliminated the majority of the chords that Zawinul had written, instead proposing that the musicians extrapolate from the melody to ornament the piece.¹⁴ Davis was not only very conscious of a stylistic departure with this record, but he also knew that it was going to come as a shock to his audiences. Davis said of *In a Silent Way*: “This one will scare the shit out of them.”¹⁵ Davis was not, however, attempting to make radio-friendly rock in the vein of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or even the Grateful Dead or Hendrix. Davis was more interested in pulling a certain sound that he had found in rock into an improvisatory jazz setting, making the ‘fusion’ categorization a justified one.¹⁶ Paul Tingen said of the album in regards to its unique genre mixture:

“[*In A Silent Way*] has since become known as the first milestone of the jazz-rock genre in terms of musical influence and commercial appeal [...] [The album’s] triumph lies in the fact that it not only lays open two new musical universes—jazz-rock and ambient—it also manages to poise itself perfectly on the meeting place between the two, working well as either.”¹⁷

It is important to realize that Davis did not want to create a “rock” album. (He renounced the term from his musical vocabulary, in fact.¹⁸) Rather, he wanted to pursue new territory with his signature brand of melodic, modal, “controlled freedom” jazz that he had popularized with *Kind of Blue*, decorated with the pop-appeal of modern instruments and new musicians. A few rock bands were pursuing a similar stylistic path, from a different perspective, bands that Davis would become linked with in a short period of time.

¹⁴ Tingen, Paul. *Miles Beyond* 57-58

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 59

¹⁶ Szwed, John. *So What* 275-6

¹⁷ Tingen, Paul. *Miles Beyond* 59-60

¹⁸ Szwed, John. *So What* 275

Movement Towards Fusion in Rock

Many of the jam bands of the late sixties and early seventies were working concepts of jazz improvisation into their music, essentially working parallel to Davis. While Miles gathered electric guitars, keyboards, and multiple drummers together for his electric sessions, artists like the Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, The Byrds, and the Allman Brothers Band were starting to fuse jazz-heavy improvisations into their live performances.¹⁹ Already having the instrumentation that Davis was currently toying with, it could be said that they were moving in an artistic direction opposite to what Davis was doing. The Grateful Dead had begun using jazz techniques very early in their career: during the Human Be-In in San Francisco in 1967, Dizzy Gillespie said of the Dead's performance: "Who are those guys? They sure can swing."²⁰ In the same day, flutist Charles Lloyd performed on stage with the Dead during "Good Morning Little School Girl," a blues track that often elicited unmistakably jazz-like licks from Garcia during the jam sections.²¹ The clearest connection between the music of the Dead and jazz is the band's use of modality for their extended jams. In his autobiography, bassist Phil Lesh calls John Coltrane's use of monochord or droning backing and modal improvisation as "a major influence." On distinctly modal tracks like "Viola Lee Blues" and "Midnight Hour," the band freed themselves from simply backing Garcia and started to all improvise individually, much like a jazz combo.²² Other jam bands like The Allman Brothers Band were working in similar musical territory; the band's most significantly jazz influenced work from this period is the instrumental piece "In

¹⁹ Tingen, Paul Miles Beyond 50

²⁰ Lesh, Phil. Searching for the Sound: My Life With the Grateful Dead New York, Bay Back Books, 2006

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Memory of Elizabeth Reed.” A blog post on deadessays.com, “The Dead and Jazz,” quotes Duane Allman on the piece: “That kind of playing comes from Miles and Coltrane, and particularly *Kind of Blue*. I've listened to that album so many times for the last couple years; I haven't hardly listened to anything else.” Perhaps the most comprehensive opportunity to hear the myriad of jazz, blues, and rock hybridization came with the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. Previously mentioned jazz-influenced bands the Grateful Dead, The Bryds, and Jefferson Airplane played, along with Country Joe and the Fish, Buffalo Springfield, and Simon and Garfunkel, amongst others.²³ A reviewer for Billboard magazine said of the music played at the festival: “The music is just as much for listening as dancing, and under many circumstances would be called jazz, not rock [...] It was experimental music based on the blues, and that’s jazz.”²⁴ By the late sixties, it was obvious that jazz and rock were beginning to intertwine more ways than one; in fact, the two genres seemed to be pooling their musical resources into birthing an entire new genre that existed somewhere in between. Miles was ready to dive headfirst into this new field by 1970, leading the way for his fellow jazz-rockers; solidifying the young genre in American music.

Bitches' Brew and Its Impact

The release of *Bitches' Brew* in 1970 was Davis’s full leap into the fusion genre; with this album Davis did not have one foot planted inside rock and the other in jazz, rather, he was working in a new medium altogether. The album was a major work for the jazz fusion movement and was heavily influential in the progression of the genre. Described by Paul Tingen as Davis’s “point of no return,” *Bitches Brew* was a swathe of complex, noisy, and lengthy

²³ Zimmerman, Nadya. Counterculture Kaleidoscope 145-9

²⁴ Ibid.

music, lending itself not towards his cool period as *In a Silent Way* had, but rather towards rock music, traditional African rhythms, and funk. His instrumentation was equally outstanding: at one point, it consisted of Davis on trumpet, three keyboardists, four drummers/percussionists, two basses, a bass clarinet, and the electric guitar. McLaughlin returned for these sessions as well, and his guitar playing drew the recordings heavily towards the rock spectrum. Much like some of the free-form jams that had begun to appear in live rock concerts, *Bitches' Brew* came together through a stream-of-conscious style of arranging and composing. Davis would have musicians come in one at a time, elaborating off a single theme, pausing them only when he managed to pull another idea out of the swirling, nebulous grooves. According to Lenny White, only the keyboardists had any type of written music in front of them, and the rest of the personnel were given only Davis's cryptic verbal directions and physical cues, often left oblivious as to whether they were rehearsing or doing a final take. Another of the musicians, Jack DeJohnette, summarizes Davis's technique when directing the sessions:

“There wasn't a lot said. Most of it was just directed with a word here and a word there [...] Miles was hearing the collective. He was trying to capture moods and feelings and textures. He always went for the essence of things, and that was much more important to him than going back and redoing a note that wasn't perfect. Perfection for him was really capturing the essence of something, and being in the moment with it.”²⁵

Once again, Davis was drawing on his previous experiences while keeping the music very current and unique. Davis's ability to set moods with his music was one of his most defining characteristics as a jazz musician, but the striking instrumentation afforded the music a never-before-seen allure. The melding of Davis's styles is summarized well by Enrico Merlin, who

²⁵ Tingen, Paul. [Miles Beyond](#) 64-70

compared the “sketching” of musical moods by means of key modulations, led by the soloist, with the musical experimentation of the late sixties.²⁶ Without question, Davis had pulled himself from the edgings of obscurity and thrust himself into the latest radical movement in popular music. His effect on one of the most prolific periods of rock’s history was not only a matter of personal artistic expression and maintaining stylistic relevance, however. The period following *Bitches’ Brew* ascertained that Davis was not going to simply define fusion, he was to inspire those who were to further its evolution.

Personal Interactions with Rock Musicians

Miles Davis’s direct contact with some of the most notable jam bands and artists of the late sixties and seventies added significance to his fusion works; not only were they a part of counterculture jazz-rock, they were going to become heavily influential in the continued development of it. Davis’s influence in rock has already been stated, but with his electric works, he reasserted his musical leadership in American pop. Davis’s most significant attempt to become personally involved with rock was his failed collaboration efforts with Jimi Hendrix. The two were in direct contact for the larger part of 1969; Davis spoke of holding conversations about music, exchanging ideas, and jamming with Hendrix in his New York apartment, and Hendrix researcher Henry Shadwick proposes that Miles may have relished being able to play a mentor role to Hendrix.²⁷ Hendrix producer Alan Douglas saw *Bitches’ Brew* as an offshoot of Miles’s musical musings with Hendrix in the two years preceding the recording. Miles was intrigued by Hendrix’s free-flowing, highly improvisatory style and was attracted to Jimi’s

²⁶ Ibid. 71

²⁷ Shadwick, Keith. Jimi Hendrix: The Musician San Francisco, Backbeat, 2012

contemporary edge.²⁸ A collaboration album was planned, and studio time was scheduled, but Davis nixed the project at the last minute over financial quarrels.²⁹ Because of the death of the Hendrix album, the most direct imposition of Davis's new works into the minds of rock's leading jam bands came in 1970, when Davis opened for both Neil Young and The Grateful Dead.³⁰ The first engagement occurred in March at the Fillmore East in New York. Although there is no documented contact between Davis and Young, both artists would go on to pursue strikingly parallel musical directions after the concert, both adhering to a policy of restlessness and continual exploration in their live and studio works.³¹ More significant was Davis's contact with the Grateful Dead in April of the same year at the Fillmore West. Miles opened for the Dead, both intimidating and inspiring the members of the band. Phil Lesh said of Davis's performance:

“We were faced with the unenviable task of following the great Miles Davis [...] As I listened, leaning over the amps with my jaw hanging agape, trying to comprehend the forces that Miles was unleashing onstage, I was thinking: ‘*What’s the use? How can we possibly play after this? We should just go home and try to digest this unbelievable shit.*’ This was our first encounter with Miles’s new direction. Bitches’ Brew had only just been released, but I know I hadn’t yet heard any of it. With this band, Miles literally invented fusion music. In some ways it was similar to what we were trying to do in our free jamming, but ever so much more dense with ideas – and seemingly controlled with an iron fist, even at its most alarmingly intense moments.”³²

It was apparent that Davis was returning the favor to his rock counterparts, challenging them and further expanding their consciousness of the evolving fusion genre. The experience was formative for the band: drummer Bill Kreutzmann claimed that afterward, the band played

²⁸ Szwed, John. So What. 270-2

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Chinen, Nate. *Direction Nowhere*. At Length Magazine, 2010

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lesh, Phil. Searching for the Sound: My Life With the Grateful Dead

“really free, loose,” and that he “couldn’t get Miles out of [his] ears.”³³ Miles confirmed the profound exchange of musical ideas that occurred that night in his autobiography, where he described his interactions with lead guitarist Jerry Garcia:

“...it was through Bill that I met the Grateful Dead. Jerry Garcia, their guitar player, and I hit it off great, talking about music – what they liked and what I liked- and I think we all learned something. Jerry Garcia loved jazz, and I found out that he loved my music and had been listening to it for a long time. He loved other jazz musicians, like Ornette Coleman and Bill Evans.”³⁴

Davis was now deeper into rock music than he had ever intended to be: instead of simply drawing what he liked from rock and utilizing it for the marketability and originality of his own music, he had reasserted his status as a heavily influential force in the development of rock by pioneering fusion and reminding the jam band rockers of their jazz roots.

Conclusion

Truly, the two schools of musical thought that were jazz and rock had been mutually influential since rock’s birth, but it took Davis, Hendrix, the Dead, and a healthy dose of stylistic expansion and exploration to uncover the deep ties. Initially inspired by the irresistible edginess of rock instrumentation, Miles Davis worked tirelessly to formulate a healthy crossroads between rock and jazz. The results fell upon receptive ears in the jam band circuit, prolonging jazz’s presence in the compositions and the jams of rock’s finest improvisers. It would be difficult to assess the entire impact of Davis’s music on American pop, but his fusion works highlight one of the most significant and exciting areas within his shadow of influence.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Davis, Miles and Troupe, Quincy. Miles: The Autobiography New York, Simon & Schuster, 1990

Notes

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