Trumpet of the Digital Apocalypse: "We Want Miles" at *Le Musée de la Musique*

"*Who is this music… that which description may never justify?"*

--Conrad Roberts, "Inamorata and Narration," in *Live / Evil*

Had it not been for my visit, last summer, to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, the recent museum exhibit "We Want Miles": *Le Jazz face à sa légende* at the *Musée de la Musique* in Paris (October 16, 2009 –January 17, 2010; scheduled to travel to Montreal and New York) would have struck me as a unique instance of a major retrospective dedicated to the life and work of a musician.

Cleveland showed me how musicians' careers can in fact be the subject of museum shows, and after my visit to the Miles Davis exhibit in December, I learned that it followed similar shows at the same museum for John Lennon, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix.

Given my visit to Cleveland ("the heart of rock and roll") last August, it is not difficult for me to imagine what these previous shows might have been like: archival photos and documents, miscellaneous artifacts (notably, "celebrity" instruments and clothing), head-set access to the music and—invariably, the most interesting—film and video footage; this, by and large, is the content of the Miles Davis exhibit as well.

The difference of course is the sheer volume of work represented and the historical time span it covers: from the first recordings with Charlie Parker in 1945 to the final recordings prior to Miles's death at the age of 65 (the same day as John Cage) in September, 1991… the latter recordings made during the July 1991 "reunion" concert at the very site in Paris, *Parc de la Villette,* where the *Musée de la Musique* now stands.

Miles's music began at the end of one war (WWII) and finished at the end of another (the Cold War), and could be described as an American chronicle, in music, of the Cold War itself or, by the same token, as the soundtrack to the coming of age of the "baby boom" generation.

Not coincidentally it is also a body of work that is well-known, not to say notorious, and certainly unparalleled in the annals of jazz for the radical changes in style it underwent in the course of 45+ "post-war" years (it is

perhaps useful here to recall that *playing the changes* is one of the things that jazz by definition does best).

The topography of the "We Want Miles" exhibit serves to highlight these stylistic changes first and foremost by dividing its presentation of the music, as in two big Footprints, between a ground-level space (*Première Partie* (1926-1967)) dedicated to an "acoustic" sound, and an underground space (*Seconde Partie* (1968-1991)) in which the music takes an *electric* turn (*Miles Électrique*).

Both spaces are somewhat long, narrow and dark and suggest the inside of dimly lit caves (in both, the way in is the way out).

After being given a set of headphones at the entrance to the ground level, the visitor turns to the right and enters a small dark room, on the floor of which shines a spotlight; Miles's raspy voice can be heard, if not understood, amid sounds of music coming from around the corner.

There, a larger room opens up and the immediate source of the music (other music can be heard in the distance(s)) is a 1930s radio built by the Ohio Radio Company, playing the music that Miles listened to as a kid late at night and in the morning before school: Jimmy Lunceford, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington …

The entire wall behind the central radio presents a photograph of a St. Louis street in the aftermath of a tornado, during the year following Miles's birth, an event which he invested with mytho-poetic significance (having to do with the "winds" of fate and his own calling).

As the brochure and floor plan indicate, the exhibit's first section follows Miles's life "from St. Louis to 52nd St."; on the wall to the left are various artifacts depicting his social and musical milieu as the son of a fairly well-to-do St. Louis couple (his father was a dentist and dental surgeon).

Most notable of these items for me were the three Gustav Heim mouth-pieces on display, which, given their construction, are said to account for the so-called "St. Louis sound" characteristic of the trumpeters (including Miles's mentor, Clark Terry) for which the city was well-known on the riverboat circuit—a fuller, more nuanced, middle-register sound that Miles made world-famous.

Some of the other items on view are posters and advertisements from the St. Louis clubs and bands in which Miles first started to play (e.g. Eddie's

Randle's *Blue Devils* at the Rhumboogie), up to the fateful passage through St. Louis of Billy Ekstine's band at the Riviera in 1944, when racial incidents forced the band's departure from the "Whites Only" Club Plantation—an all-star band that featured the new Bebop sound of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker (also, Lucky Thompson, Leo Parker, Gene Ammons, Art Blakey, Sarah Vaughn)… a band in which Miles had the good fortune to be invited (by Gillespie) to replace Buddy Anderson, who had fallen sick; the gig lasted two weeks.

The rest, like they say, is history: onward, in September 1944, to New York's 52nd Street (aka "Swing Street") and beyond.

At this point in the museum's narrative there appears the first of the oval-shaped "*sourdines"* or "mutes" (so-called after the mute that Miles's put on his trumpet), small listening booths, like separate alcoves in a cave, each of a different color, in which music is playing and for which the displays on the wall serve as context.

In this first case, the room is purplish and the topic is the 78 rpm records on the Savoy and Dial labels for which Charlie Parker, and later Miles Davis, recorded, as these are mounted on the wall and their music replayed: Bird (Charlie Parker) on "Big Foot," "Ornithology," "Grooving High," "Now's the Time," "Billie's Bounce"…

The walls directly outside display more photographs and memorabilia from The Three Deuces, The Spotlight, Minton's Playhouse, The Down Beat Club, Birdland, and give a sense of Miles's first years in New York (where he expected to be able to go horseback riding...), as a student briefly enrolled at Julliard, playing with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, with whom he recorded in 1945 and later in 1947 (with Bud Powell and Max Roach), and played his first composition "Donna Lee."

Further on, there are two paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Bird of Paradise" (1984) and "Horn Players" ("Bird" and "Diz," 1983), the apparent purpose of which is to underscore the importance for both Davis and Basquiat of the Bebop recordings on Dial, and which also anticipate Miles's turn to painting in the 1980s.

The remaining three sections in the ground-floor exhibit retrace Miles's emergence as an international jazz celebrity and major recording star for Columbia Records.

The second section, "Out of the Cool: 1948-1955," begins with material from Miles's first triumphal visit to Paris, a city he seems to have liked as much as it liked him (as the show clearly attests).

It is during this first 15-day visit to Paris in 1949, as part of Tadd Cameron's quintet at the International Jazz Festival in the Salle Pleyel, that Miles is said to have crossed paths with Sartre and Picasso, and certainly did hook up with actress/singer Juliette Gréco.

The "St. Germain" scene—French intellectual hub of Existentialism and all things cool in the 1950s—is the subject of a "side-bar" in the form of a tubular glass pillar that contains among other things film clips of Existentialists and their Critics at work; it is at this time that Boris Vian writes, *contra* Down Beat magazine: "*Un des plus grands moments du jazz, c'est le chorus de Miles dans* Now's the Time."

A few steps away the first "plug-in" (a headset connection often accompanied by a video projection) presents itself—yet another source of music, that is neither the music rising back and front in the darkness of the space nor the music highlighted within a "muted" alcove: plug-in to "Deception," from the album *Birth of the Cool.*

On the walls, sheet music for the bass and horn on "Rouge" from the same album.

With *Birth of the Cool*—a break with, and rejection of, Bebop by a nonet that includes a French horn, trombone and tuba, and brings together J.J. Johnson, Lee Konitz, Gerry Mulligan, John Lewis and Max Roach, among others—Miles's career as a bandleader takes off.

It is also no coincidence that this album marks the beginning of Miles's lifelong collaboration with composer and arranger Gil Evans.

Indeed, what becomes evident is how Miles's skill as a leader remains indissociable from the importance he assigns to collaboration.

From this point forward, the exhibit demonstrates as much, and however one chooses to describe the "genius of Miles," part of it clearly has to do with the art of delegating responsibility for the newness of the sound.

The other collaborations that could be said to shape the remaining sections of the first floor's exhibits—"Miles Ahead: 1955-1959" and "Miles Smiles: 1959-1967"—involve French director Louis Malle; record producer Teo Macero; Gil Evans and (as part of the so-called "First Quintet") John Coltrane; then the younger sidemen of the "Second Quintet."

One could include at the onset of that list record producer Bob Weinstock of Prestige Records and recording engineer Rudy van Gelder (who also recorded Miles on the Blue Note label): it is under the Prestige label, as emphasized by the second (green) listening booth (*sourdine*) that a series of albums—including *Relaxin'*, *Steamin*', *Cookin'* and *Workin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*—brought the music of Miles Davis and John Coltrane to worldwide attention; the tunes being played include "Walkin'," "Bags' Groove," "My Funny Valentine," "Oleo," "Dig," "Tempus Fugit," "Blue Haze."

Leaving the second *sourdine* and the rubric of Prestige Records, the visitor realizes that one strand of the multiple strands of music circulating in the air is coming from the next space over, where across the entire length of the wall a film sequence of Jeanne Moreau walking the streets of Paris in Louis Malle's *"Ascenseur pour l'échafaud"* (*Elevator to the Scaffold*) is being projected to Miles's soundtrack (recorded in a single take).

The effect—watching the otherwise soundless piece of film on a large screen, and hearing the music being improvised to it—is surprisingly effective, like being inside Miles's head as he plays…

One of the nearby plug-ins, amid other paraphernalia relating to the film, is an interview about the improvised soundtrack with Louis Malle; an incredulous French reporter seems bewildered by the thought that the music isn't being read from a score.

The rest of this section is dedicated primarily to Miles's collaborative work with Gil Evans at Columbia Records, as produced by Teo Macero (who later went on to produce Thelonius Monk's landmark Columbia debut, *Monk's Dream*).

The recordings with Evans started in 1955 (*Miles Ahead, Porgy and Bess, Sketches of Spain*), and overlapped Miles's sessions with Coltrane (*'Round Bout Midnight, Milestones, Kind of Blue, Someday My Prince Will Come*).

In this respect, a large wall-size photograph of the Columbia recording studio at West 30th St. serves as a background to the work with both Evans and Coltrane; but while various scores, sheet music, album covers and projections (including one on the floor) draw attention to the larger-scale orchestral work with Evans, the adjacent (blue) *sourdine* focuses on the masterpiece *Kind of Blue*, the best-selling jazz album to date (a distinction once held by *Bitches Brew*).

Kind of Blue celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2009, as did also Coltrane's *Giant Steps*.

What most impressed me here was the display case containing the actual horns of Miles and Coltrane from this period: a Martin "Committee" trumpet and a Selmer "Balanced Action" tenor saxophone.

No doubt, to be impressed by the sight of these instruments, in a room where items such as the correspondence, producer notes and sheet music for the recording of *Kind of Blue* are on the walls, and music from the album is continuously playing, is a function of the music's appeal to the listener.

But it would be difficult to overstate the achievement of these two artists in the field of 20th century music.

A sense of that achievement is offered by Jim Merod in his essay "The Question of Miles Davis," which appeared in *Boundary 2* (vol. 28 no. 2, Summer 2001) and which, especially for readers interested in poetry and literature and their connection to jazz, remains a singularly valuable critical appraisal of "a seven-year musical collaboration that, quite literally, redefined the course of jazz."

The article was written in response to the release of *The Complete Recordings of Miles Davis and John Coltrane, 1955-1961*, released in 2000, which is part of a larger project at Sony-Columbia for the re-release in "boxed set" format of all the material surrounding select recordings and personnel—i.e. the "complete" versions of *Live at the Plugged Nickel* (1965), released in 1995, *Miles Davis & Gil Evans* (1957-1968), released in 1996, *The Miles Davis Quintet, 1965-1968*, released in 1998, *Bitches Brew* (1969-1970), released in 1998—all of which preceded Merod's article—and *In a Silent Way* (1968-1969), released in 2001, the *Jack Johnson Sessions* (1970) and *In Person at the Blackhawk* (live, 1961), both released in 2003, *Seven Steps to Heaven* (1963-64), released in 2004, and the *On The Corner Sessions* (1972-1975) and *Cellar Door Sessions* (live, 1970), both released in 2005.

The culmination of the project is the release of the 70-CD (+ 1 DVD) boxed set *Miles Davis: The Complete Columbia Album Collection* (1955-1985), end-2009/early 2010, coincidental to the Paris exhibit.

Merod extols Miles's playing: the "beauty and sad dignity," the "vulnerability," the "extraordinary emotional power," "relaxed intensity," "nearly inconsolable mournful beauty," the "pathos of… gentle defiance," "extreme moments of lyric intensity," the "exotic perfection," the "primitive perfection."

Indeed, "perfection " is a word that keeps cropping up for Merod, as when he writes: "Davis's deepest wish to sustain the sublime creativity that

marked his years of musical perfection from 1956 through (roughly) 1969, could not be realized."

To paraphrase Maurice Blanchot (for example, in the essays on Kafka), this impossibility-that-is-not-impossibility—because the attempt to sustain "sublime creativity" is still what drives the music in Miles's later career—is the spectacle being staged in "We Want Miles": *Jazz facing its legend.*

At the dead end to which the visitor arrives in the next room—after passing a generic trumpet in a display case and a plug-in explaining the physics of the instrument's sound, along with some comments by Miles on his use of the mute—comes a display about the miracle that is the perfection of the "Second Quintet," a group which, from 1965 to 1968, brought together musicians some ten to fifteen years younger than Miles (Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and 17-year-old drummer Tony Williams).

Most extraordinary here is the previously unreleased film footage of live performances in Germany and Sweden in 1967, when the group—the so-called "rhythm, no time" band—was at the pinnacle of its art (these concerts are included on DVD in the *Complete Collection*).

At the center of this last room is a drum set played by Philly Joe Jones and Tony Williams, and to either side of the movie screen are Miles's blue Magna trumpet from 1964, a photo-mural of Miles's red Ferrari, covers of albums on the walls featuring the women in his life (*In Person at the Blackhawk, Someday My Prince Will Come, Sorcerer, Filles de Kilimanjaro),* a full-wall display of jazz journals from around the world, a film of Miles's 1963 arrival in Paris, plug-ins to *Stella by Starlight* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro,* a wall display of the albums *Seven Steps to Heaven, Miles in Tokyo, Miles Smiles* and *Nefertiti,* and the sheet music to "E.S.P.," "Sorcerer," "Pinocchio," "Capricorn," "Dolores" and "Footprints."

As I browsed through it all, I remembered the first time I went to hear Miles Davis as a teenager growing up in New York, c. 1968: one night I walked into the Village Gate, and this band was on stage, *cookin'.*

I was riveted: the house was packed, Miles was standing center stage in the spotlight, his trumpet pointing down at the ground as always, Wayne Shorter was off to the side waiting, and all along the rhythm section kept exploding in one great wave of energy…

Downstairs, in the lobby before the entrance to the second part of the show, there is a "timeline" extending some sixty feet along the wall; it chronicles all the musical associates with whom Miles was involved from the 1940s to the 1990s (an alternate "Special View of History…").

In the same room are also four computer stations presenting complete analyses or breakdowns of selected songs in the Miles Davis discography: "Bags' Groove" (1945), "So What" (1959), "Footprints" (1966), "Spanish Key" (1969), "Tutu" (1986).

The computer screens provide ample context (personnel, recording information, commentary, anecdotes, etc.) for the music being played on headsets—and show its musical notation tracked by a cursor.

Of these, the most interesting, visually, is "Spanish Key" (from *Bitches Brew*), basically because it struck me at the time as a sort of concrete poem for computer (more so than the later "Tutu," for example, despite that song's prevalent use of synthesizers and overdubbing).

The visual translation of "Spanish Key" can be taken as an indication of the radical shift in sound that the use of electric instruments (starting with the Fender Rhodes electric piano, and later keyboard additions like the Echoplex and Ring Modulator) introduces; moreover, it also highlights a notable shift between what can be described as a first electric period and and a second electric period, as these occur on either side of Miles's withdrawal from the scene (i.e. " burn-out") between 1975 and 1981—a shift that the topography of the exhibit space underscores to good effect.

On this lower floor, "*Miles Électrique*" begins and ends with rooms dedicated to the projections of filmed concerts.

To start: the July, 1970 Isle of Wight Festival, with a band similar to the one on *Live / Evil* and the *Cellar Door Sessions*, notable in this instance for the inclusion of two electric keyboards (Chick Corea and Keith Jarrett) and an electric bass (Dave Holland).

The DVD of the concert, released in 2004, includes filmed interviews with several band members (including Jack DeJohnette and Gary Bartz) and various jazz cognoscenti—notably, Stanley Crouch, critic (and former drummer, as well as champion of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, director of Jazz at Lincoln Center), whose hostility to Miles's electric music is a matter of much-publicized record.

Crouch describes his repeated experience of listening to *Bitches Brew* as similar to having somebody slowly drive a nail into his hand: "Nothing I

could do about it, but listen to the hammer hit the nail. Thump! *Not again! No! Not again!*"

This (Byzantine?) opinion is consistent with Crouch's earlier dismissal of *In a Silent Way*, in his 1990 article in *The New Republic:* "Miles Davis, the most brilliant sellout in the history of jazz" (see in this regard an interesting response in the Marxist e-journal **What Next?** on the occasion of the release of *The Complete In A Silent Way Sessions*).

While Crouch no doubt speaks for a certain contingent in the jazz world, suffice it to say that his more recent celebration of *My Funny Valentine* in **Slate** (in a bid to contextualize Miles's 2006 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame) seems disingenuous: the *pre-electric* Miles of that 1964 recording (with George Coleman replacing Coltrane), beautiful as it is, has no more to do with Rock and Roll than, say, the music of trumpeter Lee Morgan.

One might further observe that in **Slate**'s recent assessment of **"**The Decade's Best New Historical Albums," in the field of jazz, none of the Miles Davis re-releases are mentioned.

Given the existence of a longstanding dismissal by part of the critical establishment of Miles Davis's electric music, perhaps it is no wonder that this music drops off the radar of American poetry in the late 1960s.

For instance, in the following "jazz poetry" anthologies from the 1990s—Feinstein and Komunyakaa's *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991) and *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, *Volume 2* (1996), and Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey's *Moment's Notice* (1993)—despite several poems on/for Miles Davis (by Gregory Corso, Quincy Troupe, et al.), there is only one poem that addresses Miles's electric music, William Ford's "Of Miles Davis:"

> "From *Bitches Brew* and *Live/Evil*
> Still daring all comers to take in
> The African off-beats and squeaks."

Similarly, for example, in those same anthologies, there appears to be only one reference to Wayne Shorter… *viz.*, in Ted Joan's "Jazz Must Be a Woman" (dedicated to "*all the jazzmen that I fail to include"*), a poem in which the names of some 130+ musicians are listed.

(The most mystifying lacuna, not only in the above poem but in all three books as well: no mention of tenor saxophonist Stan Getz… *Blame it on Rio?*)

Even Amiri Baraka, in his memorable open-letter eulogy to Miles, "**When Miles Split!**" (cf. **audio**) makes, to a certain extent, the same point:

> "I know the last few years I heard you and saw you dressed up all purple and shit, it did scare me. All that loud ass rock and roll I wasn't in to most of it, but look brother I heard *Tutu* and *Human Nature* and *D Train.* I heard you one night behind the Apollo for Q, and you was bashin like the you we knew…"

Having heard him, and admired him in an earlier incarnation, why then does American poetry turn a deaf ear and blind eye to Miles "dressed up all purple and shit?"

Is it because, along the lines drawn by Stanley Crouch, American poets and their anthologists see him as having sold out?

Considering the filmed footage of Miles's 1970 band with Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Gary Bartz, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette and percussionist Airto Moreira (which came on stage after Tiny Tim) playing before a crowd of 600,000—at a festival which also included The Who, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix and dozens of other bands—were American poets estranged from what they heard and saw in Miles at the time?

If so, it's a position, a stance toward Miles's music that the Paris exhibit puts into question.

No doubt, the type of high-profile exposure represented by the Isle of Wight concert seems a long way from the quasi-marginal jazz-club circuit, in which poets might identify with the art of jazz musicians, and entertain similar, alternative notions of "success" and "fame."

It is not difficult to see in the spectacle of Miles's electric bands a self-compromising bid for wealth and celebrity akin to that of rock stars; but one of the virtues of this museum show (clearly a labor of love for its curator, **Vincent Bessières**, and his associates) is the opportunity it offers for a closer look, a closer reading into music that is literally, poetically "electric," still.

From my perspective, beginning with "Stuff" on *Miles in the Sky* (1968) and ending with *Pangaea* (live, 1975), Miles has drawn a visionary map of an American transition from the analog to the digital like no one else in music or poetry.

After the initial projection hall, the visitor's path on the lower floor (*"Miles Électrique"*) leads to a second, darker room, which presents itself as a figure "8," drawn around two *sourdines* dedicated to *Bitches Brew* (orange) and *On The Corner* (violet), respectively.

Immediately on the left, outside the first *sourdine,* there are large reproductions of the cover art by Mati Klarwein (*Bitches Brew, Live / Evil)* and Corky McCoy (*On The Corner*, *Big Fun, In Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall),* which function as visual cues to a larger structural breakdown into two parts, described in the accompanying catalogue under the rubrics "Rock" and "Funk."

Immediately on the right, behind a glass wall, are displayed items that suggest a certain connection with "Rock:" an electric piano, psychedelic posters from the Fillmore East and Fillmore West (e.g. a poster for a double bill with the Grateful Dead), album covers from live recordings at both venues, the cover of *Miles in the Sky*, in which the unforgettable electric sound of the Fender Rhodes first reverberates (and which, like parts of *Filles Kilimanjaro*, is from the era of the "Second Quintet"), a record industry "best seller report," a cover issue of *Rolling Stone,* etc.; further on, along the same wall, and presumably also under the rubric "Rock," is a rather elaborate display, which includes a punching bag, dedicated to boxer Jack Johnson and to the documentary film for which Miles Davis composed the soundtrack.

The display on the opposite wall—which contains a synthesizer, Gibson guitars, a wah-wah pedal and a Yamaha amplifier, and is devoted to the last "live" recordings of the 1970s (i.e. *Olympia, 11 Juillet 1973*, issued under a French label; *Dark Magus,* recorded in New York in 1974; *Agharta* and *Pangaea,* recorded on the afternoon and evening of the same day in Osaka, Japan, in 1975)—traces the evolution of the music under the continued rubric of "Funk."

However reductionist this twofold presentation may seem, it is complicated by the "figure-8" visitor's path ("*sens de la visite*") that jams a simple linear approach (moreover, both entrances to the *sourdines* are on the left)—so that there is no systematic approach to the material on display.

The split circuit does justice to a body of work that is more complex than generally assumed.

Part of what the show is responding to is the gap between the music on the studio albums—*In A Silent Way, Bitches Brew, Live / Evil, Jack Johnson,*

On The Corner, Big Fun (also, the unreleased material from that same period later released during the years of Miles's "silence": *Water Babies*, *Circle in the Round*, *Directions*)—and the music as "deconstructed" in the boxed sets of the past few years.

In the early 1970s, not only was the music from different sessions—different bands recorded at different times—delayed and/or recombined for market release (e.g. the album *Big Fun* contains material from both the *Jack Johnson* and *On The Corner* sessions), but what has since come to light is the extent to which—in music that was drawing on sources as heterogeneous as Sly Stone, Stockhausen and Indian tradition, and in which a process-based group dynamic pursued the ongoing exploration of tonal color, "code phrases" and rhythmic shifts—post-production editing, overdubbing and splicing of assorted fragmentary segments were also significant factors contributing to the newness of the sound.

Using techniques similar to those of film editing or *musique concrète*, or what would later become the DJ or mix-master, the record producer is a player, an improviser, in the sonic texts of Miles's "electric" jazz.

Both *sourdines*, then, give a sense of the multiple lines of force contributing to the music's increasingly rhizomorphic nature: in the *sourdine* for *Bitches Brew,* on display are Miles's trumpet, a Columbia "session data sheet" and the sheet music to the belatedly released tune "Guinnevere," while the track "Spanish Key" (re-)plays; in the *sourdine* for *On The Corner* (an album/ boxed set which also has the word "Off" on its back/ inside cover—as in *(Off) On the Corner*—to indicate the stop-and-go musical dynamic that Miles's band was exploring at the time), album covers from related sessions line the walls (*Big Fun, Get Up With It)*, along with more sheet music and Teo Macero's production notes, as the tracks "On The Corner," "Ife," "Black Satin" and "Great Expectations" are playing.

Certainly, historical and biographical accounts and assessments of this controversial phase of Miles's music have multiplied over the years since his death; the exhibit retraces the political and cultural turmoil of the era, the influence of the women in his life at this stage, the influence of musicians such as James Brown and Jimi Hendrix (from whose "The Wind Cries Mary" the opening chords of "Mademoiselle Mabry" are taken), the dissemination of his band members across the new field of *fusion music* (Lifetime, Herbie Hancock's various bands, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Weather Report, Return to Forever… a phenomenon not unlike Led Zeppelin's ur-status in the field of *heavy metal*), and of course the ubiquitous presence and influence of drugs.

What seems to me too easily overlooked by jazz critics is the extent to which the energy and ground-breaking uniqueness of this electric phase of the music is the result of an underlying collaboration with guitarist John McLaughlin, who figures in every album from *In a Silent Way* to *On The Corner,* and most significantly in conjunction with drummer Jack DeJohnette (who replaced Williams after *In A Silent Way* in 1969).

While McLaughlin's contribution to *In A Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* is relatively restrained, he emerges as a strong soloist in *Live / Evil* (which is also the first album in which Miles plays an electric trumpet), notably on the track *"*Inamorata and Narration," which includes a poem, *viz.* Conrad Robert's "Narration," which is the first and only poem in the Miles Davis corpus… or at least until the appearance of rapper Easy Mo Bee in Miles's last unfinished (projected "double") album, *Doo-Bop*.

What McLaughlin represents is the introduction of the electric guitar as a powerful presence in Miles's band, with a sonic charge to match the full resonance of the drums (Miles: "No drummer, no band")—a sort of Promethean stealing of fire from Rock and Roll in the service of a *lyre* less "lyrical" and more rhapsodic in scope and intention than before, and whose social and cultural ambitions are bigger… more sweeping, "epic."

Admittedly, the combination of an electric keyboard and guitar is already part of the existing jazz tradition of the so-called "Hammond B-3 trio," as in Jimmy Smith's work with Wes Montgomery and Kenny Burrell; nor is McLaughlin the first guitarist that Miles brings in: Joe Beck, John Pizarelli and George Benson all recorded as part of the "Second Quintet"'s change in timbral palette after *Nefertiti*…

But what emerges, for this listener at least—in the progression from *In A Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* to the high art evident in, say, the *Jack Johnson* sessions ("Go Ahead John") or the *On the Corner* sessions ("One The Corner [Unedited Master]")—is the driving force of a collaboration with power guitarist McLaughlin, a collaboration as distinctive as the ones with Gil Evans, Coltrane, Hancock-Shorter or Teo Macero, all of whom in some measure remain present in spirit, if not in person, throughout these recordings.

Given that a picture of Coltrane was the only item hanging on the walls of Miles's living room in his home at 312 W. 77th, it might serve as confirmation that, in the overtones of a controversial album like *Bitches Brew,* echoes can be heard of the same far-reaching, epic aspirations that animate Coltrane's *Ascension* (1965)*;* or that in the interplay between McLaughlin and DeJohnette can be gleaned the spiritual intensity of Coltrane's duets with Elvin Jones or Rashied Ali; or that in the mythic sweep and visionary landscapes evoked by the live recordings of the final

(pre-retirement, pre-"silence") band, say, in *Dark Magus* or *Pangaea*—where McLaughlin is replaced by two, if not three guitarists (Lucas, Cosey, Gaumont), over a "funk" rhythm section (Henderson, Foster) supplemented with congas, water drum, rhythm box and percussion (Mtume)—the soul-searching energies of Coltrane and Pharaoh Sanders are momentarily rekindled, as if in the afterglow of *Kulu Sé Mama* (1965) or *Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* (1966).

The last time I heard Miles "live**"** during this same, final phase after *On The Corner*, was at the *Palais des Sports* in Paris, c. 1974, where the Russian Circus was also scheduled to appear—and the image that sticks with me is of Miles playing wah-wah trumpet "solo" to the sound of congas (with the rest of the band temporarily "Off"), while lions roared in the background… as if Coltrane's *Leo* were being channeled from another world.

The most striking feature of the entire exhibit's topography is the dark narrow passageway—entitled "*Silence, Solitude, Requiem"*—which, like a sort of birth canal, serves to illustrate Miles's crash… and his subsequent reemergence into the realm of "*Star People."*

In effect, by the turn of 1974-75, a few years after the passing of Coltrane and Albert Ayler, the forces driving the "New Wave"— for example, as they had once been brought to the fore on the *Impulse!* label (e.g. Sonny Rollins's *East Broadway Rundown* (with Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, from Coltrane's rhythm section), Archie Shepp's *The Magic of Ju-Ju,* Pharoah Sanders's *Karma*)—were dissipating.

(One notable exception to the downturn in the field of experimental jazz is Ornette Coleman, who took his cue from Miles and "went electric" with *Dancing in Your Head* (1975)… and whose music is going strong as ever, as anyone who has heard him in concert recently can affirm.)

But, paradoxically, despite "appearances," despite his commercial success and high visibility at the time—in fact, over and above that visibility—Miles was one of few still in the fight after thirty years, still out there pushing the sonic envelope, still on the edge of "jazz" taking risks…

The exhibit's dying-into-rebirth passageway—lined with a few letters, manuscripts and production notes (including an intriguing note from Macero regarding the unrealized project "The World and the Light"), and in which Miles's haunting 1974 requiem for Duke Ellington, "He Loved Him Madly," from the double album *Get Up With It*, is being replayed (with Miles's trumpet and Dave Liebman's alto flute set against the

background of three electric guitars and percussion)—re-inscribes in the story of Miles's music the pain and suffering that his art had to overcome.

As a heroin addict (like Bird, like Trane), Miles had crashed and come back already once in the early 1950s, before signing on with Columbia; but throughout his life he had been plagued by a variety of illnesses and accidents—arthritis of the hip (and multiple operations), sickle-cell anemia, diabetes, inflammation of the joints, bleeding ulcers, pneumonia, recurring nodules in the throat, partial stroke, paralysis of the hand, depression, and broken bones (ankle/leg) on two occasions (including a car accident), not to mention head injuries sustained from a 1959 beating by police—the accumulated ill-effects of which were compounded in the 1970s by the increasing use of pain killers, cocaine and alcohol (again, not unlike late Coltrane).

Going through the darkness of the "*Silence, Solitude, Requiem*" passage-way, however, it seemed obvious to me that the period of self-crisis and musical silence into which Miles fell for more than five years represents not simply the prelude to a phoenix-like rebirth of his creative energies, but even more importantly, the paradigmatic passage into an historical moment that is ours, now.

On emerging from the corridor, the visitor enters a loaded space, bristling with audio-visual cues, in which screens, plug-ins and celebrity artifacts proliferate: large, striking photos of Miles by famous photographers (Anton Corbin, Irving Penn, Annie Leibovitz), several plug-ins to Miles's appearances on television and in film—*Saturday Night Live* (1981, performing "Jean Pierre"), *The Today Show* (in an amusing interview with Bryant Gumbel), *The Arsenio Hall Show*, *Night Music* (interviewed by David Sanborn), Japanese television commercials for Honda scooters and Aquavit, appearances on *Miami Vice* and *Crime Story*, and in the films *Dingo* and *Scrooged*—as well as displays about his autobiography with Quincy Troupe, his participation in the Sun City anti-apartheid concert, his role as a fashion icon ("*Miles Iconique*"), a wall devoted to his paintings (one of which appears on his album *Amandla*), a Gold Record of *Tutu*, and an MTV clip of rapper Easy Mo Bee from the album *Doo-Bop*—all centered around a plexiglass enclosure featuring a variety of musical instruments: a trumpet, a synthesizer, a fretless bass, a rhythm machine…

What is manifestly on display here is the world of 1980's "post-modern-ism"—during the so-called Reagan Revolution, which oversaw the rise of a conservative backlash in the U.S., unfolding in tandem with the emergence of digital technology and culture: the personal computer, the Internet, word processing, video games, the CD, MTV, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Prince, et al..

Although the intervening years since Miles's death have seen the occurrence of 9/11 and the Obama election, the impression remains that the world as represented in this exhibit's final "*Star People*" room is pretty much the same as the one outside the museum—a digitalized, "globalized" world, marked among other things, for example, by an American state machine engaged in the deregulation of the corporate sector and an American war machine committed to securing an overseas energy supply.

As a jazz fan who since *E.S.P.* has bought just about every new Miles Davis album as it was issued, I realize that, ironically, my copies of the new, well-promoted studio recordings from Miles's technologically most sophisticated period—*The Man With the Horn* (1981), *Star People* (1983), *Decoy* (1984), *You're under Arrest* (1985) with Columbia Records, and *Tutu* (1986) and *Amandla* (1989) with Warner Brothers—are either on vinyl or tape (and thus not on my iPod)…

The "We Want Miles" exhibit certainly compels a reexamination of the last phase in Miles's music: all the albums are displayed (*Aura,* the orchestral work with Palle Mikkelborg, is the object of a plug-in, as is the live recording *We Want Miles* [1982, named in reprise of a certain post-retirement rallying cry]—whose song "Jean Pierre," based on the French lullaby "*Do-do, l'enfant do*" [which I remember well from my childhood], was something of an anthem in these years—and the later recordings with Quincy Jones, both live and in studio, as well as the film soundtracks from *Dingo, Siesta* and the very nice, often overlooked recording with John Lee Hooker from the soundtrack to Dennis Hopper's *The Hot Spot*).

The major studio albums of the 1980s' "*Star People"* era sold well, at a time when Miles was something of a superstar playing to packed concert halls, reaching new audiences and accumulating national and international honorific titles (e.g. the Sonning Award for Lifetime Achievement in Music, 1984; Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*, New England Conservatory, 1986; Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, 1990; French Legion of Honor, 1991).

While all of the "big" albums certainly have their moments ("…but look brother I heard *Tutu* and *Human Nature* and *D Train"*), especially in the context of the larger heterogeneity within which they operate, and continue to bring new energies and influences into play (Chicago "smooth funk," the music of Prince, Cyndi Lauper's "Time after Time," rap music), the impression nonetheless lingers that their formats—which eschew extended solo or group improvisation in favor of shorter, tune-based tracks—are increasingly dictated by larger cultural and economic forces, which are directing the music toward airplay on FM "smooth jazz" radio, on one hand, and toward high "production value" concerts, on the other;

even in this respect, with the release of expensive-to-make albums like *Tutu* and *Amandla*, the indication is that the freer, more improvisational live performances are on the wan, and are becoming more like the highly arranged, synthesizer-based studio recordings.

The final room of the exhibit is therefore doubly interesting.

It shows on a large screen the film of the reunion concert "Miles and Friends"—held in La Villette itself, at the very site of the *Musée de la Musique.*

This is the last recorded music of Miles Davis, who died a little over two months later, as construction was being arranged for the new *Musée* and *Cité de la Musique.*

In the roster of musicians invited to perform at this concert, all phases of Miles's career are represented, especially the first electric period (which of course overlaps with the "Second Quintet"): Jackie McLean, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, John McLaughlin, Joe Zawinul, Steve Grossman, Al Foster, Bill Evans (saxophone), Kenny Garrett, John Scofield, etc.

However much the concert at La Villette may represent the will to recapitulate a career—let us say, in a bid to step back in order to better jump forward, given a concurrent project involving hip-hop and rap—it remains nonetheless indissociable from Miles's death, which occurred in a fit of anger.

Regarding Miles's death, the liner notes to *Doo-Bop* read as follows: "Then, in September 1991, Miles went in the hospital. 'For a tune-up,' he said, just routine, nothing major. 'I'll be right back.'"

Jim Merod, quoting Miles Davis's biographer Ian Carr, explains further: "In September 1991, Davis checked himself into St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica in order to relieve lingering bronchial pneumonia. Doctors wanted to give him oxygen through a tube, directly into his lungs. 'Davis did not want to do that. The doctors insisted and Miles went purple with anger, had a massive stroke, and went into a coma… He had so much brain damage from the clotting that they couldn't bring him back to life… It was a tragic irony that Miles Davis was killed prematurely by his own anger.'"

Merod goes on to consider the "question of Miles Davis" in terms of a deconstructive double-bind that, in racial terms, inverts "the sycophancy

of white identity" (a phrase he borrows from Toni Morrison); along these lines, perhaps the intrusion of a tube into Miles's lungs recalled for him the intrusiveness of a record industry, and of the socio-political machinery it represents, whose impositions he resisted/surpassed through his music.

In any case, there is a weird irony in the title of the first track of the La Villette recording: "Penetration…"

However one chooses to address the question of Miles Davis's life and death, the underground exhibit space at the *Musée de la Musique* configures his end-term, death-inducing anger as that *away from which* the visitor must necessarily turn, or as that which must *be taken along*, on the way out of the exhibit—the way out, here, is the way in—specifically, as one reenters the passageway where the dark night of the soul again functions as rebirth into the light of the world.

It is in this "fold"—by which a second, final phase of electric music, delimited by self-crisis and silence, on one hand, and death in a fit of rage, on the other, falls back and projects itself onto an initial, breakthough phase of electric, "epic" energy—that the final "Miles and Friends" concert replays, re-presents a present moment in Miles's music.

In the stratiform overlay of two electric periods, as expressed in the final "reunion" concert and experienced through the passage (again) through an "exit" and reemergence, what comes to life—as if at the heart of a rhizome… in the soil of illness, madness, rage and death—is the sound of jazz always already riffing on the message of *Live / Evil'*s "Narration": *"I love tomorrow."*

To exit the underground space that is Part Two, and revisit the first floor, Part One, is yet the same "fold" projected back onto a still larger body of work, as reassembled in the monumental *Complete Columbia Recordings* (on sale in the lobby).

Miles's last, unfinished project with rapper Easy Mo Bee and others, insofar as it marks a turn toward the spoken word, invites some closing comments on poetry, music and jazz.

For many poets and writers, Albert Ayler may have a point when he advances the proposition that "music is the healing force of the universe."

The years of Miles's "silence," 1975-1981, generally coincide with a period when American poetry redefined itself in the aftermath of the "New

American Poetry"'s dissemination, re-launching along pathways that by and large have stayed in place ever since.

For all the "balkanization" of the current American poetry scene and the proliferation not only of poetry and poets, but also Departments of Creative Writing, the lines of force, the hierarchies, the territories and "intensities" remain governed by the same players and institutions, in an increasingly careerist climate, where poetry, like accounting, say (since historically writing begins therewith), is assumed to be a safe and secure path to professional (professorial) identity within a larger socio-political network: it is a landscape similar to the one in which the restless standstill of Miles's late work is situated.

Contemplating much the same landscape, a poet recently pointed out that the Berkeley Poetry Conference of 1965—which featured among its participants Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, Joanne Kyger, John Wieners and Ed Dorn (filling in for Amiri Baraka)—concluded the day before the July 25th Newport Folk Festival at which Bob Dylan "went electric," subsequently causing as much controversy in folk-music circles as Miles Davis did some four years later on the jazz scene.

Dylan is a figure whose brilliant trajectory recalls that of Miles in several respects—not only did both make the controversial move to an electric sound, but both were major recording stars for Columbia Records; indeed, the double-album format of *Blonde on Blonde* was the template for *Bitches Brew* and *Live / Evil;* Dylan was also the object of a recent museum exhibit (at the Morgan Library in New York).

If Miles Davis stole the fire of the *lyre* from Rock and Roll in a bid to follow through on a larger, mythic, *legendary* vision (be it urban legend or primeval legend), Dylan too, at Newport, stole the Promethean fire of the *lyre* as if from lyric poetry itself.

And the poets at the Berkeley conference shared the same will to power as both Bob Dylan and Miles Davis—in their visionary push for Art in the world, "a nation of nothing but poetry."

In this sense, poetry after the "New American Poetry" is also poetry after Electric Dylan.

And in a world after Miles, in which marginal experiments in jazz still push at the limits—where sonic texts (like the remix of "Miles" in *Panthalalassa* or Sander's *With A Heartbeat)* meet trip-hop, acid jazz, drum n bass and other mutant forms in the techno–ambient matrix, poetry after Electric Dylan is also poetry after Miles.

So what can poetry be after Miles?

Contemplating the music contained in the newly released 70-CD boxed set of Miles Davis's 30-year career at Columbia (from *Miles Ahead* to *Aura*)—a rhizomatic Magic Box that offers multiple access to an immense and beautiful field of Energy (Olson: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it… to, all the way over to, the reader")—I fall mute before Miles's music, and recall what Beckett has to say (in his essay, *Proust*) on the subject of death: "Whatever opinion we may be pleased to hold… we may be sure that it is meaningless and valueless."

Having expressed that last thought, I have this penultimate thought ("*Le penultième est mort"* (Mallarmé, in *Le Démon de l'analogie*)): that the music of Miles Davis's first electric period (say, from the *Jack Johnson* and *On the Corner* sessions to *Dark Magus* and after) represents a collaborative accomplishment, in our time, not unlike the pyramids of Giza in the Bronze Age… and that the music of the "First Quintet" and "Second Quintet," in the present age, is something like the art of Chauvet and Lascaux during the Pleistocene.