STEAMIN' WITH THE MILES DAVIS QUINTET

PRESTIGE 7200

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MILES DAVIS, trumpet
JOHN COLTRANE, tenor saxophone
RED GARLAND, piano
PAUL CHAMBERS, bass
PHILLY JOE JONES, drums

1. **SURREY WITH THE FRINGE ON TOP**
2. **SALT PEANUTS**
3. **SOMETHING I DREAMED LAST NIGHT**
4. **DIANE**
5. **WELL YOU NEEDN'T**
6. **WHEN I FALL IN LOVE**

Recorded in Hackensack, NJ; May 11, 1956.
("Well You Needn't" recorded October 26, 1956.)

One of the highest points of modern jazz is the quintet that Miles Davis led from late 1955 until spring of 1957. Its earliest manifestation appeared on a record called The Musings of Miles (Prestige 7007), on which Davis was backed by a rhythm section consisting of Red Garland, piano; Philly Joe Jones, drums; and Oscar Pettiford, bass. By the time Davis' next record had been released (Miles, Prestige 7014), he had a regular working group, in which Pettiford had been replaced by Paul Chambers and the tenor saxophone of John Coltrane had been added.

Except for the work he has done with Gil Evans, all of Davis' recording since that time has been an extension and further exploration of the musical ideas set down in those two records. Since the disbanding of that quintet, it has been called by many the most important and influential jazz group of its time. It is obviously the most influential, because the music it played and the style it employed has filtered into most jazz organizations, and the group restored to currency some of the best and most neglected popular songs of the last several years. In ultimate importance, probably only the Modern Jazz quartet is of comparable stature. (Unfortunately, the Thelonious Monk Quartet with Coltrane, Jones, and Wilbur Ware was unrecorded, and of too brief a duration to make the impact it might have; it is notable, though, that half its personnel were Davis alumni.) The pervasive impact of the Miles Davis Quintet (and its inspiration) is most closely analogous to the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives of thirty years before.

The present record, Steamin' with the Miles Davis Quintet, is the final selection from the legendary 1956 sessions which produced three previous classics (Cookin', 7094; Relaxin', 7129; and Workin', 7166). Since the album is, in many respects, representative of the total work of the quintet, it affords an excellent opportunity to examine just what this remarkable music was and how it was made.

To begin with, there is the matter of personnel. Among Miles Davis' several capabilities is the possession of the most accurate ear for new talent in jazz. Sonny Rollins, who has ample reason to know, calls him a "starmaker". But, if the critics of the time are to be believed, it is impossible to see how the quintet had any possible chance of success. The group consisted, we are told, of a trumpet player who could play only in the middle register and fluffed half his notes; an out-of-tune tenor player; a cocktail pianist; a drummer who played so loud that no-one else could be heard; and a teen-age bassist. This, of course, is exaggeration to prove a point; today, the great majority of the quintet could lay serious claim to being the most skilled and influential players on their instruments. But the fact remains, talent aside, that the five men did not share a unity of style: more than many, this group needed a leader.

Davis has the qualities of leadership in abundance. One of the most notable examples of this is a record released on another company on which Miles, for contractual reasons, was nominally a sideman. But it is more than obvious, from the first note to the last, that it is a Miles record. It is, again, an extention of the principles on the first two albums. An important part of those principles lay in the area of material.

On The Musings of Miles he recorded A Night in Tunisia, and on the present record he plays Salt Peanuts and Well You Needn't. The names that association brings to mind here are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, the giants of the bop revolution. Davis does not play hard bop by any means, but he has kept these and similar tunes as a standard part of his basic repertoire, as a constant reminder of the era that gave him his original inspiration.

The previous two records included There Is No Greater Love and I see Your Face Before Me, and on the present release are Something I Dreamed Last Night and When I Fall in Love. These are ballads, and Coltrane, most often, did not play on the ballad tracks. It is probably his unique way with a ballad that first enabled Miles to reach out to the vast audience he has; an audience that, in several cases, has little affinity with any other jazz. As astute and detached an observer as British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan has referred to Miles as a musical lonely hearts club. In his sad, wistful, muted interpretations of ballads (in which he plays microphone as much as trumpet) he reveals an area of tenderness and sensitivity which is rarely visible in his public aspect. These performances, in the emotion they evoke and the man from which they come, are not comparable to anyone else in jazz, but do bear a striking similarity to Frank Sinatra.

The two early albums included a Gal in Calico and Just Squeeze Me, and the present one has performances of Surrey With the Fringe On Top and Diane. One of these is, of course, an Ellington composition, and Miles probably understands Ellington more than any contemporary musician except Mingus and Monk, but that is a subject for another time. These performances have several things in common, and it is through them and others like them that the Davis concept has become most prevalent. They are all in the medium tempo peculiar to the quintet, which no-one has ever successfully imitated. A large number of the pieces in this style were first played in this general manner by the Chicago pianist Ahmad Jamal, and make extensive use of Jamal's concepts of rhythm and space. Davis has said, "All my inspiration today comes from the Chicago pianist, Ahmad Jamal." This and similar statements have led many to credit Jamal with a stature which I do not feel he deserves. That Davis is able to derive valuable ideas from Jamal's music does not make Jamal Davis' musical equal. Most artists borrow, and the proof of their artistry lies partially in the fact that what they borrow they invariably enrich. At

least part of the unique quality of these performances lies in a particular principle which Davis has grasped, a principle which is so simple that it has apparently eluded everyone else. To put it in terms of Miles' particular group, a quintet is not always a quintet. It can also be a quartet featuring Miles, and, at different times on the same tune, it can be a quartet featuring Coltrane, or a trio featuring either Garland or Chambers. The Davis rhythm section, Philly Joe Jones particularly, is extremely well aware of this, and gives each of the three principal soloists his own best backing. Behind Miles, the rhythm is full of space, with few chords; behind Coltrane, it is compulsive; and with Garland, it lapses into an easy, Jamal-like feeling.

As with anything of great importance, though, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; a point of view that can be proven, I think, by the great majority of what these men have produced separately since 1957. A beginning attempt at analysis such as this leaves out many factors, most notably the indefinable personal chemistry that resulted when these men played together.

Such chemistry is inexplicable, and so, apparently, is the personality of the man who generated it. Miles Davis has become a legend, and in that way, too, he is comparable only to Sinatra. Both men came back from what seemed the ruin of a career at about the same time, and now occupy a position that makes it next door to heresy to imply that there might be any thing less than superb in the results of whatever they attempt. They are both setters of styles in dress and music, and both delight in indulging a passion for speed. Whatever either man does is automatically news, and yet both have a fierce insistence on personal privacy.

The company Miles finds himself in today can best be judged, I feel, by a publicity brochure recently issued by a forthcoming magazine, Show Business Illustrated, a new Playboy enterprise. The brochure promises, and I quote, that "you'll visit and get to know intimately Liz Taylor, Jack Paar, Maria Callas, Miles Davis, Peter Sellers, Brigette Bardot, Yves Montand, Frank Sinatra, Alfred Hitchcock, Marlon Brando, Walt Disney, Jack Lemmon, Harry Belafonte, Bobby Darin, Mort Sahl, Ingmar Bergman, Tennessee Williams."

I somehow doubt that you'll get to know Miles Davis intimately after reading the magazine, but that list is an accurate index of the position in which he finds himself today. The most intimate glimpse he has allowed is what he has recorded with the quintet which did so much to place him in that company. And when the legend passes, if it does, the music will remain. He may be one of the greatest public relations men of our time; he is undoubtedly one of the greatest musicians. And everything else after all, is his business.

Notes: Joe Goldberg
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