

Unlocking the Mysteries of the Second Miles Davis Quintet

Benjamin Bierman

The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965–68. By Keith Waters. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 302 pp.

*The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965–68*¹ examines six studio recordings—*E.S.P.*, *Miles Smiles*, *Sorcerer*, *Nefertiti*, *Miles in the Sky*, and *Filles de Kilimanjaro*—of the Miles Davis “second quintet.” The group featured Wayne Shorter (tenor saxophone), Herbie Hancock (piano and keyboards), Ron Carter (bass), and Tony Williams (drums). It is difficult to overstate the importance of this group, both as an ensemble and as a collection of individual players and composers, to the evolution and current state of jazz, as well as to other aspects of contemporary popular music. From a strictly personal perspective, when I think of the most significant jazz recordings and groups in the last fifty years, the first two that come to my mind are the John Coltrane quartet and this version of the Miles Davis quintet.

Miles is Miles—throughout his career restlessly and relentlessly pushing himself and everyone else through extensive changes in approaches to jazz soloing, band-leading, and composing. Hancock and Shorter, both as players and composers, have been major forces and continue to move music forward in numerous ways; Carter has long been one of jazz’s top bassists and bandleaders; and Williams helped shape modern jazz drumming.

Keith Waters, in his understated and self-effacing fashion, sets out his goals in his preface: “The analyses presented here...merely explore ideas that may be of particular interest to jazz musicians, listeners, writers, historians, and analysts, present features of the music that I think are audible but may not be immediately apparent, and consider ways in which these recordings broached or broke with jazz traditions” (ix–x). These are anything but modest goals, considering the intricate, elusively mysterious, and even magical quality of these recordings—certainly among the most important records in jazz.

Waters listens to the music from an analyst’s point of view of course, but also as an experienced jazz pianist. This enables him to make fascinating and illuminating

¹ This is the second book in the Oxford University Press series *Oxford Studies in Recorded Jazz*.

observations regarding performance-oriented issues, such as the form being lost and found during solos, incorrect entrances, and clashing chords. These touches give us a more direct connection with the music and the musicians and add spice to the analyses.

Besides his clearly insightful listening, the primary sources for the analyses are Waters's effective and extensive transcriptions of the compositions and improvisations (there are 63 musical examples). Waters also cites a broad cross section of literature about the quintet, its members, and these compositions, as well as larger issues in jazz studies. He also refers extensively to Library of Congress sources (Wayne Shorter's copyright deposits), extant lead sheets, and interviews.

This is an extremely thorough, in-depth, and insightful analytical study. It is a major addition to the field of jazz studies for a variety of reasons. First of all, it gives us minutely detailed and skillful analyses of these wonderful and innovative recordings. These sessions present essential compositions from the band members, including of course Wayne Shorter, one of jazz's great composers—particularly for small group writing—and Herbie Hancock. Waters also puts forth his notion of how to analyze jazz solos, an area still in its relative infancy and rife with slippery slopes. He also makes a successful foray into issues of group interaction, an area that has drawn much attention in the field of jazz studies, including writings by Ingrid Monson, Paul Berliner, and Robert Hodson.

Perhaps most importantly, while employing his analytical and theoretical skills and drawing on the strengths, vocabulary, and methodology of the field of music theory, Waters also manages to convey how jazz musicians generally think and speak about music without feeling the necessity to contextualize these assumptions within traditional music theory models. For example, he unapologetically speaks of an essential element in jazz, the use of complex and colorful chords with chord tones above the seventh. These chords and chord tones can be manipulated in innumerable ways and are part of the standard jazz harmonic vocabulary; they do not need explaining or rationalizing, or, for that matter, resolving. For example, rather than conceiving of the ninth as a consonant chord tone that has a myriad of voice-leading possibilities, the music theory orthodoxy at times imposes its traditional tonal approach on jazz by referring to this tone as a dissonance in need of resolution.² I greatly appreciate that Waters has brought in the practitioner's perspective, and feel that this is an important and much-needed advance in the field of jazz studies and, more specifically, music theory and analysis as it relates to jazz. This approach more clearly articulates composers' and players' practical application of complex chords.

² For an extensive discussion of issues regarding consonance, dissonance, and resolution in jazz, see James McGowan, "Consonance' in Tonal Jazz: A Critical Survey of Its Semantic History," *Jazz Perspectives* 2/1 (May 2008): 69–102.

Jazz and pop scholarship—the two often tend to intertwine—is a relatively young field that is rapidly gaining theoretical maturity. Within it, from a gross standpoint, are two streams, cultural and analytical. In his preface Waters speaks to his perception of such a split in the jazz community: “Jazz studies has profited considerably by recent intersections with cultural studies... Yet occasionally such studies critique other approaches that allow more detailed views of musical organization, structure, and theorizing about them” (x). Waters seems to be heading off in advance what he perceives to be unnecessary criticism of his approach. I support this stance as there is certainly an important place in the literature for this type of analytical writing.

Though he has created theoretical models, such as the six levels of form in improvisation (discussed below), Waters explicitly stakes out ground for “analysis for analysis’s sake,” independently of these models. And while this book is firmly rooted in the music theory world, it also reaches well beyond it, speaking to all jazz musicians regardless of training or familiarity with music theory literature and vocabulary. Only occasionally are there analyses employing traditional music theory models that are a slight stretch in this context. For example, at times his claims of long-range voice-leading maneuvers over the course of a solo do not reflect the aural effect as I perceive it and seem to imply an intention that I do not believe is present.

Waters looks at these recordings holistically—examining the overall forms, including the improvisations—and then closely analyzes both the head and improvisations for issues such as harmonic content, motive (or what he calls “a rather general and loose notion of motive” [xiv]), form, and meter (including hypermeter), bringing a unique analytical perspective to each. Some analysts have focused on particular solos, while others concentrate on formal compositional issues; Waters, on the other hand, examines an admirably broad range of analytical topics. He seems most comfortable when writing about Hancock’s and Shorter’s compositional and improvisational strategies. He also examines Miles’s contributions, of course, but the trumpeter’s overall presence as a player and bandleader should feel much larger than it does in the book.

Williams’s contributions, while acknowledged as vast, are sorely overlooked here. Even without transcriptions—a drastic omission by the author’s own admission—the drummer’s role could have been examined in much more detail. While more attention is paid to Carter than to Williams, the bassist’s presence here is also much smaller than I would expect or hope. Hancock’s role is certainly emphasized, which is understandable given Waters’s inclinations and the pianist’s pivotal role in the band. Clearly Waters has chosen to focus on the issues that are important to him, but these biases are big issues for me. In my opinion, Miles is the most important

member of this group on many levels, and Williams is next in line.³ So obviously we have a different perspective.

After the preface, the book is logically and neatly divided into eight chapters. The first examines the quintet itself, its studio processes and personnel. Chapter 2 gives an extremely detailed description of analytical techniques employed throughout the book. Chapters 3 to 6 examine one album each—*E.S.P.*, *Miles Smiles*, *Sorcerer*, and *Nefertiti*—while chapter 7 tackles *Miles in the Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro*. The final chapter examines the legacies of the quintet.

Chapter 1 contextualizes the group, which Waters positions as a link between hard bop practices and the avant-garde. Regarding the group's compositional impact, Waters states, "The compositions themselves represent a significant contribution to the jazz repertory, and their innovations form a cornerstone of contemporary jazz composition" (7–8). He substantiates this claim by discussing elements such as chord types employed, chord successions, non-functional progressions, motivic development, and a determined deviation from standard forms.

Waters also introduces the studio processes of the band, which play an important role throughout the book and add a much-appreciated practical point of view. In the process, Waters debunks Miles's reputation as a "one-take" artist by closely examining alternate takes. Waters provides detailed discussions of the evolution of each work through the rehearsal process, including comparisons between the recordings and Shorter's lead sheets, and builds upon what we generally know of these recordings from writers such as Todd Coolman, Jack Chambers, Ian Carr, and John Szwed.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the analytical strategies employed throughout the book, and Waters takes advantage of this opportunity to address major issues in jazz analysis. For example, he tackles the ambiguous term "modal jazz" and lays out various complexities and approaches to the style, in relation to both Miles's recordings and jazz more generally. After historically contextualizing the style, Waters analyzes the quintet's use of "modal harmony" in depth, as well the members' approach to mode/scale improvisation.

Motivic analysis plays a major role in Waters's analyses of both the compositions and the solos. He states that he examines motivic development less to find cohesion and unity in improvisations than to provide "ways to help hear how these players worked out individual ideas during the flow of improvisation" (xiv). His analyses,

³ Throughout his autobiography Miles speaks of Williams's importance to this group: "Tony was always the center that the group's sound revolved around" (264); "If I was the inspiration and wisdom and the link for this band, Tony was the fire, the creative spark" (273); "The band revolved around Tony" (279); "In the band I had with Herbie, Tony, Ron, and Wayne, Tony set the shit up and we followed him" (398). Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

however, often feel more like a discussion of a composition, highlighting the difficulty of analyzing improvisational material. After a brief contextualization, he parses the discussion into three basic areas: the use of motivic cells, the interaction of motivic material between players, and the expansion of motivic material. Another major methodology employed by Waters examines rhythm and phrase structure to discuss meter, hypermeter, and metrical conflict in improvisation. Waters speaks of four basic methods here: elasticizing harmonic rhythm, the shifting of accents to create metrical ambiguity, metrical conflict, and the creation of formal ambiguity through the blurring of formal divisions.

This analytical introduction concludes with Waters's theory of form in improvisation, which looms large throughout this study. He has created this useful system to categorize various approaches to "free" improvisation and "provide a more nuanced view of formal solutions and attitudes in the 1960s, one that more richly describes formal practice and that more closely acknowledges the band's notion of 'controlled freedom'" (79). He has classified levels of form in improvisation, ranging from Level 3—where the rhythm section and soloist preserve hypermeter, meter, pulse, harmonic progression, and harmonic rhythm from the head—to Level 0, where the soloist and rhythm section essentially abandon these elements (Levels 1 and 2 are subdivided to make six levels altogether).

In the following chapters, which examine the albums chronologically, Waters introduces each album as a whole and then proceeds to each composition. After an introduction to the track, he generally chooses one or two primary analytical areas to focus on. One of the great strengths of the book is that he manages to cover an extensive range of issues while also employing a wide array of analytical techniques. Each analysis is deep and detailed and allows—indeed requires—intense study.

Throughout, Waters contextualizes the compositions, giving us a feel for the composers' styles and compositional evolution, as well the group's evolving compositional approach. For example, Waters points out that Hancock's "Little One," from *E.S.P.*, is an important composition for the group harmonically, as the pianist explores shifting harmonies over bass pedal points, a significant stylistic element for Hancock and the group. Waters does not contextualize the players' improvisations as effectively, however, and this is a rich avenue for further study. Waters does, however, provide a model for this technique in an analysis of Shorter's solo on "Pinocchio" (discussed below).

Hancock's and Shorter's harmonic conceptions were essential to the character of these recordings, as well as to the future of jazz, and in his discussion of "Little One" Waters provides valuable insight into Hancock's harmonic sensibilities as a composer. Loosely and freely borrowing from a Schenkerian perspective, Waters examines the composition's bass line from a large-scale perspective. He then discusses the tune's intensely colorful chromatic progressions in close detail from a

mode/scale perspective, pointing out that the progressions generally rely upon principles of tritone substitutions but in a fascinating permutation.

For this recording, however, Waters primarily examines Miles's solo, initially discussing his handling of an Fsus4 chord in terms of scales and modes. While Shorter and Hancock avoid the third in their solos, "Davis's solo offers a study in how he negotiates and reevaluates that harmony in real time over the course of his three choruses. It suggests a remarkably rapid learning curve in adapting to that harmony, and altering the harmonic implications of the opening 4 bars in each chorus" (103). This is an engaging examination of a soloist's thought process and his journey through an improvisation.

Waters also uses this solo to make an important observation regarding the limitations of mode/scale analysis: "Davis seems unconcerned with careful negotiations of each individual harmony. Instead, the solo attains much of its expressive power through memorable and malleable motives" (106). Waters's discussion of Miles's use of motives is perceptive and detailed, yet I feel he does not quite manage to convey the actual character of the solo. I found myself longing for more adjectival writing that attempts to express the beauty, excitement, and other intangibles that make a solo, soloist, or composition special. Waters has shown himself quite capable of doing so, but seems a bit reticent in this regard.

For example, in this solo, I find myself completely enthralled by Miles's careful and extremely colorful pitch choices as he floats over this knotty and complicated harmonic progression, though it clearly presents him with a bit of difficulty. Also, his ability to make the strange melody he creates seem natural and melodic—almost as if he is playing "Bye, Bye Blackbird"—is essential to his style and appeal. Waters alludes to this when he states, "Davis seems uninterested in negotiating and expressing each harmony carefully..." (109), but he does not capture Miles in the analysis as I hear him. Davis's lyrical quality and melodic gift are not discussed, nor is the enigmatic yet unmistakable emotional content of his work. So again, Davis's impact on this music is not nearly as significant in Waters's overall analysis as I feel it deserves to be.

Thankfully Waters does not support the wildly faulty and often-discussed notion that Miles was a limited trumpet player technically. But Waters also says little to refute this idea. Davis in fact became a wonderful player, as evidenced by his magnificent work as featured melodist and soloist on studio recordings such as *Birth of the Cool* and the albums with arranger Gil Evans. Additionally, on the recordings discussed in this book, his solos are, in my listening, the most direct and musically and emotionally compelling. Unfortunately, Waters's writing does not convey Miles's brilliance, his level of musicianship, or the sound that has captivated me for so many years.

This does not apply to Hancock's playing, however, and Waters's analysis of Hancock's "Madness" from *Nefertiti* is a prime example. The CD set of the

complete studio recordings of the quintet includes alternate takes that give us added insight into the workings of this group,⁴ and for “Madness” there is also a rehearsal take. For the rehearsal they play the tune as a slow waltz in two sections—evidently Hancock’s original conception of the piece—while the released take and alternate takes are in a quick 4/4 with only one section.

After a brief discussion of the form, Waters analyzes the head of the released take, which consists of six chords/harmonies, all rich and colorful. The fifth, however, cannot be labeled with a traditional chord name, and Waters solves this dilemma by naming it the “Madness” chord (he does this elsewhere with the “Riot” chord, also on *Nefertiti*). The “Madness” chord consists of a B \flat in the bass, left-hand pitches A3-C4-E \flat -A \flat , and right-hand pitches B-D-D \sharp -E/F \flat . Naming the chord is only the first problem, and Waters goes on to relate it to doubly diminished harmonies (simultaneous diminished seventh chords a half step apart) used by Hancock. This proves problematic, as he points out, because the chord, combined with the six-note melody stated by the horns, employs eleven of the twelve chromatic pitches.

Though all of Waters’s analyses are cogent and insightful, I cannot help but feel that he is most at home when discussing Hancock’s playing. He offers a detailed analysis of Hancock’s “Madness” solo, declaring it “an improvisational tour de force.” I greatly appreciate Waters’s overview of what makes this solo so exceptional. He discusses an array of issues such as group interaction, and the freedom from meter and hypermeter while maintaining a sense of pulse (Level 1 in his scheme of form in improvisation). Waters then details Hancock’s navigation through three cycles of the six-chord progression, focusing on his use of the diminished scale (octatonic collection).⁵

Fortunately, in this solo analysis, Waters has a brief yet solid section that addresses the rhythm section’s improvisational strategies, which are crucial to this tune. In this case, however, a more thorough analysis of the drums and bass would be quite illustrative and helpful in conjunction with the harmonic analysis of Hancock’s solo. It would also help explore more deeply the “controlled freedom” that this group was so intently developing. In the case of Williams, for example, a discussion of his cymbal patterns (a crucial element in his playing and influence)—as well as the dynamics, colors and orchestrational aspects of the drum kit—would have proved useful. This is another important area for future study.

Waters’s approach to “Pinocchio,” also from *Nefertiti*, shows off another of his analytical strengths—his insight into Wayne Shorter’s compositional style, including contextualization of his composing and playing in relation to his past work. In chapter 2 Waters discusses Shorter’s use of motivic expansion in his solo on

⁴ Miles Davis, *The Complete Quintet Recordings 1965–68* (Columbia/Legacy C6KI 67398).

⁵ Jazz musicians refer to the octatonic collection as a diminished scale.

“Orbits,” from *Miles Smiles*, and notes that in “Pinocchio” these principles carried over into his composing. In the analysis of “Pinocchio” he traces the main motive as it expands throughout its three statements while also transforming harmonically, and contrasts this with Shorter’s earlier reliance upon “motives that recur at regular 2-bar intervals” (230).

Shorter’s solo on “Pinocchio” is then parsed into five sections, each introducing new motivic material. Waters also points out connections between these sections, stating for example that “As Shorter initiates new motivic ideas every 8 bars, the pitch material at Sections 3 and 4 emanates from the pitches stated just previously. This illustrates a compelling improvisational tactic in which events flow out of preceding material and suggests that soloists establish musical relationships and continuity not only from overt motivic correspondences, but also from pitch relationships that then launch new motivic ideas” (235). While Waters makes a strong argument for the tactic in this particular case, further exploration is needed to support his broader claim that it is a feature in other soloists’ improvisations.

As he does elsewhere, Waters points out discrepancies between *The Real Book* (the most prominent “fake book” used by musicians) and the recording, noting that some previous analyses have relied on incorrect lead sheets. In a quick but fascinating examination, he adds that while the fake book changes appear to be more tonally functional at first, the actual changes on the recording are actually more functional upon closer inspection. His analysis is steeped in both the functional harmony and jazz tradition, and his language is understandable to anyone with either theoretical or practical experience—a rare combination in works of this sort. He manages to blend his jazz musicianship and his analytical chops in an unusually effective manner—another indication of the value of this book as it both corrects and builds upon past work on this material.

The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965–68 advances the field of jazz analysis through its thoroughness and analytical insight, applying creative approaches to explain music that has often seemed structurally opaque and mysterious and that has often been discussed only in superlatives. This study has few counterparts for comparison and stands in a rather lonely position in the world of contemporary jazz analysis.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

BENJAMIN BIERMAN is a composer, trumpeter, bandleader, and assistant professor at John Jay College, CUNY. He has published articles in *Jazz Perspectives* and *American Music Review*, and has contributed essays to the book *Pop-Culture Pedagogy in the Music Classroom* as well as the forthcoming *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*. His website is www.benbierman.com.

The *Journal of Jazz Studies* (JJS) is published by the Institute of Jazz Studies at the Newark campus of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. JJS is hosted online by the Rutgers University Libraries at <http://jjs.libraries.rutgers.edu>.