

## THE COMEBACK OF MILES DAVIS

by Eric Myers\*

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In recent times, few events in jazz have been so eagerly anticipated as the return of the trumpeter Miles Davis in New York on July 5, 1981 to close the Kool Jazz Festival, (until this year known as the Newport Jazz Festival). The outstanding figure in modern jazz over the last 25 years, Miles Davis has changed the direction of the music a number of times. Beset by various health problems over the last five years, however, he has not recorded or performed live, and the record company CBS, which has been paying him a retainer of \$300,000 a year, must have been a trifle nervous, wondering if he would perform again.



*Miles had spent his spare time working out in the gym...*

It was rumoured, until recently, that Miles, now 55 years of age, had given up the trumpet completely. He spent his spare time working out in the gym and playing organ in his West 77th Street apartment. With a new record about to be released, and with two much-publicised performances at the Kool Jazz Festival, which were sold out weeks before, it looks as if Miles is now seriously on the comeback trail.

To capitalise on the growing interest, CBS threw a party on July 1 for Miles Davis and the international press at Xenon's, now the most fashionable discotheque in New

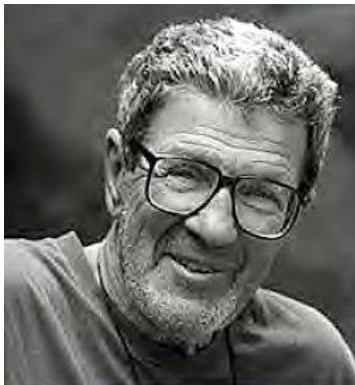
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*\*Eric Myers, then jazz critic with the Sydney Morning Herald, was in New York in July, 1981, to attend the Kool Jazz Festival.*

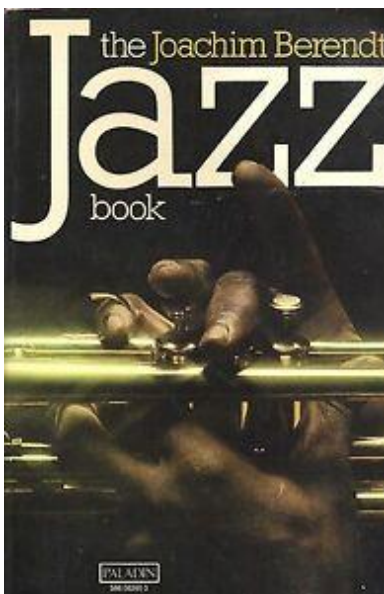
York, following the demise of Studio 54. The discotheque was festooned with beautiful food and the alcohol was free. For over an hour, some 300 international pressmen and photographers ate splendidly and awaited the arrival of the king.

Many wondered if the trumpeter would actually turn up. Miles Davis is without doubt one of the most cantankerous and unpredictable figures in American jazz, and no-one would have been surprised if he had failed to appear, after encouraging CBS to put on this huge reception. I was informed by a number of sources that the whole party was Miles's own idea. His non-arrival might have been the ultimate prank for a notorious jokester. I remembered that Miles, during a crowded Saturday night at the Village Vanguard, once left the bandstand in the middle of a set, when his girlfriend, supposedly drunk in a club on the other side of town, phoned him to come and get her. Miles is not renowned for consideration to his employers.

As we waited in the dimness, amid flashing lights and blaring New Wave music, I remarked that this environment could scarcely be agreeable to the creator of Cool Jazz. I was corrected by Joachim Berendt, the distinguished German critic, promoter and author of the best-selling *The Jazz Book: From New Orleans to Rock and Free Jazz*. "No," he said, "Miles loves this type of atmosphere; it is we who cannot stand it".



*Joachim Berendt (above) author of the best-selling The Jazz Book (below): "Miles loves this type of atmosphere; it is we who cannot stand it"...*



After an hour and some nervousness on the part of CBS representatives, Miles and his retinue finally arrived. He was dressed in blue and white truckers cap, dark shades, dark blue denim trousers and jacket. He sported a generous moustache, and I was surprised at how small and wiry he was in person, no more than five feet seven or eight. As flashbulbs popped by the score, he moved through the crowd slowly, with the music at fortissimo, making conversation impossible. Every few feet he was embraced by attractive women, (usually black), and luminaries from the music industry (usually white). Distinguished American jazz writers stumbled across each other in order to take photographs or welcome the great man.

Non-English-speaking Japanese journalists thrust microphones at the trumpeter and spoke to him incomprehensibly and heatedly. Miles is a superstar in Japan. As he moved along, Miles would lean over to a favoured ear and speak softly, in the voice which Max Gordon, owner of the Village Vanguard, has described as "a loud whisper through fog and haze you can barely hear".



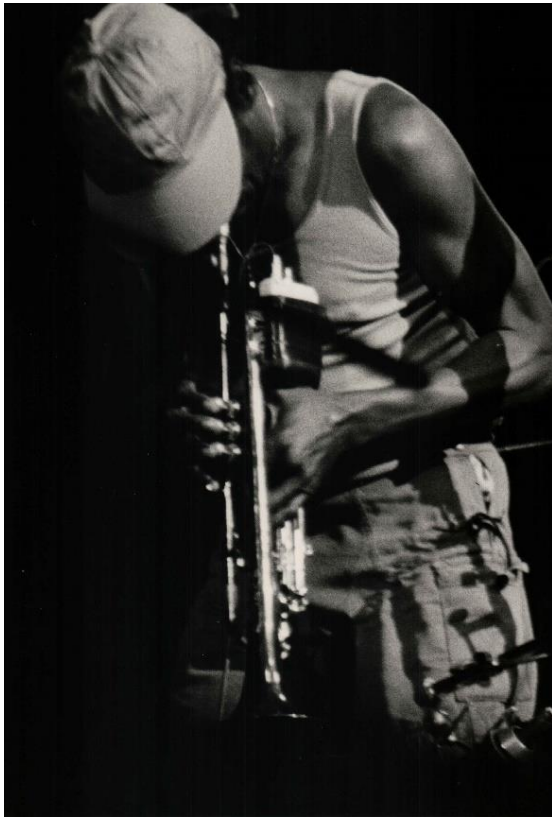
*Max Gordon, owner of the Village Vanguard: he described Miles's voice as "a loud whisper through fog and haze you can barely hear"... PHOTO COURTESY TALKING JAZZ: AN ILLUSTRATED ORAL HISTORY*

Joachim Berendt watched this event with measured cynicism. "It is unusual to see so many men greeting Miles affectionately, for he has few male friends", he said. "When you go to his house, you never see men, only women".

I asked Berendt why he was not participating in the welcoming ritual. "Miles and I have clashed in the past", he replied. "I wrote some uncomplimentary things about his music. When he came to the Munich Festival where I was director, he at first refused to speak with me. I later told him that, just as he played music as he felt, I had to write as I felt. We embraced on that occasion, but now I feel there is still tension between us. I do not wish to invade his privacy on this occasion".

If the party at Xenon's was a theatrical gesture, what of the concert the following Sunday at the Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall? Many were wondering about the

direction of Miles' present music. What is he into now? Will he be setting new pathways for jazz?



*A shot of Miles Davis taken at the Avery Fisher performance on July 5, 1981...*  
*PHOTO CREDIT MARGARET SULLIVAN*

At the end of the concert, which took a little more than an hour, the answers were a little clearer. Miles Davis is at present not concerned to pioneer a new jazz movement. In fact, from the evidence of this concert, his present music is heavily confined to the cliches of jazz/rock fusion. The concert was disappointing and anticlimatic. Miles has surrounded himself with musicians of uneven talent. The only survivor from his earlier groups is the superb Al Foster (drums) plus Bill Evans (saxophones), Mike Stern (guitar), Marcus Miller (bass) and Dominique Cinelo (percussion).

The last musician was a little-known percussionist from Martinique until one month ago. Playing in an obscure New York club he was heard by Miles who took his number and later hired him. Whether his meteoric rise is justified by adequate talent is doubtful.

Admittedly Miles Davis's playing was frequently stunning and exquisite. Walking backwards and forwards across the stage with his trumpet pointed towards the floor, wired into a transistor microphone, he played the nervous, hesitant, spare lines of old, reminding us he did more than any jazz musician over 20 years ago to bring understatement into jazz. Frequently he played lines of pristine beauty and executed some dashing runs, utilising the high register of the trumpet rather more than one might have expected.

But the music which surrounded him was generally not distinctive: jazz/rock clichés from Stern on guitar, ordinary funk lines from the bassist Miller, and inconsequential conga raves from the percussionist Cinelo. Bill Evans, a young saxophonist not to be confused with late pianist, came across as an interesting and developing player who one day could be a giantkiller, but he has some way to go before he will emulate saxophonists Wayne Shorter, Hank Mobley, John Coltrane and others who have played with Davis.

It would be hasty to judge Miles Davis merely on the basis of this set of a little over an hour. There were reports that, in his warm-up appearances in Boston, he presented some bop material, which enabled him and his group to stretch out on more harmonically challenging structures. Certainly his fans at Avery Fisher were anxious for Miles to swing and, whenever the music suggested a straight-ahead four feel, a ripple of excitement went through audience.

In 1969 Miles Davis was urged by Clive Davis, then President of Columbia Records to take on the challenge of rock music by bringing rock rhythms and electronic instruments into jazz. This Miles did, and although his LP *Bitches Brew* was not the first of its kind, it is regarded as the essential milestone of what became the most popular kind of jazz in the 1970s: jazz/rock fusion.



*Bitches Brew: not the first of its kind, but now regarded as the essential milestone of the most popular kind of jazz in the 1970s, jazz/rock fusion...*

Many fans and critics now feel that jazz/rock fusion has run its course and the absence of a new direction in jazz does much to explain the current nostalgia for earlier forms. Against the current, Miles Davis appears to be doing his best to breathe life back into that form of music. If he continues in this way, he may bury his elegant, dramatic and beautiful trumpet sound in a maelstrom of rock clichés.