Miles Davis at 100, a complex figure reflecting a complex time

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On May 26, master trumpet player and bandleader Miles Dewey Davis III, would have turned 100 had he not passed away in 1991 at age 65. Innovative, aesthetically powerful and, at times, highly provocative, Davis was at the epicenter of the founding of modern jazz in the 1940s and the electrified fusion with rock that emerged in the 1970s.

This centenary year, which Davis shares with another jazz giant, tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, has been widely celebrated with commemorative concerts, broadcasts and publications. Miles Davis is indisputably one of the major figures in 20th-century American music.

Raised affluently in East Saint Louis, Illinois—his father was a successful dental surgeon—Davis attended The Julliard School in New York City to study music. According to his 1989 autobiography, co-authored by Quincy Troupe, Davis used family resources to ingratiate himself with the brilliant, but drug addicted, alto saxophonist Charlie Parker whom he met while filling in during a Saint Louis engagement of singer Billy Eckstine's big band that also featured Dizzy Gillespie, who co-founded modern jazz, then known as bebop, with Parker.

Parker chose 19-year-old Davis, instead of Gillespie, for his first record date as a leader. Davis remained with Parker's classic quintet, off and on, for more than three years, appearing on dozens of its recordings for two independent labels, Dial and Savoy. After leaving Parker, Davis collaborated with arranger Gil Evans and others on a dozen influential sides for Capitol Records, later dubbed the "Birth of the Cool."

Davis noticeably avoided the rapid-fire, high-note pyrotechnics of Gillespie and other early bebop trumpet players such as Howard McGhee and Fats Navarro. Over time, Davis increasingly explored the trumpet's lower register, using fewer notes and more space, sometimes playing ballads softly through a mute directly into the microphone.

With his characteristic bluntness, Davis explained, "Don't play what's there, play what's not there," "It's not the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play," "I always listen to what I can leave out," and "Silence is more important than sound." He summed up, "Anybody can play. The note is only 20 percent. The attitude of the m——-rf——r who plays it is 80 percent."

Davis' popularity exploded in the 1950s, principally due to a half-dozen quintet albums featuring Coltrane, then a relative unknown but soon to be a central force in the developing jazz avant-garde, and three absolutely gorgeous albums for Columbia, his first major record label, *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess* and *Sketches of Spain*, featuring Davis' spare and sensuous improvisations embedded into complex modern orchestrations by Gil Evans.

While in Paris, Davis improvised the soundtrack to Louis Malle's 1958 French New Wave work *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*), perhaps the most successful pairing of modern jazz and film.

In 1959, Davis and Coltrane, joined by alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, pianist Bill Evans, bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Jimmy Cobb, recorded *Kind of Blue* for Columbia, an artistic success based on modal harmonies that would dominate the avant-garde. *Kind of Blue* is the best-selling jazz album ever.

Davis' mannerisms were both attractive and repellant, as he embraced an image of the "Prince of Darkness." Handsome, magnetic and always impeccably dressed, Davis did not engage in banter with audiences. He frequently turned his back while playing and walked off the stage altogether during solos by other band members.

Throat surgery in 1955 left his voice a raspy whisper, magnifying the mystique of his caustic and profane comments, some of which may have been warranted, such as lambasting Columbia for releasing *Miles Ahead* with "that white bitch on the cover." Others not so much, perhaps.

He could be relentless in his criticisms. After listening to a recording by a highly regarded avant-garde woodwind player during a "blind-fold test," Davis responded, "That's got to be Eric Dolphy—nobody else could sound that bad! The next time I see him I'm going to step on his foot, you can print that. I think he's ridiculous."

Davis' many comments on so-called racial issues in the United States were contradictory. He included white musicians in his bands, but also made ignorant and racialist statements such as "I got in trouble when I started getting popular because white people started coming to see me," and "I hate how white people always try to take credit for something after they discover it. Like it wasn't happening before they found out

about it—which most times is always late, and they didn't have nothing to do with it happening," adding, "It's like, how did Columbus discover America when the Indians were already here? What kind of shit is that, but white people's shit?"

Davis once said during an interview, "If somebody told me I had one hour to live, I'd spend it choking a white man. I'd do it nice and slow." He then moderated his opinion somewhat. "The only white people I don't like are the prejudiced white people. Those the shoe don't fit well, they don't wear it."

Davis flaunted his wealth by collecting expensive sports cars, much to the dismay of talented colleagues scuffling to survive the exploitive music business. He befriended middle-weight champion Sugar Ray Robinson and took up boxing himself. He also physically abused women, most notably his first wife Frances Taylor, a striking beauty and talented protégé of the legendary dancer Katherine Dunham, who later detailed Davis' jealous rages and beatings in interviews.

In 1959, just weeks after *Kind of Blue*'s release, Davis was standing on Broadway outside Birdland, the New York nightclub named after Charlie Parker. According to one version of the event, when a police officer said "move on" Davis pointed to the marquee with his name on it. A second officer struck Davis on the head with a nightstick, opening a bloody gash. Davis was arrested, taken to the precinct, and then to the hospital for stitches where he was photographed in his bloodied white suit with Taylor beside him.

Davis wrote in his autobiography that the incident "changed my whole life and my whole attitude again, made me bitter and cynical again when I was really starting to feel good about the things that had changed in this country."

That being said, Davis remained politically conventional. In 1961, shortly after the CIA-backed assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba, Davis performed with Gil Evans at a Carnegie Hall benefit for the Africa Relief Foundation, an imperialist front. Drummer Max Roach, Davis' colleague from the classic Charlie Parker Quintet, who embraced radical politics, jumped onto the stage holding a sign stating "Freedom Now."

Davis led an edgy, artistically successful quintet in the 1960s with a new generation of musicians, notably the late tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter and drummer Tony Williams, and two survivors, pianist Herbie Hancock and bassist Ron Carter.

By the end of the 1960s, however, Davis abandoned acoustic instruments and traditional jazz forms in favor of electrified vamps that alienated many fans, including this writer, but attracted others, spawning the genre known as jazz fusion.

Davis traded his signature Brooks Brothers coats and ties for outlandish costumes and performed at major rock venues such as the Fillmore East in New York. His new albums featured excellent younger musicians, including saxophonists Benny Maupin and David Leibman, keyboardists Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and Joe Zawinul, guitarists John McLaughlin and John Scofield, drummer Billy Cobham and bassist Dave Holland.

Despite his popularity, in 1975 Davis withdrew from public life altogether for over five years, taking up abstract painting while indulging in drugs and multiple sexual partners. He emerged for a final decade of recordings and performances that were musically uneven as his health gradually failed due to a lifetime of heavy smoking, drinking and substance abuse.

Davis refused to revisit his past. "Those songs to me don't exist, you know? *Kind of Blue*? I'm not going to play that shit, those things are there. They were done in that era, the right hour, the right day, and it happened. It's over; it's on the record," adding "I never thought jazz was meant to be a museum piece like other dead things once considered artistic."

Arranger Quincy Jones finally persuaded Davis to participate in a tribute to the late Gil Evans on July 8, 1991. "I kept bugging him about it. He said, 'OK, m——-f——-r.' To see him at 65 years old trying to re-create his 25-year-old self was just amazing, man," Jones would later recount, although clearly Davis could barely play.

Davis died in a Santa Monica, California, hospital three months later from a combination of respiratory failure and stroke.

What is to be made of such a remarkable, complicated life?

The artist Miles Davis blossomed with the development of jazz as a distinctive, popular art form during the immediate post-World War II years, a period of immense working class militancy and mobilization, and throughout the ensuing mass struggle for civil rights. His eventual artistic retreat reflected not only his own advancing age and declining health, but the wider political and cultural malaise associated with the immense degeneration of the labor and civil rights movements, the demise of the USSR, "the end of history" and the general lurch to the right by important sections of the cultural elite in the 1980s and 1990s.

After decades of reaction at home and abroad, culminating in the culturally and politically depraved Trump administration, the consciousness of workers and artists is again moving to the left, ultimately to a rejection of capitalism, the underlying cause of stagnation and degeneration, creating conditions for the emergence of artists as impactful as Miles Davis in the 21st century.