

MASTERPIECE

Jazz Meets Rock in an Intoxicating Potion

Miles Davis's 'Bitches Brew' pioneered jazz fusion.

By John Edward Hasse

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Fifty years ago this month, Columbia Records issued Miles Davis's churning *Bitches Brew*, confronting two genres of music and crystallizing a third, jazz-rock fusion. It was a potent cauldron: a quicksilver leader and 12 younger musicians improvising over rock and funk rhythms, semi-jams as long as 27 minutes, cutting-edge editing techniques, and a dreamlike Afro-futurist cover. Bold, transformative and bestselling, this double record marked a milestone for Davis and American music.

Most innovative artists make their breakthroughs in their 20s and spend the rest of their careers exploring and burnishing their new approach. Like Picasso, Stravinsky and Frank Lloyd Wright, Davis—subject of a recent PBS/BBC documentary—repeatedly shed his style to create a new paradigm. “Isn’t it great that you can experience surprise through music?” the influential trumpeter mused to writer Kiyoshi Koyama for a set of abandoned liner notes. . .to what album, it’s not clear.



Davis started his career in the 1940s playing bebop, innovated a counter-bop style known as cool jazz, then became a mainstay of earthy hard bop. In the late 1950s he pioneered a modal approach in jazz, and in the 1960s he stretched further away from jazz's conventional approach to harmony.

In 1969, two decades after making his innovative “Birth of the Cool” recordings, and one decade after his landmark *Kind of Blue* album, the ever-restless Davis was experimenting with such electronic instruments as electric piano and electric bass and

adopting groove—the rhythmic architecture or “feel” of a tune—instead of harmony, as an organizing principle.

The young audience for jazz had been shrinking as both rock and soul music drew listeners in droves. With big ears and eyes, the 43-year-old Davis was digging such acts as Sly and the Family Stone and Jimi Hendrix, intrigued by their electronics, rhythms, fashion, youth appeal and popular success.

In August 1969—just after the Woodstock Festival—Davis assembled his band for three daily sessions in which there were no separate takes, just a continuous run of the tape recorder. The players, each tightly miked, sat around Davis, who pointed at a player to start or stop. “I told the musicians that they could do anything they wanted, play anything they heard. . .,” said Davis to writer Quincy Troupe, “so that’s what they did.”

The recording doubled most instruments: two players each on keyboards, reeds, bass, drums and percussion. As well as one guitar and, on two tracks, a third keyboard. His stunningly gifted sidemen included electric pianists Chick Corea, Larry Young and Joe Zawinul, soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter, bass clarinetist Bennie Maupin, bassist Dave Holland, drummers Jack DeJohnette and Lenny White, and guitarist John McLaughlin.

The album takes you on a trip to unexpected, even mysterious places. With its layers of rhythm, collective improvisation and hard-to-detect song structures, it is always unpredictable. And it rewards relistening.

The title track—with echoing trumpet, thrashing drums and dense rhythms—is dark, multilayered and abstract. *Spanish Key* has some of Davis’s and Mr. McLaughlin’s best playing on the album. Wayne Shorter’s *Sanctuary* is as close as the album gets to a ballad, the lonely, pensive sound of Davis’s trumpet hovering over the rhythm section, alternately quiet, busy and loud. The least outré cut, *Miles Runs the Voodoo Down*, has Davis soloing dramatically over a one-chord vamp and a James-Brown-like funky bass-and-drums dance groove.

Whether in a studio, nightclub or concert hall, jazz’s ethos was real-time recording. This album made a radical departure from that norm. With Davis’s approval, producer Teo Macero added echo and delay and—like tape loops and cinematic jump cuts—cut and reordered passages to produce a remarkable instance of studio art. “I had carte blanche to work with the material,” Macero told *Wire* magazine writer Joel Lewis. Credited only as producer, Macero was also a kind of co-composer. Without the undersung Macero, there would be no *Bitches Brew*.

The album sparked an uproar, much as another Columbia Records artist, Bob Dylan, had when he went electric in 1965. Davis's turn to electronics, distortion and rock beats scandalized his old-guard fan base.

But *Bitches Brew* vaulted him into the youth market and such rock venues as the Fillmore, which paid handsomely. The players on the project—a wag called them “sons of ‘Bitches Brew’”—went on to power such fusion bands as Weather Report, Return to Forever, the Headhunters and the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

If you come to this album anew from such acoustic Davis recordings as *Porgy and Bess*, you may have to listen with a radically different sensibility. If you approach via rock or soul music, you'll have to suspend any expectation of lyrics, brevity or true lead guitar. Whatever your listening experience, you'll find *Bitches Brew* bracing.

A half century on, *Bitches Brew* continues to fizz and fascinate.

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