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MILES DAVIS - Blue Moods

MILES DAVIS, trumpet; BRITT WOODMAN, trombone;
CHARLES MINGUS, bass; TEDDY CHARLES, vibes; ELVIN JONES, drums

NATURE BOY
ALONE TOGETHER

THERE'S NO YOU
EASY LIVING

There was a boy . . . somehow strange and enchanted, perhaps . . . but a natural, not a nature boy. This one grew and learned, among other things, not to whistle at the lovely lady of a cigar-smoking citizen of Mississippi. Which made it possible for him to grow enough to read news service reports about what happens to that kind of boy. It made possible, too, some disenchanted wanderings, with horns often not his own; wanderings along a series of personal precipices where nostrils may ache from the sheer agony of breathing.

If there is dignity and artistry in such a boy, he will record such a life with gaunt gestures, or as an annointed conscience, or as the inveterate cynic, or, or . . . there are some few, even, who merely reflect, neither urging nor decrying. Miles, it seems to me, is one of these latter. His the almost fragile, though never effeminate, tracing of a story line which is somewhat above and beyond him, of almost-blown-aside, pensive fragments which are always persuasively coherent.

His are moods, blue ones if we can allow for a programatic spectrum. Not the kind of blue that happens on Mondays those lastNIGHTWASanight, now-it's-five-days-till-Friday kind of blues. More like Sunday blue; nothing to do in the morning, no family dinner, only a movie in the afternoon and a gig at night kind of blues. That's what Miles says to me anyway, says it in particular and at length in the course of this LP, says it, too, in as moving a way as it can be said.

Just about one month before these tracks were cut, Miles had performed at The Newport Jazz Festival. Within the ranks of the professional critics, there was not too much notice taken when he joined the group already on stage. Professional listeners are blase, especially when an artist is as unpredictable as Miles; unpredictable, that is, in terms of the relationship between what he can do and what he will do. And for many of us there is a forgetting that the improvising soloist, with muse on the wing, so to speak, is confronted with so many technical problems, that a statement of cohesion and beauty is an awe-full happening. Add to this the failings and weaknesses of all human beings, and there is no wonder left that we can hear what amounts to raw genius in one evening, or one set, or, even, one number, and, then, immediately after, discover nearly meaningless mouthings. It's enough to drive you mad. It **has** been enough to drive a number of jazz musicians mad, and to drive more to madneses of various sorts.

In any case, on this night at Newport, Miles was superb, brilliantly absorbing, as if he were both the moth and the probing, savage light on which an immolation was to take place. Perhaps that's making it seem too dramatic, but it's my purely subjective feeling about the few minutes during which he played. And, over-dramatic or not, whatever Miles did was provoking enough to send one major record label executive scurrying about in search of him after the performance was over. And dramatic enough to include Miles in all the columns written about the Festival, as one of few soloists who lived up to critical expectations. But when you mention it to Miles, he says, "What're they talking about? I just played the way I always play."

He doesn't always play that way of course. Up to, and down to, certain limits, everyone plays the way he is. And Miles is no exception. Then, too, the presence of Chet Baker on the program, and of Shorty Rogers in the same country, these two his most successful mutants, might have produced the kind of tension which professionals can turn into victories.

So all that happened before this record date. That, and much more, of course, because Miles' life has resembled both the moth and the flame during the twenty-eight years that he has lived it, especially since 1945, when he made his first major public impression while with Bird at the Three Deuces in New York City. Moth and flame, too, for the last few months, until just recently, when the bother and anxiety about a growth in his throat had made the cat-slight Miles speak and walk in such whispers that his always present, kind-of-nose-thumbing withdrawal seemed nearly complete. More moods.

It may seem that there is altogether too much attention being paid to feelings, to moods, in this essay. After all, like skin, all of us have moods. But there are skins and skins. And some people make moods work for them. Which, I suppose, could be a beginning in the definition of an artist. That, while he is perhaps more sensitive to the synthetics of the world around him, hence probably more tortured by them, he can fashion his turmoil into a tale for a purpose as singular as himself.

Lo the pensive Miles. Complete with moods, he waited one hour in front of his hotel, leaning detachedly against a fire plug, waiting to be picked up, apparently never doubting that he would be driven to the recording studio, which was only two blocks away, as he had been promised. Then, on the way to the studio, his one major comment: "I hope I won't have to hit Mingus in the mouth." This, of course, despite the fact that Mingus could carry two of Miles around the block in a half-mile gallop. More in affirmation that he Miles was the boss, was **tough**, in that curious use of the word by musicians wherein the top men on a particular instrument are acknowledged as leaders in other sections of life as well. (Thus, Max Roach, **the toughest of drummers**, has, and will again, make pronouncements about such things as the disposition of funds from a benefit for another musician, and his pronouncement will carry immense weight whether or not he is any authority on the subject.)

Once in the studio, where Mingus was bothering the drummer — all bass players bother drummers and vice versa — it seems part of the nature of things — Miles moved quietly into a corner and waited. Four other moods waited to be served: Teddy Charles, hurriedly writing arrangements (he did all but **Alone Together**), ordering himself a light lunch ("three ham and cheese and some beer"); trombonist Britt Woodman, who taught Mingus how to box, fussed with his slide; Elvin kept adjusting his foot pedal; and Mingus, blithe spirit, alternately fussed and fumed like a great rooster in attendance to a hatching.

All those moods, present and to be accounted for in the music on this LP. For example, you don't hear it here, but on one take Miles wandered so far afield that he was completely lost. But he made no mention of it, not even a request for another take, although, fortunately, another was made, almost as if he really didn't care, was above caring, whether anyone had discovered the error.

And the tunes: **Nature Boy**, and where was I; **Alone Together**, oh there I am; **There's No You**, there never was; and **Easy Living**, maybe, but I haven't seen it. All cut of the same cloth. Again, moods. Again, blue.

From this, and the sensitivity of each musician to the others, comes a clarity of expression which makes annotation superfluous, perhaps, even presumptuous. But there are these things which occurred to me, which may make this seemingly strange sales-talk more persuasive. (Sales-talk it is, too, for I am moved enough by this poignant side of jazz to boost its circulation.)

If Duke Ellington would listen to **There's No You**, which event I very much doubt, he would find some incentive for writing again. Because here Ellington trombonist Britt Woodman plays with an eloquence which has to preclude the further use that Duke makes of him as a Lawrence Brown voice. Here, too, as on the other two arrangements of Teddy's, is the clever anticipation, in written lines, of what Miles will express, as well as Teddy's beautiful solo. **AND MINGUS.**

And, Mingus again on **Easy Living**, dig especially his support of Miles, and, then, Miles' re-entry above the ensemble during the final chorus. **Alone Together**, which Mingus arranged, is typically his — the throbbing of collected hearts, all about a two-headed title. Here, again, his backing is superb. Through it all, none of the musicians show Miles' finality of mood, but they do perfectly match him as if they shared the same secret, each one adding, as is natural, his own interpretation, and, in the case of Teddy and Mingus, his own answer to that secret. In that very special way it is Miles' album in the same way that a wedding always belongs to the bride no matter what entertainment is presented at the reception.

These are reflections about a life in which we are all shareholders.

BILL COSS, Editor, **Metronome**