

THE MILES METHOD

A Theory of Transformative Artistry

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Introduction

Of all the musical geniuses of the 20th century, there were perhaps none as creatively prolific as Miles Davis. A musical seeker and truth teller, Miles was unapologetically disruptive to the global music scene, and his influence is still being heard in the music of today. Now, almost thirty years after his passing, those who worked with Miles, as well as those who heard his music, still speak in glowing terms of his legendary status as a musician, artist, and creative guide.

In his autobiography Miles tells the story of a time when he attended a gala dinner commemorating Ray Charles at the Kennedy Centre. In an uncomfortable and indignant conversation with a lady sitting next to him, Davis was asked, "What have you done that's so important in your life? Why are you here?" He answered, "Well, I've changed music five or six times..."⁽¹⁾ And Miles was true to his word, for multiple time throughout his career his influence changed not only the musical style we call "jazz", but also the entire direction of music.

For those who appreciate transformational artists in history, one question arises; how does an artist become so creatively transformative? This is where I hope to lead us, because when discussing such people it's often helpful to explore not only their creations, but the philosophy behind their creations. The artistic outpourings are the fruits, however the processes of thought and action which lead to such fruits are to be considered as the roots

- essential and fundamental. For artists today who wish to develop greater creativity and artistry, there is perhaps no greater teacher than the wise Miles Davis, and throughout this essay I hope to pull apart some of the interviews and resources that we have from Miles in order to offer a speculative theory of transformative artistry, otherwise known as “The Miles Method”. For the convenience of the reader/artist, I have compressed this method into ten essential parts, all of which play into a cohesive philosophy which I hope will be of value to other artistic seekers. Of course, in the interpretation of the wisdom of Miles Davis, there lies a great danger of misconstruing his words or placing his thoughts into boxes where they don’t belong. For this reason I will point out that this essay is not intended to be a historical account of Davis’s literal process of creativity, but instead it is an interpretation of some of the common ideas which flow throughout his career.

Finally, I’d like to express the importance of reading this essay not merely as an academic exploration, but as a practical guide for the modern artist who wishes to base his or her creative efforts in a foundation offered by one of the most incredible artists in history. Consider the ideas presented as well as how they can apply to your art form, creative process, or even your life. And most importantly, put them to practice.

Past, Present and Future: Follow the Stream

Miles Davis made his professional debut on the music scene during one of the most important moments in the history and development of the music we call “jazz”. It was the mid forties, and as DeVaux put it, “The birth of the new style (bebop) coincided with the peak of the revival of New Orleans jazz, prompting a frequently acrimonious, occasionally hysterical war of words that did much to polarise the jazz community into opposing sides: the Progressives and the ‘mouldy figs’” (2). Of the former, there were musicians like Charlie Parker; the founding father of bebop; a revolutionary style of jazz which broke many of the rules previously set by the swing era musicians. Of the latter was Louis Armstrong; a quintessential performer who had won the respect and admiration of both the audiences and the musicians, and yet who still regarded the new sounds which Parker had brought onto the scene as highly inferior. Of this new music called “bebop” Armstrong said, “All they want to do is show you up, and any old way will do as long as it's different from the way you played it before.” (3)

From the passage above we can clearly see that, despite his genius, Louis Armstrong had picked a lane, and he was staying in it. Parker, however, had moved on to create his own style called “bebop”, and this is where Miles Davis really came onto the scene. Miles, who had played in commercial swing bands and now in Charlie Parker’s bebop band, clearly felt that being an artist was not about finding a sound and staying with it, but rather that it was about listening for the next sound or the next style. Over the course of

their careers, Charlie Parker would go on to stay mainly in the lane of Bebop, whereas Miles would go on to create music that continued to push the boundaries, thus putting him on a stream of creativity that would carry him to the heights of artistic mastery.

Skipping ahead to the top end of his life and career, in a rare 1988 interview the interviewer asks Davis, “What kind of repertoire are you going to be doing tonight? Is it going to be a mixture of the last albums you did in other tours like Decoy, You’re Under Arrest, Tutu, or are you going to do something different?” Miles shakes his head throughout the question and replies, “No, no, it’s an entirely different thing... It’s gotten a little bit funkier and it goes in another direction... We play Tutu, we play one song that Prince wrote, and we play something I wrote. But I reconstructed them and they sound up to date on Prince’s side and James Brown’s side and my theory of music.” This response shows the struggle that Miles often came across — that nobody truly understood what he was doing. He wasn’t interested in playing what he’d already played, and if he was, then he was going to “reconstruct it” — a common theme found throughout Miles’ creative processes. There were always new sounds, new bands, and new styles to explore, and Miles was there on the frontline.

In the same interview Miles is seen slouched over drawing a picture as he listens to the interviewer. The interviewer says to Miles, “I have one picture of yours right now over here that was done a couple of years ago, and the first time I saw it...” Miles interrupts and places the drawing he has just finished on the lap of the interviewer. He says, “Here’s one that was done just then. Now.”⁽⁴⁾ Miles wasn’t fond of, nor was he polite to those

who were only focused on what he had already done. He wanted to talk about what he was doing, and that was rarely the same as what he had already done.

In an earlier 1986 interview the interviewer asks a question comparing classical music to jazz, suggesting that the music is being doctored and that they're not keeping it in its purest form "like they do with classical." Davis responds by saying, "When you say 'in its purest form...' you mean when they had bell-bottomed pants? You can't wear that today. You know what I mean? You can't wear that today. This is 1986, and it's almost 87. You can't continue to play like that, or wear the same clothes..."⁽⁷⁾

While some, like Louis Armstrong, identified themselves with the music that they had been playing, and others, like Charlie Parker, identified themselves with the music they had created, Miles was a true visionary who identified not with what was or what is, but with what could be. He had elevated himself to a different sphere of artistic intuition, and he was only interested in following the stream of creativity that would lead him to the next sound, or the next style.

During the 80s while synthesizers were fresh on the scene, Miles was quoted as saying "If you don't match those social sounds that are in the air, they don't want to hear it. I wouldn't if I was my fan. If I was a fan of myself, which I am, I wouldn't want to hear anything that looked like what I did in 1960. You know, you can't do both of them. I mean, it's over, the 60s and the 70s. It's 1984, and soon it will be 1985. They're doing all sorts of things. Anything is possible."⁽¹¹⁾ This passage shows an artist who is clearly

riding the stream of creativity, all the while listening for the new sounds and the new whispers of what is coming, which he called the “social sounds”.

All this focus on the next sound, however, was not mere disdain for the traditions of the past. Commenting on his time in Davis's legendary quintet, Herbie Hancock says that the band was engaging in “controlled freedom” (18, P6) where each band member was able to contribute something unique and new to the sound, while at the same time everyone was being linked together by Miles who represented the “history of jazz” (18, P6) that led up to that particular moment. This, in a way, was the true genius of Miles. He was a constant innovator, but the flavour of all the styles he'd played previously was at least still present in the musical concoction of the moment, which was always fresh.

For the modern artist who wishes to follow in the footsteps of such a visionary, there is one very important lesson we can learn from these bites of wisdom. With which process do you identify as an artist? The process of creating the traditional art of the past? The process of creating a new art of the future? Or the process of transforming what has been into that which could be? Miles was an artist who seemed to identify with the latter, and in this way, he was able to follow the stream of creativity that pushed him beyond his own limits and into new territories of artistic genius.

Knowledge is Freedom

Perhaps an important next step for a transformative artist, and key to the revolutionary nature of Davis's work, is his philosophy of happiness. In a 1988 television interview he said, "For me, knowledge is happiness. If I learn something, I'm happy... I learned something last night. I can't wait to apply it." (6)

Often artists can attach their life satisfaction to the end product rather than the process which gets them there - that of learning and growing in creative intelligence. In his self-titled autobiography, Miles says that "Knowledge is freedom and ignorance is slavery." (1, p61) This wisdom is especially true for artists and musicians. One reason why so many brilliant artists are able to freely create works that express the heights of their internal creative imagery is because they have the necessary tools of knowledge and skill at their disposal, and that means that knowledge and skill must be precursors to truly free and honest art. This is exactly why one wouldn't expect a new pianist to be able to express his or her artistic ideas as beautifully as a pianist who has spent their entire life mastering their craft — the creativity may be there, but the tools of creation are not.

Miles was a master of his craft, and this is what gave him the freedom to explore ideas and concepts without feeling restricted. Ignorance and lack of skill truly does put shackles on artistry, and thus for the transformative artist it is imperative that much time is spent learning new ideas, concepts and tools for further freedom in creativity.

Be Fearless in Your Creation

In a recent interview between myself and the music historian Benjamin Cawthra, I asked about Davis's relentless creativity. Benjamin gave the following insight; "I think of Miles Davis as artistically fearless... The only way to account for somebody who went through so many phases without worrying too much about whether the audience would come with him is that he's artistically fearless. He'll jump off that cliff with the confidence that it will be ok... He has that kind of belief in his aesthetic power and a confidence that he will reach people wherever the road leads him next, and that he's going to land on his feet. And he did that over and over again." (16)

For any artist, it can often be uncomfortable to push beyond the boundaries and into new territories of artistry. For Miles, it seemed that this was second nature, and he simply decided to fearlessly plough forward, despite what the audiences may have thought. But as it turns out, this was exactly what both his audience and his band members loved about his style. Being interviewed about his time playing alongside Miles, the guitarist Carlos Santana was asked if he was surprised that Miles started playing pop and rock. Santana replied, "No, I was not surprised because I knew he had that kind of heart. I think only ignorant people are like cows that regurgitate and eat the same thing. I always knew that Miles was a person who had a big heart, and his finger wanted to be at what was happening now — on the pulse. We love him for that, because he was always pushing forward." (8)

For the modern transformative artist, following the stream of creativity wherever it goes must be the ultimate priority. Applause of the audience and praise of the critics must not get in the way of achieving something completely revolutionary. The artist holds their breath and jumps, because they know that nothing spectacular was ever achieved without criticism or pushback.

Don't Look Back, and Don't Get Comfortable

In the same 1987 interview discussed earlier, the interviewer suggests that Bitches Brew was being touted as a revolution in music. Miles, in his usual abrupt style, replied by asking, “How long is it going to be a revolution?”⁽⁴⁾ Bitches Brew was released 17 years before this interview, and Miles was obviously tired of the callbacks. He wasn't interested in looking back at what he had done, but rather he wanted people to focus on what was happening now, and on what was going to happen.

Miles also didn't have much to say about those musicians who had gotten too comfortable within their styles. In a 1987 interview Miles was asked what he thought about Wynton Marsalis. He said, “I can't say anything about Wynton... He's a good trumpet player, but he doesn't have anything extra, you know, he's precise. And maybe later he'll develop... another style, but as it is now, he's just, you know, he's a good trumpet player, you know, he's straight though.”⁽⁷⁾ This idea is later developed in another interview where he is asked why he is constantly moving and changing. He said, “I can't be around a person [who's] comfortable. You know what I mean? They get on my nerves, because they don't wanna do anything.”⁽¹²⁾ Just a brief look over Miles' extensive discography shows a musician who lived up to his word — he was never comfortable. Moving from bebop to straight ahead, from cool jazz and fusion, Miles was constantly changing musicians and sounds in order to push his own creative limits.

Miles's priorities also clearly found their way into the sound of the recordings we know and love. In his biography of Miles Davis, *So What*, John Szwed remarked that Davis's "love of first takes at recording sessions were a part of the aesthetic of discovery that was given priority over a finished, perfected performance." (19, P264) Miles simply wasn't interested in perfection, but like an eccentric chemist mixing new compounds and substances together in search of the newest high, Miles was constantly creating new concoctions which pushed the boundaries and stunned listeners around the globe.

For the transformative artist these principles are immensely important. Safety is often the enemy of creativity, but what Miles shows us in his art and through his wisdom is that an artist should never get stuck in the habit of playing or creating what what has already been, and they should equally never be satisfied with being comfortable or safe if they're serious about creating something new and worthy of attention. Discomfort often pushes the mind to find new ways of doing and being, and thus the transformative artist will find ways to go beyond the bounds of comfort and necessity in order to retrieve new and valuable artistic intuition.

Transform Your “Mistakes” Into Masterpieces

One of the great challenges to any true artist is the perceptions they harbour around mistakes, and what it means to make them. Miles Davis offered true wisdom in these matters. In his 1987 interview he sits drawing with vivid colours, and the interviewer questions what he does when he makes a wrong line in his drawing, and if that's like music. In his usual raspy voice Miles responds, “The line isn't wrong until you have to put the next one down. Music is the same way... You don't make bad notes. The note next to the one that you think is bad corrects the one in front. The only way you can do that is by experience. The only way you can [fix] a line that you don't mean to draw is to draw every day.”⁽⁴⁾

Here we find two golden nuggets of wisdom. First, that the artist finds no mistakes when they view each line or note in relation to those that come next, and second, that the only way for an artist to become a seasoned reformer of these perceived mistakes is for them to immerse themselves in the art form. Experience is the true way to perfection, and Miles didn't just speak this, but he lived it. In his Harvard lecture on the wisdom of Miles Davis, the legendary pianist Herbie Hancock talks of a moment on stage with Miles where things could have gone completely awry. “Right in the middle of Miles' solo,” Herbie recalls, “I played the wrong chord - a chord that just sounded completely wrong, and Miles paused for a second, and then he played some notes that made my chord right, which astounded me. I couldn't believe what I had heard. Miles was able to make

something that was wrong into something that was right with the choice of notes that he played and the feeling that he had... What I realise now is that Miles didn't hear it as a mistake. He heard it as something that happened - just an event. And so that was part of the reality of what was happening at that moment, and he dealt with it... Since he didn't hear it as a mistake, he felt that it was his responsibility to find something that he felt fit, and he was able to do that. That taught me a very big lesson about not only music, but about life, you know? We can look for the world to be as we would like it to be as individuals, you know, 'make it easier for me' - that idea. But I think that the important idea is that we grow, and the only way we can grow is if we have a mind that is open enough to accept and to be able to experience situations as they are and turn them into medicine, to turn poison into medicine. Take whatever situation you have and make something constructive with it." (10)

The above passage shows the fruits of a way of life that values openness to new experiences as well as a sense of personal responsibility for the varied situations of life. For the artist, this change of perception is an absolute key to creative mastery. Such an artist identifies with transformation not only in the stream of creativity that leads to the next sound or style, but also in the potential that lies between each note or each stroke. Within these pockets of space and time lie opportunities for metamorphosis, where what is can be transformed into what could be. This requires a complete restructuring of what we ordinarily consider as "wrong" or "right", and it also requires a great amount of experience in the art of calling upon one's skills in each and every infinitesimal moment, but once achieved, this skill is undoubtedly valuable to the artist.

You Don't Have to Label It

In a TV advertisement for Honda scooters in 1984 Miles is seen leaning up against a scooter that looks like a prop straight from a 2020 scene in “Back to the Future”. In a reserved and somewhat awkward way he says, “I’ll play it first, and I’ll tell you about it later... Maybe.”⁽⁵⁾ This quote was quintessentially Miles, and if the advertisers came up with it then they got him just right. For Miles, labels only served to distract from what the music or art really was. He took this so seriously that he even detested the use of the term “jazz”⁽¹²⁾, often calling back to his early days in St. Louis where they didn’t call it anything⁽⁴⁾. It seems that for Miles, if people knew what it was called, then it had already been done.

Earlier in the decade in a 1982 interview Miles was asked what “we should tell people about Miles”. He said “Don’t tell them nothin’. Let them guess. What’s he gonna do next?”⁽⁹⁾ Again, what we see from this example is a man who was far more interested in pushing forward into new lanes of creativity that hadn’t been discovered rather than placing himself within a set of walls, definitions, or descriptions. Putting a label on art, or even talking about it too much, can often distract from what it is and what it could be. For the modern artist, it is imperative that labels and categories don’t put unnecessary boundaries on the creative process. Transformational art is by definition something completely different from what had come before, and although such art is built upon the ashes of that which came before, placing it within boundaries and walls runs the risk of

having it be associated with something which is dead or dying. The rule is simply this: an artist's art does not need to be placed within a certain lane or label, and refusing to do so opens up new paths of creative outlet that can supervene that which already exists.

Listen With Your Heart

In a highly commercialised world where the bottom dollar is king, Miles Davis seemed to surpass everyone's expectations simply by listening to what he wanted to do and create before listening to the logistical team behind him. Carlos Santana recalled this as being one of the key lessons he learned from Miles. He said, "He taught all of us how to do what we want to, not what our accountants or lawyers or CBS or Warner Brothers want. Do what your soul tells you to do. Damn the rules, it's the feeling that counts. That's a supreme lesson to teach anybody; execute your heart's convictions." (8) He then also went onto say that "If people don't understand Miles it's because they rationalise Miles with their mind and not with their heart. If you see Miles with your heart, he's right on." (8)

What Miles can teach us all is that as an artist, your own thoughtful creativity and earnest convictions must come first. They must come before the audience, the other musicians, the lawyers, the record company executives, and the accountants. True art is created for the sake of beauty and artistic brilliance - not for the sake of company profits. Miles understood this, which is exactly why he was able to break so many barriers and transform the music of the world so many times. And so it must be for the transformative artist, that they must listen to their own heart's convictions. To do anything else would be to put the cart before the horse.

Pass It On

In my previously mentioned interview with the musical historian Benjamin Cawthra he said that “You could look at the history of jazz, post war, just by looking at the Miles Davis family tree of musicians, and get a pretty fair sense of what happened over those 40-50 years in the music. And I think that’s part of his genius, actually - to be able to see the talent in others and to situate them in such a way that, through performing his music, their own talent comes out.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Miles was not only a bandleader, but his bands were essentially mini-universities for up and coming musicians. Miles constantly fast tracked the careers of younger musicians who he deemed to be promising by giving them opportunities to further develop their own style and sound.

This mentor-like approach, however, must not be taken to be any form of charity. Miles picked the best, and as a result, he created music that brought together the best of both the newer conceptions of jazz as well as the traditions which Miles had played through. Discussing Miles’ “second great quintet” with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams, Keith Waters recalls that “The group provided a formative workshop for the creative young innovators to develop individually and collectively. The players developed paths for extended improvisation and group interaction on an astonishingly high level.”^(18, P5)

In a Rolling Stones article, R. Palmer correctly points out that “In a music that has known more great players than great bandleaders, Davis set standards for ensemble style and interaction again and again. The list of musicians who broke into the front ranks through tenures in Davis’s bands reads like a who’s who: saxophonists John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderly and Wayne Shorter; pianists Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea; drummers Philly Joe Jones, Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette; guitarists John McLaughlin and John Scofield.”⁽¹⁷⁾ So many musicians are indebted not only to the path that Miles paved for music, but for his caring influence in the lives of those who played with and learned from him. He never stopped creating, and he never stopped passing that wisdom on to the musicians who deserved a shot.

Today’s artists share this same sacred responsibility — to learn and create, and then to pass it all on to those up and coming artists who are clearly deserving of a guiding hand. Art is about bringing people together in the spirit of creativity and celebration of life, and as soon as artists start living with scarcity mindsets, the art dies. Miles saw the value of incorporating new talent into the stream of creativity, and as a result incredible musicians graduated from his bands throughout his entire career.

For Inspiration, Come Back to the Water

When asked how he would describe Miles' music, Carlos Santana said, "Essential. As important as Picasso or Stravinsky, or da Vinci. To me it's always nourishment for the soul, like water. You know, you can have champagne or Coca Cola or beer, but sooner or later you're gonna drink water." (8)

There are some artists whose work was undoubtedly genius and pure. Miles was such an artist, and as such his music has been a source of soul-nourishing water for countless artists. This wisdom spoken by Santana, a transformative artist in his own right, gives a valuable lesson to those seeking to change the direction of their preferred art form: always come back to the water. Come back to those artists who paved the way, listen for the underlying stream of creativity that they represent, and let their revolutionary art rejuvenate the soul and inspire the way forward.

Don't Speak Your Legacy — Give It

Standing out the back of a stage after doing a stellar performance in 1985, Gwen Sommers asks Miles about the legacy that he would leave to younger jazz artists of the day. He said “I don't know... it's already there. It's in the tapes. I left it already. It's there! In the records, in the tapes... They'll do the same thing that I did - hear my stuff and take it somewhere else.”⁽¹³⁾ This is, perhaps, the greatest and most important legacy that we can learn from Miles — the legacy that is in the tapes. He really was a man of few words, because he was far more interested in showing what he had created rather than talking about it.

This offers yet another profound lesson for the transformative artist of today, which is to say that the legacy an artist leaves should be in the art they produce, and not in the words that they or the critics use to describe it. Nobody remembers the voices of Davis's critics, but they know the legacy he left with his groundbreaking albums like *Birth of the Cool* (1957), *Kind of Blue* (1959), *Sketches of Spain* (1959), *Bitches Brew* (1969) or *Tutu* (1986). These are the albums that changed history and changed the music we now know, and they're the best legacy Miles could have left behind.

Bringing it All Together

Miles Davis was unquestionably one of the most profound musical genius's in recent history, and his legacy lives on in many of the “social sounds” that we hear today. His transformative artistry stands as a guiding light to all who wish to create honest and meaningful art. Throughout this essay I have compiled some of the most common themes throughout Davis's interviews and other resources which can help us to understand the true genius behind the music, and as such I have offered what I believe to be a coherent theory of transformative artistry that suggests the following ten steps for any budding transformative artist to consider:

1. Past, present and future: follow the stream
2. Understand that knowledge is freedom
3. Be fearless in creation
4. Don't look back and don't get too comfortable
5. Transform “mistakes” into masterpieces
6. Don't feel the need to label the art
7. Listen with the heart
8. Pass it on
9. For inspiration, come back to water
10. Don't speak a legacy — leave it

Considering all of these steps together and in relation to each other, it is my hope that any budding artist who wishes to truly transform the world with their art will find this theory helpful and practical. Perhaps if more artists could engage with these kinds of concepts and practices we would see even more art that pushes the boundaries of creativity far beyond what we now see as possible.

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