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TOO MANY MILES?

The forward-looking musician still has us looking backwards, which only makes jazz seem more like a retrospective art form

BY MIKE DOHERTY

It's been 18 years since he passed away, but Miles Davis is still the biggest jazz artist on the planet. If anything, the mercurial trumpeter casts a greater shadow now than he did when he was alive. Tributes to his legacy are everywhere, from a huge exhibition of memorabilia in Paris to a 24-hour temporary satellite radio station on SIRIUS Canada, to a series of concerts and tours led by former sidemen and followers, to books, to a Don Cheadle-helmed biopic that's in the works. On Tuesday, Sony will release a 71-disc box set of Davis's work.

The question arises: At what point does the constant paying of tribute turn into fixation? And furthermore, is there a danger that in looking back at the career of someone who was always looking forward, the jazz world is ignoring the innovation of a younger generation?

Certainly, from a commercial standpoint, Miles Davis is an easy sell to crossover audiences at a time when jazz is hardly a commercial force. "John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, I don't think, have sunk into popular culture," says André Menard, artistic director of the Montreal Jazz Festival, "but Miles's sounds have percolated in most of rock and pop music, from what I hear all the time. ... He has this crushing presence in the world of music."

Crucial to Miles's appeal is his unique, enigmatic star quality. Miles the man appears to have been as complex as his music: no two people remember him the same way. Biographer Jack Chambers, who wrote the acclaimed two-volume set *Milestones* (1983-'85), calls the jazz legend "a miserable son of a bitch" and "a genuinely nasty man." Menard, who presented Miles's concerts on four occasions, suggests that the trumpeter had a "concrete aura that was very hard to get through," but that he was nonetheless "a gentleman."

What everyone does agree on is that he took orders from no one, and that — up until two retrospective concerts at the end of his life — he never looked back, either at his own legacy or at that of his fellow jazz musicians. Since his death, however, the jazz tribute project has become such a tradition that jazz itself has come to be seen as a "retrospective art form," as Chambers puts it, where all "the commemorative extravaganza, concerts, CDs"



ILLUSTRATION BY KAGAN MCLEOD

EVEN MORE MILES

The Miles Davis discography is vast and unruly, and it promises to become even more so on Monday with the release of the 70-CD Complete Columbia Album Collection, exclusive to Amazon. Confusingly, the set doesn't collect all the contents of Sony's previous 10 vault-raiding boxes, while it does contain a smattering of previously unavailable rarities, most notably the 1970 Isle of Wight concert and a bonus DVD of a 1967 concert in Germany. Fans who own most of the albums will no doubt be disappointed at being asked to pay for them again in order to obtain the rarities. On the other hand, for \$257.97, or \$3.63 per disc, the set should be surprisingly good value — even if you do already have every edition of *Kind of Blue*. Also, with all the original artwork intact, it promises to be a valuable time capsule of 30 years of innovative jazz, from 1955 to 1985 — some of which appears for the first time in remastered form. Copies were unavailable at press time, but one thing that's for sure is that such a collection could only make sense as a physical artefact, rather than an interminable series of downloads. Perhaps it will become known as a sort of Rosetta Stone for jazz, or as biographer Jack Chambers muses, "the 71 discs might contain a clue like St. Thomas Aquinas did for all of those theologians in the old days. Read one paragraph, and you're away for the rest of your life, speculating, working." *Mike Doherty, Weekend Post*

come across as "a marketing ploy. There's an emphasis on looking back because some of the creative impetus is stuck back there."

Part of the problem, for Chambers, is the "academic crust on the jazz world that was not there until the 1990s. What's missing for me is this raw kind of feeling that players could communicate in performance in days gone by." Davis himself dropped out of Juilliard after studying for a brief period there in the mid-'40s: "He always said he learned more from Dizzy Gillespie at night than he did from his professors in the daytime."

While Davis might have turned his back on the formal study of music, his work will occupy jazz musicologists for generations to come: because he was such a pioneer — from cool jazz to hard bop to modal jazz to fusion with rock and funk — it's almost impossible to get around him in any study of the genre. Moreover, so great has his critical and commercial success been that it has tended to drown out the work of those around him — drummer Jimmy Cobb, for instance, the sole survivor of the Kind of Blue sessions, makes the news only when playing concerts of music from that one seminal album.

"The spirit of having to go backwards to be noticed saddens me," says Toronto-based trumpeter Nick "Brownman" Ali. However, he suggests, there is a way out: the key is not to "photocopy" Davis's sound or his playing but to concentrate on his spirit of "fearlessness and irreverence." In his own recurring series of five-night tribute concerts, Brownman and a shifting cast of Canadian and American collaborators celebrate different phases of Davis's music while attempting to use the frameworks "to be original and play like we live in 2009."

There's always the hope that a new Miles Davis may emerge to lead jazz forward, inspired by the spirit, rather than the letter, of the original. "It can be done," Brownman asserts. "But you have to be just as fearless as Miles was."

■ We Want Miles runs at Paris's Cité de la Musique until Jan. 17, and then moves to Montreal's Musée des Beaux-Arts from April 30-Aug. 29, 2010. Miles Davis Radio runs on SIRIUS Channel 72 until Wednesday. The Brownman Electric Trio's album *Juggernaut* is available now on Brown-taurus Records.

Weekend Post

Hey, I vaguely recall that film

A 're-visiting' like *Bad Lieutenant* counts on that sort of reaction



CHRIS KNIGHT on Movies

Despite similarities in titles, this weekend's new release *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* is not a remake of the 1992 movie *Bad Lieutenant*. But it's also not the case of two films that happen to share a name, as with *Spellbound*, which is both a 1945 Hitchcock thriller and a 2002 documentary about a spelling bee. (Calling that one *Bee Movie* would have made for even more confusion.)

"Re-imagining" comes close, although Edward R. Pressman, who produced both films and is the only human link in the chain between them, calls it a "revisiting." Both feature a police lieutenant (Harvey Keitel in the original; Nicolas Cage in the new one) and both lieutenants are bad, but that's where the similarity ends.

This raises the question: Why play the same-name game at all? Most likely it's because in a crowded cinema-cape a film needs all the brand power it can muster. *Bad Lieutenant* is one of six new films in Toronto this weekend, sharing marquee space with *Planet 51*, *The Blind Side*, *Mary and Max* and a little number called *New Moon*. It's not even first in the long-winded title department; that honour goes to *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*.

The first *Bad Lieutenant* may not be that well remembered, though it did win an early Independent Spirit Award for Keitel. But moviegoers will likely recall something familiar about the title, which might be just the tipping point it needs to beat *The Men Who Stare at Goats*.

Films are forever jostling for this kind of recognition. TV spots remind potential

viewers of the accolades of the stars. (I always feel bad for the third-tier actors, though, when a trailer crows: "Academy Award winner Meryl Streep, Academy Award nominee Amy Adams ... and Chris Messina.") Trailers tell us that a new movie is from the guy who wrote, directed or even just paid for a well-known film.

A good parallel to *Bad Lieutenant*'s brand of "remember me?" is Quentin Tarantino's recent hit *Inglourious Bastards*. It took the title and rough outline of a 1978 spaghetti war movie — *The Inglourious Bastards* was itself a cheap knockoff of *The Dirty Dozen* — and remade it with better actors and worse spelling. It's the kind of recycling that Tarantino does better than almost anyone else.

Drawing inspiration from the ghost of movies past seems to be gaining in popularity. Last Christmas gave us *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which borrowed the title and ageing-in-reverse conceit from a 1921 short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. But many critics pointed out that the story was basically *Forrest Gump* told backward. (Eric Roth wrote both screenplays.)

In the summer, *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* appropriated the name of the 1960s action figure — itself christened after a popular 1945 film, *The Story of G.I. Joe* — for a fairly generic plot about world domination. Though impossible to calculate, at least some of the film's US\$150-million box office (it scored just 36% at rottentomatoes.com) had to be a direct result of brand recognition. Calling it just *The Rise of Cobra* might have sliced US\$50-million from its profits. Renaming it *Transformers: The Rise of Cobra* could have had the opposite effect, particularly among the "I'd watch Megan Fox in anything" crowd.

Upcoming movies continue to borrow liberally from well-known franchises. Next summer brings us *Marmaduke* the movie, with Owen Wilson as the voice of the slobbery Great Dane from the single-panel comic strip. Recently it was announced that Sony Pictures had purchased the rights to the board game Risk. Peter Berg (*The Kingdom*, *Hancock*) is making a film version of Battleship for release in 2011, and no less a directing talent than Ridley Scott is said to be working on Monopoly.

As with *Bad Lieutenant*, board-game movies are unlikely to bear anything beyond name resemblance to their predecessors. And if *Port of Call New Orleans* does well its producer might want to consider expanding the concept to other movies. Imagine Samuel L. Jackson as a drug-addled Jedi in *Star Wars: Port of Call Tatooine*. I'd watch that, and I don't even have a clue what it's about.

Weekend Post

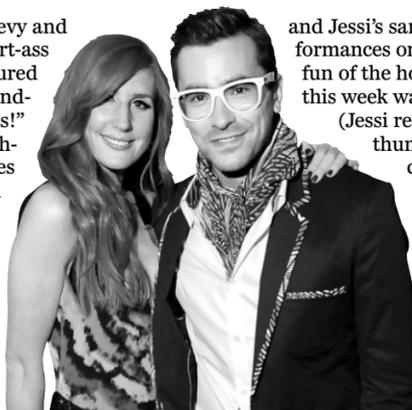


VVS PICTURES

Nicolas Cage and Eva Mendez in the new *Bad Lieutenant*.

THRICE REMOVED • HOW MUCH ANALYSIS CAN THE HILLS TAKE?

There are fans of MTV Canada's *The After Show* — which sees Dan Levy and Jessi Cruickshank deconstruct *The Hills* with painstaking detail and smart-ass hilarity — who are so in love with their hosts that they apply to be featured on the show via webcam for all of five seconds and sit waiting with hand-made signs reading "I love you, Dan!" or even "Dan, I want your babies!" And there are other fans who watch *The After Show* without even watching *The Hills* because it really doesn't matter how well you follow the lives of Kristin, Audrina and Justin Bobby — Dan and Jessi are entertaining in and of themselves (in fact, some ratings stats suggest that more people tune in to *The After Show* than to *The Hills*). But to add yet another level of the mix, the folks at *Eye Weekly* (one of Toronto's alt-weekly newspapers) have created The After Show After Blog, which takes Dan



and Jessi's sardonic nit-picking and flips it around to analyze their own performances on *The After Show*. Caroline Lock takes great pleasure in making fun of the hosts' outfits (and rightly so — Dan's tight-fitting patterned shirt this week was the wrong choice on many levels), pointing out their slip-ups (Jessi recently got the last name of Brody's mom wrong) and giving the thumbs up when they do good (she loves that Jessi has visible difficulty trying to restrain her intellectual feminism, and also loves that Dan recently name-dropped chicken tetrazzini). For those addicted to either TV show, the blog adds yet another layer to the mix and yet another excuse to procrastinate. Now all we need is The After Show After Blog After Podcast! Who's starting it? *Vanessa Farquharson, Weekend Post*