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SUPERBOSSES

How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent

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MILES DAVIS

Narrative by Sydney Finkelstein

Based on research for
SUPERBOSSES: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent

http://www.superbosses.com

Introduction

“I was put here to play music, and interpret music...I might do a lot of things, but the main thing that I love, that comes before everything, even breathing, is music.” --Miles Davis

A Harlem club, the clinking of glasses, the twinkling overhead lights, a smoky haze...the musicians on stage begin to warm up and tune their instruments...the soft din of brushes on a snare drum signals the start of a performance...with the anticipation of what’s to come, the crowd quiets and the lights dim overhead, but intensify on stage. The music starts and out of the corner of the stage, Miles Davis emerges, almost lurking on the side, slowly moving towards a more visible spot. Seemingly oblivious to the crowd, Miles plays to his band members, turning his trumpet and directing muted melodies occasionally towards the sax or bassist...his piercing solos howling over the ebb and flow of the music...

Despite the many conflicting forces at work throughout his life, Miles Davis always remained a true authentic, firm in his dedication to music. Despite his at times contradictory behavior, Davis always approached music with the same zeal and purity, never satisfied and always seeking perfection. He also established himself as a constant forerunner, a man who became the emblem of innovation in jazz. His music and the plethora of protégés he spawned represent a constant cycle of reinvention, varying styles and periods, and among myriad other accolades, the greatest jazz album of all time, Kind of Blue. Davis was arguably responsible for the creation of cool jazz, hardbop, modal jazz, jazz fusion, jazz-funk, and jazz-rock, yet was able to transcend musical genres such as funk, rock, and blues to create entirely unique sounds for

1 This narrative is a working summary of source material, prepared by Sydney Finkelstein, as background for his book, SUPERBOSSES. http://www.superbosses.com © Sydney Finkelstein, 2016.

which he remains legendary. One of the most prolific generators of jazz talent, Davis selected dozens of musicians over the years to play with his bands, magically shaping them into the who’s who of jazz superstars today. Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Tony Williams, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, John McLaughlin, and Julian “Cannonball” Adderley are among the many great protégés who emerged from under Davis’ tutelage.

A recipient of numerous awards throughout his life, Davis was selected by *Down Beat* for the Reader’s Poll Best Trumpet Player three times in 1955, 1957, and 1961, and in 1962 inducted into the *Down Beat* Jazz Hall of Fame. He received eight Grammy Awards, a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, three Grammy Hall of Fame Awards, an honorary degree from the New England Conservatory, and months before his death in 1991 was awarded France’s Legion of Honor. Several protégés of Davis, including “Cannonball” Adderley, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans, Wayne Shorter, and Joe Zawinul were also inducted into *Down Beat’s* Jazz Hall of Fame. Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Chick Corea are examples of Davis protégés who emulate their mentor’s impressive award list with twelve, nine, and fourteen Grammy Awards to date, respectively. Corea has been nominated for a staggering forty-five Grammy Awards to date.

“Even when he was first starting out, Miles’ sound and style got your attention immediately, because you knew whatever he played, it was going to be unusual. His music was always unusual because that’s the way his mind worked—unusually. Miles Davis was always unusual. He didn’t get that way just after he became famous—he was special from the beginning.”—Quincy Troupe, poet, author, and friend of Davis

**Childhood**

“...

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conduct stifled and eventually strangled creative imagination and expression.”

4-- Quincy Troupe

“The very first thing I remember in my early childhood is a flame, a blue flame jumping off a gas stove somebody lit...I saw that flame and felt that hotness of it close to my face. I felt fear, real fear, for the first time in my life. But I remember it also like some kind of adventure, some kind of weird joy, too...The fear I had was almost like an invitation, a challenge to go forward into something I knew nothing about. That’s where I think my personal philosophy of life and my commitment to everything I believe in started, with that moment.” 5 –Miles Davis

Miles Dewey Davis III was born just outside of St. Louis on May 26, 1926 in Alton, Illinois. Growing up in East St. Louis in an affluent black family, Davis was the son of dentist Dr. Miles Dewey Davis II and Cleota Henry Davis. According to the Davis’ father and grandfather, the Davis men were products of a strong tradition of educated, successful, and musical black men. His grandfather was a successful bookkeeper who instilled the value of careful money management in his son and grandson. According to Davis in his autobiography, his father skipped high school and went straight to college, eventually becoming one of three black men to graduate from Northwestern University’s College of Dentistry. As a child, young Miles was told that his Davis ancestors were classical musicians that played for plantation slave owners. Likewise on his mother’s side, musical talent was present. Cleota Davis was also the product of a well-to-do family, daughter of an organ teacher, herself an accomplished violinist and pianist.6

Davis attributes his early interest in music to a radio program called “Harlem Rhythms.” He recalls frequently being late for school, as he dawdled in the mornings in order to listen to the lineup of great black bands of the era. “It had all them great black bands on there and I remember being fascinated by hearing the records of Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Lunceford, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington…”7 He also recalls early musical memories of his parents’ native Arkansas,

“When I was visiting my grandfather, especially at the Saturday night church...I guess I was about six or seven. We’d be walking on these dark country roads at night and all of a sudden this music would seem to come out of nowhere, out of them spooky-looking trees that everybody said ghosts lived in...But I think that

4 Troupe, Quincy, Miles and Me, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 45.
kind of stuff stayed with me...that kind of sound in music, that blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing, that southern, Midwestern, rural sound and rhythm. I think it started getting into my blood on them spook-filled Arkansas back-roads after dark when the owls came out hooting. So when I started taking music lessons I might have already had some idea of what I wanted my music to sound like."  

By the age of ten, Davis had received his first trumpet as a gift from his father’s best friend and neighbor, Dr. John Eubanks, also known as Uncle Johnny. Davis recalls holding talent shows with his brother Vernon and sister Dorothy, trying to play the trumpet while his brother danced and sister played the piano. He also remembers being the judge of their shows—perhaps the first sign that he would grow up to be one of the greatest in his field at selecting and arranging musical talent. By the age of twelve, Davis acknowledges that music had become his number one priority. Friends recall that Davis began spitting rice or peas en route to school, a mouth exercise he learned from his first teacher, Elwood Buchanan. After a short while, no one remembered Davis ever going anywhere without his trumpet, as it had almost become a natural extension of his being. Although he had other interests such as sports, Davis remembers knowing at the time that he wanted to be a musician. In his autobiography, he makes note of how fiercely proud he was at Boy Scout Camp when he was selected to play taps and reveille.

Some of Davis’ early music teachers would go on to have a significant impact. One of his high school instructors who he calls “Gustav “ in his autobiography was the first trumpet in the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra; even in his later years, Davis used a mouthpiece designed by him. Described by Davis as his “first great teacher," Elwood Buchanan was responsible for teaching his pupil to play without vibrato in his tone, which was standard practice at the time, a trademark for which Davis would later be

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10 This exercise replicated the muscle movement of the upper torso required for an act in which exhalation is forced, such as blowing into a wind instrument or blowing out a flame, etc. From http://www.musicschool.com/instrument/?name=Trumpet.
Davis commenced lessons with Buchanan right around junior high school, and his influence was so great that it even caused a rift between Davis and his mother. He describes, “On my thirteenth birthday, my father bought me a new trumpet. My mother wanted me to have a violin, but my father overruled her. This caused a big argument between them, but she soon got over it. But Mr. Buchanan was the reason I got a new trumpet, because he knew how bad I wanted to play.”

Davis continued his studies with Buchanan throughout high school in the Lincoln High School band, reaping the influence of St. Louis’ unique sound. The influence of German immigrants in the St. Louis vicinity gave way to a strong marching band tradition, one that the blacks adopted and stamped with their own creative signature. Known as St. Louis “running style,” it was not unrelated to the sounds of New Orleans, but more controlled and by nature of its heritage, a less emotionally-expressive culture.

In addition to the musical aspects of Davis’ early years and his steadfast dedication to studying trumpet, he encountered other events that would return to haunt him throughout his life. His parents’ rocky relationship and racism were two elements of his childhood that would materialize from time to time, in some form, for the duration of his life. Miles recaps some early memories about his parents’ dysfunctional relationship:

“My mother and father never did get along well. They saw most things through different eyes. They had been at each other’s throats since I was a little kid. The only thing I ever saw that really connected them up was later when I got my bad heroin habit...I remember my mother picking up things and throwing them at my father and saying all kinds of off-the-wall, nasty things to him...I remember one time after an argument my father had to go outside to cool himself out. When he came back my mother wouldn’t open the door and let him back in—he had forgotten his key. He was standing out there screaming for her to open the door, and she wouldn’t...He got so mad with her he punched her right in the mouth through the glass. He knocked a couple of teeth right out of her mouth. They were best apart, but they gave each other grief until they finally got divorced.”

Despite these troubling stories of domestic violence, Davis acknowledges that “None of our parents’ problems seemed to affect the fun that me, my sister, and my brother were having,

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15 Vibrato is defined as a tremulous or pulsating effect produced in an instrument or vocal tone by minute and rapid variations in pitch (from www.dictionary.com). Popularized by swing and big band musicians like Harry James, Davis heeded Buchanan’s advice and later became famous for his clear, clean lines.
17 Troupe, Quincy, Miles and Me, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 5-6.
although looking back I guess it really did. It had to affect us somehow, although I don’t really know how.”

As is frequently the case that children of domestic violence encounter or commit it themselves later in life, Davis had a string of tumultuous romantic relationships and marriages, some of which resulted in violence and even jail time (see Appendix A).

Racism was another issue, more so than domestic violence, that first came up in Davis’ childhood and seemed to be a ubiquitous element throughout his life. In childhood trumpet contests at school, Davis never beat white children whose playing abilities were much inferior to those of Davis. In a 1962 interview, Davis said, “It made me so mad I made up my mind to outdo anybody white on my horn. If I hadn’t met that prejudice, I probably wouldn’t have had as much drive in my work. I’ve thought about that a lot. Prejudice and curiosity have been responsible for what I’ve done in music.”

Davis also acquired a self-awareness regarding racism based on his father’s active and outspoken political and community life. As a wealthy and successful dentist in St. Louis, Miles Davis Jr. had strong opinions regarding race in America, the NAACP, the black position in society, and was fiercely proud of his race. Through his father, a young Miles gained both an early sense of pride in his race, but also witnessed discrimination and racism that would plague him even at the height of his popularity.

**Early NYC years—Beboppin’ towards success, plummet to the nadir**

At the youthful age of seventeen, Davis received his first professional experience playing with Eddie Randle and the Blue Devils. After a mere audition, Davis became a permanent member of the Blue Devils for about a year in 1943 and 1944, calling this “one of the most important steps in [his] career.” For the first time in his life, Davis gained experience writing and arranging music, the ins and outs of band life, and got a taste of life as a performer at the action-packed Rhumboogie Club in St. Louis. In June of 1944 after graduating from high school, Davis had an opportunity to play with Billy Eckstein’s band as they passed through St. Louis for two weeks. This not only solidified Davis’ decision to leave St. Louis for New York City to attend Juilliard, but was the first time he saw jazz greats Charlie “Bird” Parker and Dizzie

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23 According to Davis’ autobiography, he experienced racism in many things such as blatant targeting by police, lack of prompt and proper ambulance service for his ailing father, and injustices at record labels that purportedly pushed white music over black music.
Gillespie, “in his words, ‘the greatest feeling I ever had—with my clothes on.’” Davis continued on to New York City and quickly immersed himself in Harlem’s jazz clubs and Fifty-second Street’s legendary scene, dropping out of Juilliard after one year. He secured a spot in idol Charlie Parker’s band, and found himself under the tutelage of Parker and Gillespie. Davis learned under two schools of teaching, as Parker taught by example and Gillespie was more engaged, using practical demonstrations and tools such as a piano to explain harmonies.

Soon after Davis first recorded original compositions “Milestones” and “Half Nelson” in 1947 at the age of twenty-one, he began to move away from the bebop style that he had grown accustomed to playing alongside Parker in New York. Along with arranger Gil Evans, Davis produced Birth of the Cool in an attempt to move away from more traditional bebop styles and towards a smoother, more harmonic sound. According to Davis, “Birth of the Cool became a collector’s item, I think, out of a reaction to Bird and Dizzy’s music. Bird and Diz played this hip, real fast thing, and if you weren’t a fast listener, you couldn’t catch the humor or the feeling in their music. Their musical sound wasn’t sweet, and it didn’t have the harmonic lines that you could easily hum out on the street with your girlfriend trying to get over with a kiss.” Although Davis attributed this album to “black musical roots” and Duke Ellington’s influence, the album was unconventional in that unlike bebop, it attracted a white audience for the first time. Moreover, this was one of Davis’ first official positions as bandleader, in which he assembled a nonet that included unusual instruments such as the French horn and tuba. The recording of the album took place over the course of two years between 1949 and 1950, and included a cast of rotating musicians (see Appendix B).

It was also around this time that Davis began dealing with his addiction to heroin, one of several addictions Davis would battle throughout his life. In 1949 he traveled to Paris, his first trip outside of the country. It was such a euphoric experience for the young musician musically and culturally, as he fell in love with the city and met icons such as Jean-Paul Sartre and the man to whom he would eventually be compared, Pablo Picasso. He also met and fell deeply in love with bohemian singer Juliette Greco, and was devastated to part from Greco and return to the United States after “the freedom of being in France and being treated like a human being, like someone important.” Moreover, “Paris was where I understood that all white people weren’t the same, that some weren’t prejudiced and others were…I really came to know [this] in Paris.”

Davis acknowledges that this realization was particularly important, as it made him become more aware of current social and political events involving race and “how white people treated black people and [how] it was hard for me to come back to the bullshit white people put a black person through in this country.” Within weeks of his return to the US, Davis fell deeply depressed and completely overtaken by heroin. In his autobiography, Davis tells, “Shooting heroin changed my whole personality from being a nice, quiet, honest, caring person into someone who was the complete opposite. It was the drive to get heroin that made me that way. I’d do anything not to be sick, which meant getting and shooting heroin all the time, all day and all night.” Davis battled this addiction for roughly four years, eventually quitting cold turkey (after more than one attempt) at his father’s ranch in rural Illinois. Although much has been made of Davis’ triumph over heroin, he started to occasionally use cocaine, and prescription drugs and alcohol would invade his life from time to time. Nevertheless, by 1954, Davis was back in control of his life.

Musical chronology, innovations

Rebound to Hardbop

Even though Davis would culminate his time spent playing with Parker and his significant contributions to bebop and cool jazz with a four-year period of depression and drug use, the subsequent few years gave way to a period of tremendous innovation and influence, and it was during this time that Davis first received a reputation for discovering new talent. The recording of Walkin’ in April of 1954 put Davis back on the scene after a nearly four year hiatus, and Davis describes it as the track that “turned my whole life and career around.” Davis describes, “I wanted to take the music back to the fire and improvisation of bebop, that kind of thing that Diz and Bird had started. But also I wanted to take the music forward into a more funky kind of blues, the kind of thing that Horace [Horace Silver played piano for Walkin’] would take us to.” The resulting hardbop genre was a mixture of both the slower sound of cool jazz with a groovier, rhythm and blues feel that wasn’t quite as fast-tempo as bebop.

In 1955, Davis gave a landmark performance at the acclaimed Newport Jazz Festival. The performance was a timely tribute to the recent death of Charlie “Bird” Parker and a chance for Davis to wipe clean his sullied reputation as a junkie. It was also the first performance in

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which Davis gained popularity for what would become a trademark, his use of the Harmon mute. Immediately following his standing ovation, Davis was bombarded with offers for record deals, and eventually forged a relationship with Columbia Records, with whom he would stay for thirty years.  

One of the most well-known examples of Davis’ success in recruiting talent was what would be known as the first great quintet, or the Miles Davis Quintet. Expanding upon hardbop, saxophonist legend John Coltrane, pianist Red Garland, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Philly Joe Jones were fairly unknown when they started out together in 1955, recording their first hit for Columbia, ‘Round About Midnight. But this anonymity would not last. Davis describes both feelings of pure joy in their musical melding, and also his satisfaction in launching arguably one of the greatest saxophonists of all time:

“And faster than I could have imagined, the music that we were playing together was just unbelievable. It was so bad that it used to send chills through me at night, and it did the same thing to the audiences, too…The critic Whitney Balliett said not long after Trane and I were playing together that Coltrane had a ‘dry, unplanned tone that sets Davis off, like a rough mounting for a fine stone.’ But before long, Trane was much more than that. After a while he was a diamond himself, and I knew it, and everybody else who heard him knew it, too.”

Modal Jazz and Gil Evans

Upon the addition of second saxophonist Cannonball Adderley to the group, the new sextet culminated their success in hardbop with the recording of Milestones. Soon after in 1959, over two recording sessions in March and April, the Davis and his then-current sextet of Jimmy Cobb, Cannonball Adderley, John Coltrane, Paul Chambers, Bill Evans, and Wynton Kelley produced what is argued to be the greatest and is the best-selling jazz album of all time, Kind of Blue. As Carlos Santana asks in a DVD released in honor of Kind of Blue’s 50th anniversary, “‘How do you go into the studio with minimum stuff and come out with eternity?’ Former band member and jazz legend Herbie Hancock describes the record, “It’s a cornerstone record not only

for jazz. It’s a cornerstone record for music.”

Ranked #12 on *Rolling Stone* Magazine’s 500 Greatest Albums of All Time, *Kind of Blue* also reached quadruple-platinum status in 2008 from the Recording Industry Association of America.

Davis had been experimenting with a new form of jazz known as “modal” in part on *Milestones*, drawing upon multiple, even somewhat conflicting influences for inspiration.

“I had gotten into the modal thing from watching a performance by the Ballet Africaine from Guinea. I was seeing Frances Taylor [former wife] again; she was living in New York now and dancing in a show...Anyway, we went to this performance...and it just [exp.] me up what they was doing, the steps and all them flying leaps and shit...man, that was some powerful stuff. It was beautiful. And their rhythm! The rhythm of the dancers was something...they would do rhythms like 5/4 and 6/8 and 4/4, and the rhythm would be changing and popping...I loved what they were doing. I didn’t want to copy that, but I got a concept from it.”

Unlike music based on traditional chord structures, modal music is based on scales and allowed Davis a new sense of freedom he did not have in the harmony-heavy bebop. *Kind of Blue* was also revolutionary in the sense that Davis did not actually write out music for *Kind of Blue*, but rather “brought in sketches for what everybody was supposed to play because I wanted a lot of spontaneity in the playing, just like I thought was in the interplay between those dancers and those drummers and that finger piano player with the Ballet Africaine.”

Davis also relied on childhood memories to influence *Kind of Blue*:

“*Kind of Blue* also came out of the modal thing I started on *Milestones*. This time I added some other kind of sound I remembered from being back in Arkansas, when we were walking home from church and they were playing these bad gospels. So that kind of feeling came back to me and I started remembering what that music sounded like and felt like. That feeling is what I was trying to get close to. That feeling had got in my creative blood, my imagination, and I had forgotten it was there. I wrote this blues that tried to

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41 Mulderry, Nell, Director, *Celebrating a Masterpiece: Kind of Blue*, 2008.
get back to that feeling I had when I was six years old, walking with my cousin along that dark Arkansas road. So I wrote about five bars of that and I recorded it and added a kind of running sound into the mix, because that was the only way I could get in the sound of the finger piano. But you write something and then guys play off it and take it someplace else through their creativity and imagination, and you just miss where you thought you wanted to go. I was trying to do one thing and ended up doing something else."

It is argued that both the commercial and artistic success of *Kind of Blue* may be attributed solely to Davis’ ability to select talent. In choosing “brilliant soloists” and challenging them to improvise and focus on melody, space, and possibility, the end result ranges from pieces both romantic and haunting, tender and bittersweet.  

Parallel to working with the quintet and *Kind of Blue*, Davis worked for several years on the side with composer Gil Evans. The duo experimented with various outside musical influences, and produced dynamic records such as *Porgy and Bess*, a compilation of pieces from Gershwin’s musical, *Miles Ahead, Quiet Nights*, and *Sketches of Spain*. The latter album is another example of Davis’ ongoing experimentation with somewhat unusual musical influences, and sounds previously unheard of in the jazz world. Davis drew upon an Andalusian song influence for one particular track on the record:

“The ‘Saeta’ was an Andalusian song known as the arrow of song, and it was one of the oldest religious types of music in Andalusia. It is a song usually sung alone, without any kind of accompaniment, during the Holy Week religious ceremonies in Seville, and tells about the Passion of Christ...the singer, a woman...sings this song. I was supposed to be her voice on trumpet...My voice had to be both joyous and sad in this song, and that was very hard, too."

Much like Davis’ earlier success with Parker in New York City, the few years post 1959 gave way to another low period in Davis’ life. Both saxophonists, Adderley and Coltrane, left the group soon after the recordings of *Kind of Blue*, and in August of 1959, Davis was attacked and arrested by police for merely standing (and not moving when asked) in front of the Birdland Club in New York, where he was headlining. 

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Although the arrest was later deemed illegal and charges were dropped, photos of Davis bloodied and in custody were in all the major New York newspapers and Davis claims the incident “changed me forever, made me much more bitter and cynical than I might have been.”

In 1961, he was diagnosed with painful sickle-cell anemia, followed by the death of his father in 1962, then his mother in 1964, and finally the dissolution of his marriage to dancer Frances Taylor. It wasn’t until 1964 that things began, once again, to turn around for Miles Davis.

**Second Great Quintet**

Parallel with the musical and political changes of 1964 such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix, Davis’ newly assembled “Second Great Quintet” with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams overlapped great jazz traditions of the past and new musical frontiers of the future. Unique in that all band members shared writing responsibilities, the Quintet also brought jazz improvisation to a breakthrough level. Few elements were defined for the first time: only the melody, mood, and scale, steering away from the traditional chord progressions. Although the group performed earlier Davis works in their initial live performances, there was a great discrepancy in their studio recordings such as *E.S.P.*, *Miles Smiles*, *Sorcerer*, and *Nefertiti*. In their studio work, the group’s interplay and collaboration was more apparent. The last two albums recorded with the Quintet, *Miles in the Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro* featured electric guitar and, for the first time in Davis’ music, electric keyboard. The use of both instruments was significant in that it pinpointed the entrance of the 1960s counterculture into his music, and was only the start of what would be a lengthy involvement with other parallel musical genres.

**Electric Miles and Beyond**

From 1968 to 1975 is known as Davis’ Electric Period, in which he combined jazz, fusion, and funk. Rotating through musical talent such as Jack DeJohnette, Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, David Liebman, Dave Holland, Joe Zawinul, and John McLaughlin, albums like *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, *Water Babies*, and *On the Corner* raised the eyebrows of many a critic—much to the indifference of Davis. “When I started changing so fast like that, a lot of critics started putting me down because they didn’t understand what I was doing. But critics never did mean much to me, so I just kept on doing what I had been doing, trying to grow as a
musician.” Davis apparently passed on this mindset to protégés like Wayne Shorter: “‘There’s nothing magical about the electric period. There’s nothing mysterious about how we put things together. There was just more courage involved. The courage to say: ‘To hell with the critics.’”

The Electric Period was not only transformative in the musical sense, but personally for Davis as well. In a few short years, he had several marriages, divorces, and serious relationships (see Appendix A); he briefly became a vegetarian and stopped all drug and alcohol use completely; he transformed his own personal sense of style, straying away from his traditional Brooks Brothers look and wearing traditional African garb in support of “the black consciousness movement;” and finally, in 1969, Davis was the victim of a bizarre shooting incident while sitting in his Ferrari—the motive still unclear. Despite the challenges and rapid change to Davis’ personal life, his music demonstrated influences such as Sly and the Family Stone, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, and Muddy Waters, and even some avant-garde sounds, ultimately creating, once again, a new sound—jazz-rock. For the first time, Davis was able to reach a younger, black audience that had until then, seemed to escape him.

In 1975, a brief hiatus turned into a five-year period of complete hibernation for Davis, who was plagued by a variety of health issues. Davis stopped recording and performing altogether. Arthritis, sickle-cell anemia, hip and knee problems, a diabetes diagnosis, and almost thirty years of on-again off-again drug use had worn him out. His return to music still remained was under the shadow of an excessive period of drug and sex abuse, and Davis suffered a stroke in 1982, followed by a hip operation and pneumonia in 1983. The last years of Davis’ life included collaborations with Prince and other pop influences, work with synthesizers, the smash album Tutu, and even a small role in Scrooged with Bill Murray. Davis continued touring right up until his death in 1991.

Spawner of talent

“Miles was brilliant as a bandleader. He allowed the musicians to play just as they are and deal with the music from their own choices and their own

judgments. Therefore the music that came out was very strong.”

Chick Corea, Grammy award-winning pianist

**Ability to select talent**

Even in the very early stages of Davis’ career, it is clear that this mind-boggling musician had a knack for both selecting and cultivating awesome jazz talent. As mentioned earlier, the Miles Davis Quintet was the first example of a group entirely assembled by Davis. After a series of recordings with a rotating cast of musicians, Davis had booked performances intending to use the same musicians, including Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland, and Paul Chambers. Having lost his original saxophonist to a drug rehab program, Davis was desperate to find a replacement.

“And then Philly Joe brought up John Coltrane. I already knew Trane from the Audubon gig we had done together several years back. But that night Sonny [Rollins] had just blown him away. So when Philly told me who he was bringing, I wasn’t excited. But after a few rehearsals—I could hear how Trane had gotten a whole lot better…”

John Coltrane ended up a permanent fixture in the quintet, and like many others trying to collaborate with Davis, he was selected based on his playing ability.

“And I had heard this great little seventeen-year-old drummer who was working with Jackie McLean names Tony Williams, who just blew my [exp.] mind he was so bad. I wanted him to go to California with me as soon as I heard him…just hearing [him] made me excited all over again. Like I said earlier, trumpet players love to play with great drummers and I could definitely hear right away that this was going to be one of the baddest [exp.] who had ever played a set of drums.”

In the words of former saxophonist Bill Evans, “He had a terrific musical ear. He had an uncanny ability to pick the right kind of style or to pick the right musicians. That was just as much a talent as it was being a trumpet player…[However,] he doesn’t tell you anything about what to play…As far as he was concerned, you are supposed to already know how to play by the time you get to him. He is not here to teach you how to play, he is just there to shape his band, his music, you are just another color on his easel.”

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65 Interview with Bill Evans, Grammy nominated saxophonist, September 22, 2006.
When selecting talent, Davis also sought out musicians who fit in with the vibe of his other players, musically and personality-wise. Herbie Hancock’s audition for the second quintet demonstrates both Davis’ instant musical judgment and ability to determine if his new pianist would fit in with the group.

“I had met Herbie Hancock about a year or so earlier… I asked him to play something for me on my piano, and I saw right away that he could really play. When I needed a new piano player I thought of Herbie first and called him to come over. I was having Tony Williams and Ron Carter over so I wanted to know how he would sound with them.

They all came over and played every day for the next couple of days, and I would listen to them over the intercom system I had hooked up in my music room and all over the house. Man, they sounded too good together. On around the third or fourth day, I came downstairs and joined them and played a few things. Ron and Tony were already in the band. I told Herbie to meet us at the recording studio the next day. We were finishing up Seven Steps to Heaven. Herbie asked me, ‘So does that mean I’m in the group?’ ‘You’re making the record with me, ain’t you?’ I said.”

Saxophonist David Liebman, who played with Davis’ band from 1972-1974, said in an interview that in the early 1970s, the circle of jazz musicians was small, and most lived in the same neighborhoods and communities in New York City. Davis was aware of the talent pool, and most of his protégés started out “living in the same circles.” Davis had a very keen sense of what he calls “real world perception,” meaning that his teacher was intuitive when it came to selecting talent. Moreover, he tells that when Davis heard someone’s playing, he would listen and select band members based not on their level of talent necessarily, but on what they could contribute to his group. Davis had the ability to pick and choose aspects of a musician’s playing based on how it would fit with his overall vision.

**Magnet for talent**

As his career progressed, Davis’ magnetizing effect on musicians was also a mechanism for producing protégés. He explains how he did not seek this role, yet accepted his position as a magnet for talent:

“I was paying the band good, like $100 a night back in 1964, and by the time we broke up it was maybe $150 or $200 a night. I was making more money,

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67 Interview with David Liebman, Grammy nominated saxophonist, April 10, 2009.
68 Interview with David Liebman, Grammy nominated saxophonist, April 10, 2009.
and I was paying more than anybody else in the business. And then they were getting paid well for the record dates, and because they were playing with me their reputations were as big as anybody’s. I’m not bragging, that was just the way things were. You play with me and then you become a leader, because after that, everybody was saying, that’s the only place to go. And that was flattering but it was also something that I didn’t ask for. But I didn’t have problems accepting that role.” 69

David Liebman adds that by the early 1970s, Davis was “already legendary” and that musicians had an understanding that to work with Davis meant you had reached the “top of the pyramid.” 70

As compared with these accounts of his magnetism in the 1960s and 1970s, by 1986 Miles Davis had reached a god-like status in the music world. His friend and co-author of his biography Quincy Troupe recounts a story in another book about the star of when Davis participated in an Amnesty International concert with a who’s who of 1980s pop stars. Troupe remembers witnessing the world’s most popular artists completely in awe of this legend, his magnetizing effect drawing them in.

“[I was there, and I remember how famous rock and pop stars like Madonna, Sting, Bono from U2, Peter Gabriel...all seemed too afraid to say anything to Miles, who sat backstage as if he had drawn a circle around himself and the chair he was seated in...It was as if that imaginary circle had a sign posted that read, ‘Do not enter unless invited.’ So these famous stars hovered somewhere outside of this magic circle...Waiting...Waiting for Miles to notice or acknowledge them. And when he would notice them with a tiny, almost imperceptible nod of his head, they would enter the circle, one by one, and squat or get down on one knee to speak with the master, until with another tiny, almost imperceptible nod of his head, Miles would let them know that the audience was over, and it was time for them to leave, which they did immediately. It was something else to watch the respect with which these celebrities approached Miles and to see the great honor and esteem they held him in. They were star-struck by him and were grateful to be in his presence.” 71

—Quincy Troupe

Whether his magnetizing effect took the shape of a great tool for recruiting talent or later, an awe-inspiring aura for even the most famous celebrities, a former bassist with Davis tells, “There was a tremendous sense of focus coming from him that influenced

70 Interview with David Liebman, Grammy nominated saxophonist, April 10, 2009.
everybody. We were all drawn in by it, it was almost like a vortex. Once you were in its sphere of influence, there was a certain magic that seemed to be happening.”

**Leadership development**

> "I knew that Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams were great musicians, and that they would work as a group, as a musical unit. To have a great band requires sacrifice and compromise from everyone; without it, nothing happens. I thought they could do it and they did. You get the right guys to play the right things at the right time... you got everything you need.” —Miles Davis

If one fact remains clear from the story of Miles Davis, it is that he passed on irreplaceable skill and experience to countless protégés. Davis writes extensively about the positive group dynamic and cooperation aspects of his Second Great Quintet, comprised of the abovementioned musicians. Despite the fact that by this point in his career, Davis was fully established as a leader in both the industry and with his musicians, he still acknowledged the essential roles played by each band member. “If I was the inspiration and wisdom and the link for this band, Tony was the fire, the creative spark; Wayne was the idea person, the conceptualizer of a whole lot of musical ideas we did; and Ron and Herbie were the anchors. I was just the leader who put us all together. Those were all young guys and although they were learning from me, I was learning from them, too...” In addition to the successful musical collaboration of this quintet, there was also a general camaraderie, which lent itself to trust and confidence among members. According to Davis, “One of the first things you’ve got to have in a great band is confidence in the other guys, that they can do whatever it is that has to be done, whatever you say you’re going to play. I had faith in Tony and Herbie and Ron to play whatever we wanted to play, whatever was decided at that moment. That comes from not playing all the time, so the music is fresh. And they liked each other on and off the bandstand, and that always helps a lot.”

In contrast to the harmony on and off the bandstand with the Second Great Quintet, David Liebman recalls a slightly different group dynamic in the early 1970s with his band mates. He compared a well-functioning band to a sports team: forced to improvise, work together, and with the intent that each team member will eventually get

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his “moment in the sun.”

However, Liebman says of his time playing with Davis, some of his fellow musicians were wary of giving Liebman his moment in the sun, as they were extremely focused on the growing Black Power movement and simply couldn’t understand why the proudly black Davis chose a white man for his band. Despite this, Liebman implies that Davis easily looked beyond skin color in order to recruit the best musical talent and achieve the best possible sound.

In acknowledging the value of each individual band member musically and as an individual, Davis went so far as to admit that it was not only his band members learning from him—

“I was learning something new every night with that group. One reason was that Tony Williams was such a progressive drummer. He would listen to a record and memorize the whole record, all the solos, the whole thing. He was the only guy in my band who ever told me, ‘Man, why don’t you practice!’ I was missing notes and shit trying to keep up with his young ass. So he started me to practicing again because I had stopped and I didn’t even know it.”

“I loved that band, man, because if we played a song for a whole year and you heard it at the beginning of the year, you wouldn’t recognize it at the end of the year. When I played with Tony, who is a little genius, I had to react in my playing to what he was playing. And this goes for the whole band. So the way we all played together changed what we were playing each and every night during that time.”

Unlike some superstars in their respective fields, Davis seems to have embraced the fact that his band members pushed him to new limits, as this was merely another driving force in his constant push to evolve and perfect his music. Even in light of the enormous success he was having with the Second Great Quintet, Davis still remained focused on ways to improve and develop his music, “because to be and stay a great musician you’ve got to always be open to what’s new, what’s happening at the moment. You have to be able to absorb it if you’re going to continue to grow and communicate your music.”

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76 Interview with David Liebman, Grammy nominated saxophonist, April 10, 2009.
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“I had learned a lot from Herbie, Tony, Wayne, and Ron and had just about absorbed all the things I had picked up from them in the almost three years we had been together. Now I was starting to think about other ways I could approach the music I wanted to play, because I could feel myself starting to want to change but I didn’t know yet what this change was all about. I knew it had something to do with the guitar voice in my music and I was beginning to get interested in what electrical instrumental voicing could do in my music.”  

In fewer words, “I have to change. It’s like a curse.”  

Throughout his career, Davis passed on a vast array of musical knowledge to protégés. However, Davis was known for teaching by example and not for utilizing a direct and practical textbook approach to teaching music, as was one of his great mentors, Dizzie Gillespie. Despite his solid musical background and extensive knowledge of musical theory in a field where improvisation and playing by ear was common practice, Davis adopted his other mentor Charlie “Bird” Parker’s more hands-off approach, and emphasized the importance of listening and feeling. Former band member Dave Holland remembers his teacher saying, “When you play music, don’t play the idea that’s there, play the next idea. Wait. Wait another beat, or maybe two, and maybe you’ll have something that’s more fresh. Don’t just play from the top of your head, but listen and try to play a little deeper…Don’t play what’s there. Play what’s not there.”  

Davis taught other former band members like Gary Peacock and Adam Holzman not only how to listen to time, space, and music, but how critical this skill was to their success in jazz. As a result, Davis became known for his “less is more” approach and that every single note holds meaning and weight.

Liebman concurs, mentioning that his mentor was a “mysterious, and a man of few words,” and he meant to make his musicians think about his sparsely used comments. As Davis was known for leaving a lot of space between notes and beginning and ending in unusual places within the music, Liebman recalls one remark his teacher made that stuck with him for years. “Finish before you’re done” was something Davis said to Liebman that took the musician years to figure out. Liebman eventually realized that Davis meant that it was not necessary to “finish a phrase with a bow and ribbon…let it hang in the air and someone else in the band might use it for a response.”

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83 Miles Davis to Dave Holland, in Tingen, Paul, Miles Beyond, (New York: Billboard Books, 2001), 14.
85 Interview with David Liebman, Grammy nominated saxophonist, April 10, 2009.
Davis used to insist that protégés be competent in their musical abilities, yet flexible and interpretive to the notes played. It was not up to Davis to transfer emotion and feeling to the notes on the page; musicians had to find this for themselves. Davis recounts an early experience with John Coltrane, “…Trane liked to ask all these questions back then about what he should or shouldn’t play. Man…to me he was a professional musician and I have always wanted whoever played with me to find their own place in the music.” Davis describes other examples of struggling to find the perfect balance between musical proficiency and one’s contributing one’s own level of interpretation and feeling:

“In the beginning, we had the wrong trumpet players because we had those who were classically trained. But that was a problem. We had to tell them not to play exactly like it was on the score. They started looking at us...like we were crazy. They couldn’t improvise their way out of a paper bag.”

“So you have to have a balance on something like Sketches of Spain, between musicians who can read music and play it with no feeling or a little feeling, and some others who could play with real feeling. I think the perfect thing is when some musicians can both read a musical score and feel it. With me, if I read it and play it, it’s not going to have that much feeling in it. What I found I had to do in Sketches of Spain was to read the score a couple of times, listen to it a couple of times more, then play it. It seemed to work out all right, because everyone loved that record.”

Ultimately, “playing with Miles was about being focused, about being open to where the music takes you. His sound focused your attention on him and the music. Sometimes this meant leading and sometimes this meant following. He just had that magic, he had that power, that special gift.”

Conclusion and legacy

“This woman told me she went to visit this old retired bullfighter who raised bulls for the ring. She had told him about this record that had been made by a black American musician, and he didn’t believe that a foreigner, an

American—and especially a black American—could make such a record, since it depended upon knowledge of Spanish culture, including flamenco music. She asked him if she could play the record for him and he said she could. He sat there and listened to it. After it was finished, he rose from his chair and put on his bullfighting equipment and outfit, went out and fought one of his bulls for the first time since he had retired, and killed the bull. When she asked him why he had done it, he said that he had been so moved by the music that he just had to fight the bull. It was hard for me to believe this woman’s story, but she swore that it was true.”

Quincy Troupe remembers all too well when he learned of the death of his good friend Miles on September 28, 1991. From a hotel room in Georgia, the CNN newscast stunned the man who had co-written Davis’ autobiography. But in a way, he acknowledged that his ailing friend must have been ready. Much like Davis had an almost intuition regarding the next hot musical genre, or who of his band members would go on to be successes in their own right, maybe he knew his time had come. “Miles believed in the spirit, in life after death, and the last time I saw him…he was talking about death. Maybe he knew his time was coming, felt it in his body, or maybe his doctors had told him he didn’t have long. Miles talked about how he missed his father, Gil [Evans], and Coltrane. With his raspy voice and knowing chuckle he said that he would see them all soon enough and that he and Gil and Trane would play some great music again, together.” This all came from a man who repeatedly refused to attend funerals, even of his mother and closest friends; Davis even is famous for have saying that “he would rather die before he ‘played that old-time music again,’” referring to constant requests to play his greatest hits. Davis always looked ahead and ironically, the one time he agreed to revisit some of his old classics at the Montreux Jazz Festival in France in 1991, he passed soon thereafter.

Davis left behind him a prolific legacy as one of jazz’s most influential artists. Having not only produced, but collaborated with some of the music industry’s celebrated stars for nearly four decades, one can only wonder what inspirations and driving forces would have continued to evolve and excel the music of Miles Davis, had he not left us at the premature age of sixty-five. What new talent would he have produced and which new superstars would have had the opportunity to join forces with such a master? What new realm would Davis’ music touch? Nevertheless, one can assume that Davis would have continued his role as a spawner of talent, and proudly so. Another tragic loss for the music world, a young John Coltrane quickly rose in the ranks under Davis, and his great teacher only relished in his pupil’s success:

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91 Troupe, Quincy, Miles and Me, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 161.  
92 Troupe, Quincy, Miles and Me, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 159.
“Trane’s music and what he was playing during the last two or three years of his life represented, for many blacks, the fire and passion and rage and anger and rebellion and love that they felt, especially among the young black intellectuals and revolutionaries of that time...Coltrane was their symbol, their pride—their beautiful, black, revolutionary pride. I had been it a few years back, now he was it, and that was cool with me.”

Perhaps Miles Davis did not intend to take on a role as a producer of talent and teacher to so many, but his undeniable push to progress and seek the best musical talent around was merely an inevitable result of his life’s work:

“As a musician and as an artist, I have always wanted to reach as many people as I could through my music. And I have never been ashamed of that. Because I never thought that the music called ‘jazz’ was ever meant to reach just a small group of people, or become a museum thing locked under glass like all other dead things that were once considered artistic. I always thought it should reach as many people as it could, like so-called popular music, and why not? I never was one of those people who thought less was better; the fewer who hear you, the better you are, because what you’re doing is just too complex for a lot of people to understand. A lot of jazz musicians say in public that they feel this way, that they would have to compromise their art to reach a whole lot of people...I always thought that music had no boundaries, no limits to where it could grow and go, no restrictions on its creativity. Good music is good no matter what kind of music it is.”

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