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Miles et Alia

The list of musicians who have played with Miles Davis since 1966 contains a remarkable number of big names, including Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, Jack de Johnette, Dave Holland, John McLaughlin and Miroslav Vitous. All of these have worked successfully without Miles, and most have made a name for themselves whilst or since working with him. Who can say whether this is due to the limelight given them by playing alongside Miles, the musical rewards of working with him, or Miles's talent-spotting abilities? Presumably the truth is a mixture of all these.

What does Miles's music owe to the creative personalities of the musicians working with him? This question is unanswerable in practice, for one cannot quantify individual responsibility for a group product - assuming that is what Miles's music is. It is obvious that he has chosen very creative musicians with which to work, and yet there has often been an absence of conspicuous, individual, free solo playing in his music since about 1967. It would appear that Miles can absorb musical influences without losing his balance. What we find then, is a nexus of interacting musicians, centring on Miles; that is, musicians who not only play together in various other combinations, but influence each other as well. Even if the web could be disentangled (I know not how, save with a God's-eye-view), a systematic review of all the music that lies within it would be a task both vast and boring. Instead, therefore, I would like to examine a limited area of the nexus, consisting of closely related figures, especially Miles, Joe Zawinul and Tony Williams.

A good place to start is the album Miles Smiles which was recorded in 1966-7, and employs a quintet consisting of Miles (trumpet), Wayne Shorter (tenor sax), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass) and Tony Williams (drums). The music hovers on a boundary of styles: between the classic modern jazz style, and a style that was soon to become characteristic of Miles. Pieces like 'Orbits' and 'Dolores' are well within the classic style: instruments take solos in turn, zooming and pattering in improvisations originating from a main tune which serves as both introduction and ending and is played or part-played between solos to tie the piece together. During the next couple of years Miles and Shorter abandoned this style of playing for reserved and economical styles, Miles employing short and fairly simple phrases, with great emphasis on perfect and polished tone, and Shorter playing long flowing melodies on soprano sax.

Tracks like 'Circle' and 'Ginger Bread Boy' depart much more from the classic style, and sound a little like Filles de Kilimanjaro, the album of 1968. The total effect of this music is much more restrained and coherent. Repeated piano chords and chord sequences take up a punctuating and articulatory role, and the same chord may be repeated again and again. In 'Ginger Bread Boy' bass riffs, with variations, are repeated throughout the piece; here there is also a superb piano solo in which the chordal structures are overlaid with lingering, wispy, curvy, chromatic lines.

On all the tracks of this album Williams provides rapid drumming that acts as a backdrop to the other parts; yet despite its rapidity his playing is always clear, precise and nicely articulated, giving the overall sound a nervy, insistent quality. In subsequent work with Miles, Williams is much more sparing and reserved, corresponding to the changes made by Miles and Shorter. It is here that the careful articulation of rhythm and timbre becomes really essential. There are actually some foretastes of later styles on Miles Smiles, for example the crisp drum rolls on 'Orbits' or the taut cymbal work with carefully varied timbre on 'Circle'.

Filles de Kilimanjaro is complete perfection of its kind. The salient features of the style have already been described in connection with 'Circle' and 'Gingerbread Boy' on Miles Smiles, and here the style blossoms to produce something very cool and rather chic. A characteristic use of electric piano illuminates the linking that was to arise between Miles and Joe Zawinul, the electric pianist who joins Miles for Zawinul's own composition 'In a Silent Way' on the 1969 album of that title; Zawinul's conception of the electric piano, judging by his own recording of the piece on his first album, Joe Zawinul (1971), is close to that of Miles. The soaring solo of improvisation plays no part in Filles de Kilimanjaro. Typically, after the theme tune is played in duo by trumpet and sax, various phrases of alternating piano chords and repeated bass riffs split off to provide, with Tony Williams's extremely subtle drumming, the real structure of the piece. Trumpet, sax or piano improvise in a reserved way, merely giving birth to what is already intrinsic in the ongoing musical texture of drums, bass and piano. The soloist doesn't have to belt along with an involved self-demonstrating improvisation; he can even shut up altogether and the music is still there. But although the result is relaxed and timeless it is far from dispassionate and keeps one as involved as does the headiest of rock music: a perfect combination of calmness and electrifying tension. Within the space provided by this, all sounds, because of their economy, are equally important and nothing is taken for granted.

The tune of the title track is a rather lengthy melody. Zawinul, too, exploits long meandering melodies - in, for example his composition, 'In a Silent Way' - and this becomes, in a different guise, the main characteristic of Wayne Shorter's playing with the group Weather Report. Another feature of the Filles de Kilimanjaro album that links Miles with Zawinul is the open diatonic simplicity of the tunes, which use less blue notes than one might expect in a jazz context. One of Zawinul's techniques - found, for example, on his own recording of 'In a Silent Way' - is the surrounding of a melody of this type with a glittering array of scattered sounds. In Miles's own version on the album In a Silent Way (1969) the glitter is all there, but without the background-foreground contrast, being simpler and less splashy and more openly amalgamated with the total texture. Most of Miles's album In a Silent Way uses a moderately complex tapestry of clearly coloured sounds, including John McLaughlin's electric guitar. (This polyphonic technique, by the way, is carried much further in the album On the Corner (1972), where the music consists of monotonous, self-perpetuating, complex textures, unlike the clearly punctuated and tuneful playing of the In a Silent Way album.) Williams's playing is excellent on this album: for example, on 'Shh/Peaceful' the regular and simple cymbal rhythm (Example 1) is played so finely and with such subtlety as to make it a star part.

In a Silent Way features electric organ, three electric pianos and electric guitar. On Bitches Brew (1970) the trumpet is subjected to echo effects - and more recently to complete electrification including quasi 'Wa-Wa' techniques; in addition, Zawinul has taken to using a keyboard operated synthesiser as well as electric piano. In short, there is a marked tendency to electrify. I make no comment on this, save that the sounds used are always just right for the music.

On Bitches Brew an amalgamation with rock music becomes evident: for example there is the funky opening to 'Miles Runs the Voodoo Down' or the boogie guitar playing on 'Spanish Key'. By 1969 Williams had left Miles to start Lifetime, a group which began with a rock image and rock loudness. (Incidentally, John McLaughlin's best efforts, I think, were with Lifetime before several spoonfuls of divine sugar were added to his brew.) Weather Report, a group including Zawinul and Shorter, also exploits rock idioms in its own highly individual way. Because, on the whole, they arise quite naturally from tendencies intrinsic to the music anyway, the amalgamations sound quite natural, with no loss of balance. To illustrate the last point, listen to On the Corner which, despite its 'soul' sounds, is tuneless, complex and dissonant - all the features that soul music doesn't have.

Weather Report's first album, called simply Weather Report (c.1972), keeps to a conventional modern jazz style apart from its colour and texture: the com-

ination of electric piano, Wayne Shorter's flowing soprano sax, Airto Moreiro's additional percussion work - all sorts of apparently random but beautifully placed noises - and Miroslav Vitous's moderately fast but rhythmically steady bass playing gives the whole a special shine and polish. The use of Moreiro's noises in an otherwise tuneful and harmonious context is a typical contrast of the kind I have already mentioned in connection with Zawinul.

On the track 'Adios' on Weather Report's Sweetnighter (1973) the device is used again, and in a manner analogous to Zawinul's version of 'In a Silent Way' - only here the halo of starlight that surrounds the melody is provided not by the electric piano, but very effectively by a child's roller toy. On other tracks, for example 'Manolette' and 'Will', another kind of contrast is used: a slow soprano sax tune gradually unfolds before a background of rapid percussion work, consisting of complex, repetitive, interlocking Latinesque rhythms.

I have so far traced the theme of tensions, contrasts and union of opposites in the work of both Miles and Zawinul. Tony Williams with Lifetime exploits contrast too. On Turn it Over (1970) two tracks - 'Once I Loved' and 'A Famous Blues' (a McLaughlin composition) - are based on almost jarring tensions which are much less resolved than with Miles and Zawinul, so that the end result is far from calm enjoyment. 'Once I Loved' has three elements: a strand of high, piercing, organ notes, and some gentle broken chords on guitar accompanying the voice, which sings a lovable jazz ballad: "Once I loved, you were the world to me/Once I cried at the thought/I was foolish and proud and let you say goodbye/Then one day, in my infinite sadness, you came and brought me love again ...". The introduction to 'A Famous Blues' has serene vibrato organ chords, gentle guitar phrases and two sets of words, one whispered ("Stay wandering in the black abyss of your head/Stay searching in the murky corridors of your mind ...") and one sung ("Take me home with you/There's so much to do/Let's go to your house ...").

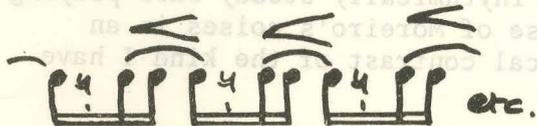
I have already noted that although Zawinul's music has a certain complexity in its total structure, his tunes - and indeed all those used by Weather Report - are fairly simple and quite diatonic. In Lifetime's work, on the other hand, there is a tendency to use more exotic, chromatic, twirling note sequences. A Weather Report piece like 'Boogie Woogie Waltz' or 'Sweetnighter' doesn't depend much on a tune at all, but more on simple riffs, so that the piece is much more of an automatic process than Williams's work. Indeed, nothing is less like this than the music on Lifetime's record Ego (1971). This group is now without McLaughlin, and has a new guitarist (Ted Dunbar) and two extra percussionists. The use of constantly repeated backing phrases, a standard pop technique, is very prominent, but the phrases tend to be evocative and chromatic, as for example in the introduction to 'Urchins of Shermese', where the organ Vox Organalis is something like Example 2. This is later replaced by heavy descending guitar chords, coloured in by cymbal work, based on the octave chromatic descent shown in Example 3 (overleaf). Instrumentation and timbre are strong and colourful, playing perhaps a greater structural role than in Zawinul's music.

I hope I have said enough to demonstrate that the music of Miles, of Joe Zawinul and Weather Report, and of Tony Williams and Lifetime are all very different, and yet seem to converge on the same virtual point, or at least run parallel in places. Their music is diametrically opposed in style to free jazz, although sharing a common source with it, and has generally been smooth, controlled, self-assured, a bit delicious and a bit decadent, although Miles's and Zawinul's work may now be departing from this description.

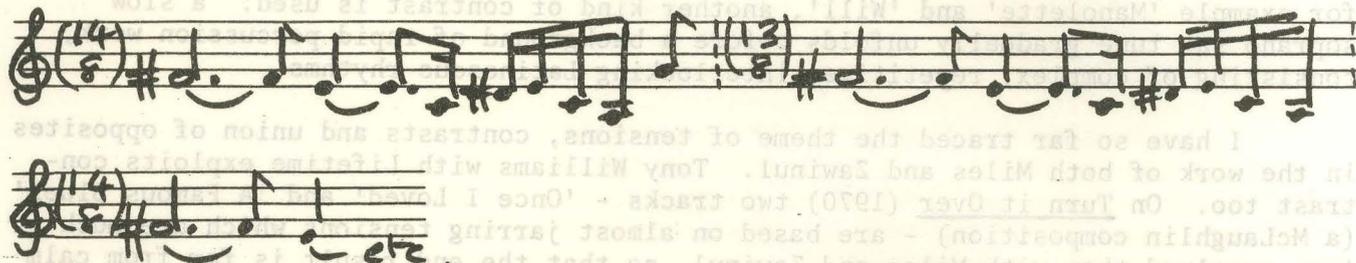
Some people are quick to associate these qualities with Miles's financial success and rich living, but, short of means-testing musical worth, this revelation can do no more than cause one to raise an eyebrow and go on listening.

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Example 1. 'Shh/Peaceful'



Example 2. 'Urchins of Shermese'



Example 3. 'Urchins of Shermese'



Discography

Miles Davis

Miles Smiles (1967)	CBS S62933
Filles de Kilimanjaro (1968)	CBS S63551
In a Silent Way (1969)	CBS S63630
Bitches Brew (1970)	CBS S64010 & 64011
On the Corner (1972)	CBS S65246

Weather Report

Weather Report (c.1972)	CBS S64521
Sweetnighter (1973)	CBS S65532

Lifetime

Turn It Over (1970)	Polydor 2425-019
Ego (1971)	Polydor 2425-070 B

Joe Zawinul

Joe Zawinul (1971)	Atlantic 2400151 & K40349
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