

Miles Davis, Paul Buckmaster, and Teo Macero at 50:
A Retrospective Reclamation of “Jazz’s Most Hated Record” (with Enrico Merlin)

Sebastian Suarez-Solis

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Dr. Anna H. Celenza

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Miles Davis' seminal jazz work *On the Corner* turned 50 this last October. The record sounds as inventive today as it did at its conception, when it bewildered, befuddled, and broke ground for more reasons than sound alone. When, then, if not now, would be a better time for a retrospective into the album? I recently took it upon myself to do such a thing and found in it a trove of techniques for today's composers and musicians. In my research I encountered an interesting history, in which there is a dichotomy between jazz purists and progressive listeners.

My research on this album began at a classical music festival in Alba, Italy (with a seminar by field expert Enrico Merlin on the original studio session recordings for the album). Since then, I've interviewed Merlin about Davis's roles as composer, bandleader, improviser, listener, curator, and entrepreneur. These traits are on full display on this album, alongside the talented contributions of his collaborators. My conversations with Merlin have proved quite essential in my research and, as such, I have abridged some of his thoughts throughout the paper, especially in the background section.

Background and Historical Context

Numerous figures served as musical influences on Davis as he began creating *On the Corner*, from James Brown and Sly Stone to Ornette Coleman, Jimmy Hendrix, Malcolm X and Karlheinz Stockhausen. As Davis later explained: "Black kids were listening to Sly Stone, James Brown, Aretha Franklin... They were into funk, music they could dance to. It took me a while to really get into the concept all the way, but with this new band I started to think about it."

Jimi Hendrix's influence on Miles has been well documented. He put Gil Evans onto Hendrix, much like he would do with his band mates and Stockhausen. Miles was "traumatized" by Hendrix's *Band of Gypsies*, according to Dominique Gaumont, one of Davis' guitarists.

Hendrix's tone (his electronic instrument), his mixture of disparate elements of rock, pop, improvisation, and funk, and his attraction to the youth compelled Davis. The modulation, wah-wah, and signal distortion and compression which are mainstays of Hendrix's sound are clearly present in *On the Corner*.

The influence of Malcolm X on America's black youth did not go unnoticed by Miles. As George E. Clarke has noted in his Duke University publication *Cool Politics: Styles of Honour in Malcolm X and Miles Davis*: "X and Davis dominate the popular cultures of their separate demesnes. Transfigured into demi-deities, they are omnipresent in mass media...their representations also dramatize and reproduce a patriarchal black masculinity, an anarchic machismo."

Another major influence on Davis' conception of *On the Corner* was the electronic works of Karlheinz Stockhausen. Paul Buckmaster wrote the liner notes for the album, and from them we can glean quite a bit about Miles's adoration of Stockhausen: "...since he had had speakers installed throughout his house, had Gruppen playing, loud, over and over again. At one point, he had me turn the record over and play, repeatedly, *Mixtur*. This music filled his house for the better part of the day, and also on other subsequent days. He obtained a cassette copy of Stockhausen's *Hymnen* and found that piece most intriguing. I saw in fact that he had that cassette in his Lamborghini..." There is documentation of Davis having listened to (and been in possession of) recordings of numerous Stockhausen's pieces: *Hymnen*, *Telemusik*, *Kurzweilen*, *Gruppen*, and *Mixtur*, among others.

In looking at Davis's historical pretenses for producing *On the Corner*, his fascination with musician Sly Stone was unavoidable, and Stone's influence is unmistakable. The knack for experimenting with musical production and editing techniques exhibited on albums like *There's*

a Riot Goin' On and *Stand!* (alongside, of course, dazzling musical ability, which Stone and Davis have in spades) finds its way into the making of *On the Corner*.

Above all, Miles was keen on youth; he wanted to create a record that could be popular with the Black youth of the day. In an earlier interview with British magazine *Melody Maker*, Davis had stated this clearly: “I don’t care who buys the records as long as they get to the black people so I will be remembered when I die. I’m not playing for any white people, man.”

According to Merlin, in the correspondence between Davis and Paul Buckmaster (who had a longstanding relationship with Miles as composer), the original name for *Bitches Brew* was “On the Corner.”

The *On the Corner* Sessions: How *On the Corner* was Recorded

Much of this section comes from interviews I’ve recording with Enrico Merlin, musicologist and expert on the record. Merlin previously interviewed Buckmaster and producer Teo Macero. As I interviewed Merlin via Zoom, I could see off the glare of his glasses the scrolling of his database on the record, it was quite astounding. Earlier in the year, he had given a talk at the Alba Music Festival in Alba, Italy, where he had gone over a digitization of the original (pre-edit) session reels and how the tracks were put together, as well as the efficacy of the record today. As he puts it: “[we] had some preparatory sessions, but the real sessions for *On the Corner* – that became the record –... June 1, ’72.”

Earlier in the year, Paul Buckmaster and Miles Davis had gotten together in Davis’s apartment, and a sort of big band was put together, but not in the traditional sense in any way. The second recording session occurred at Columbia’s studio E in the CBS Studio Building in New York on June 6, with subsequent sessions on June 12 and July 7, 1972.

Each session of the four sessions produced its own amount of material. The session with the most material in the final product is the first, June 1, date. On June 6, parts of “One and One” and “What If” were recorded, the latter of which were not used for the record. Of note, the “Black Satin” theme was recorded on the July 7 session, and two tracks “Ife” and “Jabali”, were recorded on July 12. It is important to identify, however, that Davis was not using studio time to record previously arranged material (like he usually did in his Gil Evans days). Instead, he was going into the studio to improvise. He would ask his musicians what tunes they had written or tell them to play a certain line or repeat a phrase with more or less (or different) inflection; he was bringing forces together, musically and personnel-wise.

From 1969, with the explorations in *Bitches Brew* onward, Davis was concerned with (as Enrico Merlin says) a “hyper-evolution of the rhythm section.” From the one drummer, keys, and double bass rhythm section of the decade prior to the massive vehicle that is the multiple percussion, keyboard, and guitar complements of *On the Corner* is only a difference of 13 years. Only 13 years separates *Kind of Blue* and *On the Corner*.

After the four recording sessions, the task was upon composer and recording engineer Teo Macero to curate a suite from the tapes. There could have been much more acoustic material on the record, even: some acoustic sitar and guitar material was recorded but discarded from the final product. In stark contrast from earlier records, there is no (or very little) overdubbing on *On the Corner*. The aim was to find a combination of sounds that worked; that is, this work was focused purely on sonic exploration, sound for sound’s sake.

It is not possible to know exactly how long it took Macero to curate and edit the recordings that became the album, as it is likely he was working unpaid, undocumented overtime during the production of the album.

Record Reviews and Other Publications

It's a fair assumption that the record did not fare well during its initial release. It was marketed to stores, radio stations, and consumers as a jazz record, but many jazz fans were dismayed by Davis's continued interest in new sources of inspiration (free jazz, funk and Motown, musique concrete, pan-African and Hindustani music). One might even go as far as to say that the album was relegated to "cult classic" status simply due to a labeling error. Its success doomed before ever went on sale. When the album hit the shelves and critics began to opine, the printed professional reviews were all but dismissive, quickly casting it aside as a jazz flop. The album was released in October 1972, and the first reviews from major jazz publications in the US came out in early 1973. To say jazz publications panned it is a slight understatement. *Jazz Journal's* Ron Brown sums up the purist jazz critic sentiment quite well: "I'd like to think that nobody could be so easily pleased as to dig this record to any extent."

Will Smith, from *Down Beat*, showed his displeasure in the first couple lines of his review: "The title is apt and maybe a little too close for comfort. In fact, it's almost as though Miles was "on the corner" during much of the recording."

"Take some chunka-chunka-chunka rhythm, lots of little background percussion diddle-around sounds, some electronic mutations, add simple tune lines that sound a great deal alike and play some spacy solos. You've got the "groovin' " formula, and you stick with it interminably to create your "magic." But is it magic or just repetitious boredom?"

Smith continues by noting: "Miles is playing not much differently than he did in the '50s and '60s... Sure, he's added some electronics, but it really doesn't alter his style much. Just thank God he's got more taste in the use of his electronic hookups than Don Ellis. Pete Welding said it

all too well in his review of Miles' last release. *Live- Evil* (db,4/13/72). He said the music needs editing.” Other critics parrot similar ideas.

Right below the review for *On the Corner* – Smith offers a glowing, five-star endorsement for Sun Ra’s live album *It’s After the End of the World*. One can only imagine Davis’s frustration upon seeing these two reviews by Smith. Worthy of note, however, is Smith’s tone in lauding Sun Ra’s work: it’s quite telling of his dispositions toward musical aesthetic. While trying to assure the work is of high caliber, he insists that the theatrics and absurd ideas he accuses Ra of being known for are not present in this recording: “The arkestra's [sic] music often is a dichotomy. It can be alternately sophisticated and naive. The absurd aspects are downplayed for the most part here.” Smith’s words imply that for him, great jazz music is often sophisticated and rarely naive.

Those were only critiques from critics (attached to institutions of power and social sway), however. What did general listeners and musicians think? Indeed, fellow musicians did have more of an inquisitive and positive experience. In a *Down Beat* blindfold test with Doc Severinsen II, Leonard Feather played him “Black Satin,” the second track on the record, to Severinsen’s delight. “It's a very interesting thing. It's pretty hard to criticize it musically, because it's so much its own thing. One thing it did indicate to me is that as a group they're into this thing together. Whatever it is they're doing, they're into it with all four feet ... it's valid. I think.” From what he intimated in his blindfold test, it seems he was quite fond of the admixture of timbres in the record: “They managed to keep it a mystery to me that it was a trumpet for quite a while.” Listeners in *Jazz Digest* chimed in with similar adorations.

Rock and pop publications differed by a far margin. *Rolling Stone* published a gleaming review of the record on December 7, 1972, comparing it alongside Carlos Santana’s

Caravanserai and lauding Davis for his ability to listen to outside sources like Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix. The English popular rock and punk magazine *Sounds* reviewed the record in January 1973, as well.

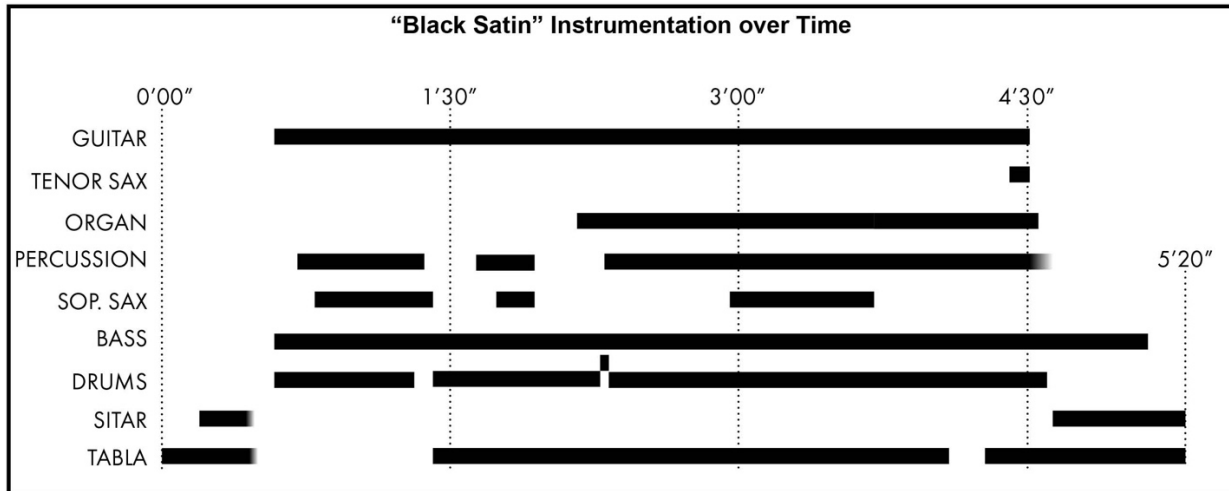
Overall, while it is evident the major jazz publications did not take to the record (or worse), Davis did spark great interest in rock and pop fans with *On the Corner*, going all the way up to major magazines. This, however, did not save it from its original fate: record store discount bins.

Miles Davis' *On the Corner* 50 Years Later

The cover of *On the Corner* is groundbreaking in its own way. Davis had deliberately chosen to leave the cover bereft of any personnel listings and, if anything, that's what the cover portrays: a surety of position, a chosen presentation. Throughout the design of the cover, there are hints to its nature, hints of Davis' deliberation: "I didn't put those names on *On the Corner*... so now the critics have to say, 'What's this instrument, and what's this?' I told them not to put any instrumentation on..." Davis said in an interview with Michael Watts in a February 1973 *Melody Maker* issue. "I'm not even gonna put my picture on albums anymore. Pictures are dead, man. You close your eyes and you're there."

In this way, the digital "listen" suffers from the physical one, as the phenomenological aspects of having the cover at hand are part of the experience of understanding the album. As someone who encountered the record knowing much of the listed personnel and instrumentation, there was not much initial room for wonderment at who was playing what.

Black Satin



The shortest and arguably the most effective of all the tracks on the album, “Black Satin” contains within itself almost all the techniques that make *On the Corner* such a seminal record. Looking at the figure above, we can see that this album is wholly different from his previous two works *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*: while both albums treat the sample as a unit to loop for synthesis of a new sound, *On the Corner* is more focused on creating a mood through the selection and curation of moments of extended improvisation without overdubbing.

For now, an abridged analysis will do: there is an intro and an outro, both free time sitar and tabla duos; a head, of sorts, with an Ornette Coleman- or James Brown-like groove, hits, of sorts, and solos. Referencing the table above proves useful in understanding the composition of the track.

Looking at the instrumentation – saxophones, bass clarinet, trumpet, guitar, sitar, tabla, percussion, bass, drums, several keyboards, and organ – can reveal quite a bit about its particular effectiveness. Comparing this orchestration with those of his collaborations with Gil Evans, this new colossus weighs in on the leaner side, but its sound is undeniably as big, if not bigger. Once more, Davis is at his best, bringing in elements of one stream with another; there is a clear

similarity to Davis's earlier work with Gil Evans, bringing together instruments from disparate sources in grandiose ways, working with a composer as well as Macero, and whatnot. However, even more so than *Sketches of Spain*, in *On the Corner* Miles aimed to weave together sonic perspectives from many international cultures. Just a couple weeks before he recorded *On the Corner*, as his group was coming together, he was interviewed once again by jazz critic Leonard Feather. When the topic turned to his earlier recordings, particularly his earlier (lauded) work with Gil Evans, Davis was apathetic, rather reflexively focusing on the future:

“LF: Will you ever again do anything like you did with Gil Evans? Or have you put all that behind you?”

MD: I can't get with that. But we have a new instrumentation for a big band that's outa sight.

LF: What does it consist of?

MD: If I tell you that, every motherfucker will be copying it. Quincy would be the first one. Quincy's always trying to pick my mind.” (Davis, Miles, Paul Maher, and Michael K. Dorr)

Was that a hint toward the cats he would wrangle together for *On the Corner*? It's interesting to note that this focus on Davis's Evansian side is not so much a forced ex post facto assumption, but even as much a pre-empted by the likes of Leonard Feather. Most apparent – and first to our ears – is instrumentation. Of course, as there is no track listing, one can imagine that instrumentation is even more so on the mind during even a casual listen. Davis's collaborations with Badal Roy on tabla, Collin Westcott on electric sitar, and James Mtume on percussion lay a solid foundation while also – if not because of – their great instrumental potential for dialectical conversation, a kind of cross-cultural hocket.

While meeting with composer Paul Buckmaster in preparation for a recording session (in the years leading up to *On the Corner*), Davis was given the suggestion to include sections of atemporality a la Stockhausen. Davis's connections through Buckmaster to Stockhausen prove another inseparable part of the greatness to this record and, yes, of course, "Black Satin." It is through Buckmaster that there is record of Davis's exposure to Stockhausen's music, with *Telemusik* being the first such piece to strike him, tape splicing in particular. Stockhausen's incorporation of groundbreaking electronic techniques, specifically stacked splicing (on a special multi-track tape editor), ring modulation, filtering – his own explorations into new sounds and global perspectives – had found their way in the West Coast American jazz circle.

In a way, *On the Corner* serves as the logical extension for the frameworks and musical axioms that Davis's previous albums build and discover. *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* both use tape splicing techniques by way of Columbia Engineer Teo Macero, both groundbreaking in their own rights, yet fundamentally different from the music of *On the Corner*. Why the stark difference across the board between the records? Why are *Bitches Brew* and *In a Silent Way* so much more immediately successful and ultimately chosen to be more widely influential albums? Short answer: marketing and institutional inflexibility. How can Davis get this to the youth if the youth aren't buying it?

If it's any reflection on the album, however, I think it comes down to instrumentation and again, in large part, the production strategy. Miles had been working with Maupin (bass clarinet) and Mtume (percussion) for years, but the added electronics by way of Stockhausen, Stone, Brown, and Hendrix gave way for a different motive for production. As well, Collin Walcott's electric sitar proved a very important addition sonically, especially on tracks like "Black Satin." With this record, the focus for production was the curation of nice, long stretches of sound

(which, in a set of 4 reels is quite a short amount of time, a rare gem to discover) instead of synthesizing new sounds from looped samples. In this way, there is a sort of presence that provides a dimensionality to the sound that was prescient, at least the way the album was presented. If it was presented as a rock album, maybe it wouldn't be seen as prescient today; we can never know.

On instrumentation, it seems inane not to mention the wah-wah trumpet until then, though its function seems benign, almost hopelessly experimental without the proper context (which some reviewers mention Davis's assumed frustration at his trumpet for not being a guitar), until Davis's momentary obsession with Stockhausen places the wah-wah trumpet in the correct light: a powerful tool for spectral modulation. With the wah-wah trumpet, keyboards/synthesizers, organ, saxophones, and plethora of instruments, Davis wields a synthesizer made up of human elements. It's not only the stellar techniques that Teo Macero utilizes post-recording which make this track – and this album – stand out, but the instrumentation and composition of Davis and Buckmaster (as well as Davis's unmatched studio energy as leader) which work in tandem to provide a spectral moiety, in situ, unlike the controlled looping explorations and refined moods his previous albums.

Back to temporal analysis, sans abridgment; now we are ready for a holistic analysis of "Black Satin" by Miles Davis. "Black Satin," a metonym for the album itself, sits at the intersection between Davis's fascination with musicians, especially Stockhausen; his dialectic fervor toward his compatriots, specifically James Brown and Sly Stone; and Davis's drive to bring together discrete forces in a cross-cultural attempt (possibly even driven by a post-Gil Evans nostalgia), all supported by Paul Buckmaster and Teo Macero's work as composer and engineer. There is quite a bit to glean from the approximately 30 second tabla and electric sitar

introduction, which also includes bird whistle, whether by imitation from some manipulated instrument, or by the percussionist. The opening sample, which we hear in medias res, the previous track having faded out, “Black Satin” beginning with a tabla and bird whistle in between the beat. The bird whistle, certainly modulated, reflects a certain Stockhausian oeuvre; radiofrequency play. Here, importantly, tablaist Badal Roy would be seen as communicating the tail of piece to the ensemble and the audience if this were not edited. However, phenomenologically, the ritual and its effects are the same regardless of the method of composition.

At the tail end of the introduction, we hear some pitch and formant modulation, which lend the samples a sort of wavy, distorted electronic grain to the sound. It is considerable for composers aspiring to develop such sound worlds to note that re-pitching and formant modulation is quite easy and an in-house function of many digital audio workstations.

After a crossfade and a couple seconds of silence, the drums, keyboard, and (most notably) the wah-wah bass come in with a quick, tight funk groove à la James Brown or Sly Stone. So far, we have been presented with many disparate elements in plain juxtaposition. As the seconds pass and instruments layer, a synthesis of the previously presented elements emerge, especially in the head motive. Saxophones mix with Davis’s wah-wah trumpet, a sort of Stockhausen-like ring modulation which melds and flutters. For the most part, I have noticed that instruments tend to be treated as one track, meaning that any wish to double a timbre meant doubling it in the orchestrator’s sense of the word: finding some other available player to play it and mix timbres, not physical overdubbing or overediting in a sense. Each player is still one player.

As Davis's voice becomes more apparent from the saxophones', the energy soars, with almost no room left to grow, and grow it does, which I attribute to one perception I've made: the moments where the instrumentation cuts out leaves musicians free to explore even louder volumes when they come back in again. I've used this invariably in my compositions when I want to reach new levels of loudness. This is especially effective at 1:19, when the drums cut out for about a bar and a half. Too long to be a hiccup, too short to be a mood killer, just long enough to be talked about fifty years after its release. Certainly, these rare gems cannot be what reviewers saw as mistakes left in the mix. Under cover of sleigh bells, the instruments fade out and give way to an outro of bird whistle, electric sitar, and tabla.

The Complete *On the Corner* Sessions

The radical nature of this album is even more apparent in the complete sessions, the tracks that never were; it seems almost too easy to think that the tracks that did not make it to the final cut were simply too new. Listening to tracks like "U-Turnaround," it's hard to deny the record's forward-thinking presence, with its punchy, driving drumset, freely flying improvisations on top of rock and funk grooves, and unmatched energy. Even in these tracks, the references to Stockhausen et al is very much present. *Hymnen* and *Kurzwellen* come to mind.

The complete sessions, released in September 2007, also offer a possible solution to an auditory dilemma. Though Bennie Maupin and Paul Buckmaster are credited as performing on the record, it is hardly perceptible. Merlin suggests that there are some certain swoopy drones that the cello may be responsible for, but offers that it is possible they weren't on the final cut but were credited regardless, as they had already done the studio time. On June 12, the band recorded "Jabali" (named after Billy Hart), which does feature the bass clarinet. In general, the *Complete On the Corner Sessions* do have more to offer from Buckmaster and Maupin.

***On the Corner's* Lessons for Today's Musicians**

Despite its bygone status, *On the Corner* remains as sonically relevant and culturally important. For composers, performers, and musicians in general, the album can be a fantastic resource for inspiration, a reminder of collaboration done right. The distance in time between *Kind of Blue* and *On the Corner* is only 13 years. 13 years marks the difference between the height of cool jazz and the global-electronic-fusion-free-jazz moiety of *On the Corner*. 10 years marks the difference between *Kind of Blue* and *Bitches Brew*. It is only recently, in the 21st century, that critics have come around to appreciate the album; maybe it was too quick of a change for the art institutions. In a field of musicians who strive to keep the same sound (jazz or pop, Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis, Frank Zappa, or the Rolling Stones), Davis constantly chased new ideas.

Miles Davis understood that art is nothing without community (without those who take part in it), from audience members to the music-makers themselves. *On the Corner* would be only a session, a jam session, if Miles didn't inspire a web of musicians, composers, and engineers. Jazz would not have a global fusion front without the Miles Davis school of musicians and their disciples. Grow your communities.

Besides his mind-blowing sonic abilities, Davis' didactic musical practice and ability to recontextualize the forces around him is what makes *On the Corner* such an effective composition. Grow your communities.

Davis, as well, through *On the Corner*, shows how to make political art an explicit act, from audience cultivation through to phenomenological artistic expectation, from instrumentation, form, and messaging down to motifs, moods, and sources of inspiration. It's a communal act, like being on a street corner.

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