

“Bitches Brew”—Miles Davis (1970)

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Essay by James Kaplan (guest post)*



Miles Davis

The sessions for the album that would be called “Bitches Brew” began on August 19, 1969, the day after the end of the four-day music festival in White Lake, NY that came to be known as Woodstock. Four hundred thousand young people had slogged through sporadic rain and mud and inadequate sanitary facilities and drug freak-outs to hear 32 acts, from Joan Baez to Jefferson Airplane, Santana to the Grateful Dead, Sly and the Family Stone to Jimi Hendrix. “That many people at a concert makes everybody go crazy, and especially people who make records,” Miles said. “The only thing on their minds is, ‘How can we sell records to that many people all the time?’ If we haven’t been doing that, then how can we do it?”

But this was also on Miles’s mind. He was in considerable debt to Columbia Records, and the sales of his new LPs, even when they charted, were stuck in the mid five figures--not enough to recoup what he owed, and a fraction of the Woodstockian numbers the label’s rock artists were racking up. To this end, he had been browbeating Columbia president Clive Davis--and, apparently, scaring him a little. “He has a raspy, low voice,” Davis recalled,

a fiery whisper that conveys heat over the telephone while you are straining to find out how much money he wants. He is spellbinding, and he can talk.... Then one day Miles called me to complain about his record sales. He was tired of low sales, and angry about it. Blood, Sweat and Tears and Chicago had borrowed enormously from him--and sold millions. These young *white* artists--he was in a rather militant frame of mind--were cashing in while he was struggling from advance to advance. If you stop calling me a *jazz* man, he said at one point, and just sell me alongside these other people, I’ll sell more.

It was remarkable: over fifty years in America, the very word *jazz* had gone from sex, scandal, and sensation to the low-price bins at record stores.

It was time for an even bigger change.

Miles had booked Columbia Studio B on East 52nd Street for three days, August 19 to the 21st, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Davis and the rest of his quintet--Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette--all showed up promptly the first morning, but this time there were even more musicians: Miles had hired a bass clarinetist, a second electric pianist (Joe Zawinul), an electric bassist, and three additional percussionists.

He and the band had been working out three new numbers while on the road that summer: at the Newport Jazz Festival in July they'd played two of them, "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down" and "Sanctuary." (The third was "Spanish Key.") This was not the dreamy music of his previous LP, "In a Silent Way": the new songs were harsh, spiky, urgent--redolent of the darkly charged atmosphere before a summer thunderstorm.

There were no detailed charts for the new sessions: as before, Miles had sketched out some chords and rhythms beforehand, but what he wanted from his musicians was spontaneity. Improvisation, at the highest level. And he wanted everything they came up with: for the first time, he had the producer Teo Macero run the recording equipment throughout each session. Miles conducted from the studio floor, walking around to each player and gesturing for louder or softer, now and then whispering an enigmatic word or two. Grooves started and stopped, then started again. The sessions, Chick Corea remembered, "were kind of wispy, they just passed right by. They felt more like rehearsals.... There's not much romance or drama to it for me." This is not how Miles remembered it. "That was a great recording session, man," he said. "It was just like one of them old-time jam sessions we used to have up at Minton's back in the old bebop days. Everybody was excited when we all left there each day."

Did Davis know ahead of time how the album would sound? Unsurprisingly, he claimed that he did. Not writing detailed arrangements ahead of time was "not because I didn't know what I wanted; I knew that what I wanted would come out of a process and not some prearranged shit." And whether he felt certain of the process or not--and even by his own account there was a great deal of uncertainty in Miles's molten core--he knew how important it was to *seem* certain.

And Miles the great artist wanted complete ownership of "Bitches Brew." "Some people have written that doing 'Bitches Brew' was Clive Davis's or Teo Macero's idea," he said. "That's a lie, because they didn't have nothing to do with none of it. Again, it was white people trying to give some credit to other white people where it wasn't deserved because the record became a breakthrough concept, very innovative."

Doing the album may not have been Clive Davis's or Teo Macero's idea, but as a great editor, Macero had a great deal to do with making "Bitches Brew" what it finally became. Working from almost nine hours of tape, he, the recording engineer Ray Moore and Miles mixed and spliced for more than a month, in a process that might have impressed Karlheinz Stockhausen. "With all that music, what we know as 'Bitches Brew' could have been assembled twenty different ways," the producer Bob Belden said on the occasion of the album's reissue almost thirty years later. "And Teo found logical, and musically interesting, ways to present it."

Months before the album's release in March 1970, Macero sent advance tapes of it to Ralph J. Gleason, arguably Miles's biggest fan in the music media. Gleason--who would write the gushing, e. e. cummings-style liner notes for "Bitches Brew"--mock-criticized: "No wonder jazz is dead, guys like you are killing it." Teo answered: "I may have killed jazz, but I have established a new kind of music. What have you done lately?"

James Kaplan is a biographer, novelist, and journalist. His books include "3 Shades of Blue: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans and the Lost Empire of Cool"; "Irving Berlin: New York Genius"; "Sinatra: The Chairman"; and "Frank: The Voice."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.