

Yale University
African-American Studies
Spring 2002

SEMINAR ON MILES DAVIS

INSTRUCTOR: John Szwed

A survey of the life and music of Miles Davis, examining the social history and musical traditions which shaped his work, and exploring his influence on music, literature and society.

ABOUT THE COURSE

Miles Davis is one of the five or six most important figures in the history of jazz. But where other musician/composers are typically known for a single line of artistic development, Davis' importance derives from a personal evolution which took him through a series of radical musical changes, and eventually led him - some would say - outside of the jazz tradition altogether. Beginning first as a rhythm and blues and swing player in southern Illinois, he quickly became one of the central figures in bebop with Charlie Parker in New York City; almost immediately, however, he established a new form of music known as cool jazz which would forever be counterpoised to bebop. Again he changed, and next helped create a very different music - hard bop - only to momentarily jettison it for the mixture of classical and jazz which Gunther Schuller called third stream. From there Davis moved on to modal jazz, then jazz-rock, finally settling almost completely into a pop style. The change from jazz to pop made Davis the perfect figure for biographers who sought to write his life as tragedy rather than romance. As a result of these changes Davis' influence was arguably longer and more far-reaching than almost any other 20th-century musician.

His personal life sometimes threatened to eclipse his music, and for many years he was the quintessence of what became known as cool. Over the years he was in the company of Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, Juliette Greco, Louis Malle, Sugar Ray Robinson, James Baldwin, Marlon Brando, Norman Mailer, Dennis Hopper, Prince, and married Frances Taylor, Betty Davis, and Cecily Tyson, each of them famous in different branches of the entertainment world.

This seminar will examine Davis' music in detail, locating it in the musical and social periods in which it emerged, and will follow the development of his public persona, reading his autobiography and the four biographies, as well as two novels and many poems and plays based on his life. We will also examine published articles and reviews, a heretofore unknown and unpublished autobiography written by Alex Haley, video- and audio-taped interviews, photos, and family documents. We will attempt to assay his musical importance and understand his social impact, and in the process also critically discuss the means by which biographies of artists are created.

REQUIRED READING:

Davis, Miles. Miles Davis: The Autobiography

Carr, Ian. Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography

Chambers, Jack. Milestones

Carmer, Gary. The Miles Davis Companion

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