

## articles

### Porgy and Miles\*

By Mark Tucker

Miles Davis traced his rising fame in the 1950s to changes taking place in society. "There was a new mood coming into the country," he stated in his autobiography. "Black and white people were starting to get together, and in the music world Uncle Tom images were on their way out." Describing himself as a "nonconformist"—"cool and hip and angry and sophisticated and ultra clean"—Davis identified with others in that period who were breaking barriers and challenging authority: Martin Luther King leading the Montgomery bus boycott, Marian Anderson appearing as the first black singer at the Metropolitan Opera, Marlon Brando and James Dean gaining popularity as actors by portraying rebels (Davis 1989:197–98). Davis's bold, brash persona earned him a special degree of respect from black Americans. Writer Amiri Baraka considered the trumpeter his "ultimate culture hero," someone who embodied "a black attitude that had grown steadily more ubiquitous in the 1950s—defiance" (Baraka 1996:41, 48).

Given Davis's affiliation, first with a group of postwar jazz musicians carving out a new identity for black artists, then with a larger movement engaged in transforming the nation's cultural and political landscape (including the Beats, Civil Rights activists, Abstract Expressionists, and others), it is remarkable that in 1958 he teamed up with arranger Gil Evans to record an album devoted to *Porgy and Bess*. Ever since its premiere, the opera by the Gershwins and Heyward had sparked controversy and caused African Americans to speak out in protest. In 1935 Duke Ellington said *Porgy and Bess* was not "true to and of the life of the people it depicted" (quoted in Morrow 1993:117). In the sixties Harold Cruse excoriated it as "the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist's cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation and acceptance of white paternalism" (Cruse 1967:103). Unpredictable though Davis may have been, it is hard to think of him undertaking a project more at odds with his rebellious image and militant sensibility than a rendition of Gershwin's "folk opera" depicting working-class African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina.

Yet far from an artistic misstep, *Porgy and Bess* became one of the most successful albums of Davis's career. Widely admired by critics and fans, it

occupies a lofty position in the canon of recorded jazz. Critic Tom Piazza (1995:179) calls it “as beautiful and integrated a jazz album as you will ever hear.” Historian Wilfrid Mellers (1987:355) proclaims it “the most distinguished music that has as yet been created through the . . . merging of the traditions of jazz, pop, and art music.” One of the album’s tracks, “Summertime,” has gained masterpiece status through its appearance on *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*. Music from the Davis-Evans *Porgy and Bess* has been performed by jazz repertory orchestras and choreographed for dancers.

Listening to the recording today, it’s easy to understand both its initial popularity and long-term appeal. Gil Evans’s orchestrations envelop the trumpeter’s spare, plaintive solos with a gorgeous tapestry of sound. Gershwin’s melodies take on new colors and shapes in this environment—as though familiar garden flowers had undergone exotic mutation after being transplanted to the soil of another planet. The album does not simply offer up jazz-flavored interpretations of selected tunes but delivers a thorough and cohesive reimagining of Gershwin’s score, with careful attention to structure, pacing, continuity, and shifts in mood. Some writers, in fact, have discussed the LP as a large-scale jazz composition in its own right; Baraka (1997:71) refers to it as a “symphonic tone poem.”

One striking quality that permeates the album is ambiguity: it’s not clear to the listener whether Davis and Evans are retelling the opera’s story of love and loss on Catfish Row or spinning a different tale altogether, offering views of their own lives and times in late-1950s America. Partly, the ambiguity results from the instrumental performance of a texted vocal work; removing the words puts distance between the jazz re-composition and the opera’s original setting and plot. Having Davis serve as principal soloist throughout—performing numbers sung by characters both female and male, both leads and secondary roles—further enhances the vagueness of the presentation.

In the Strawberry Woman’s song, for example, is Davis channeling the voice of the street vendor? He apparently thought so, saying that if you listened to his version of her cry, “you *know* what’s going on. You *hear* that old strawberry-seller yellin’ out strawberries” (quoted in Carr 1982:102). Critic Gary Giddins, though, cites the piece as evidence of the trumpeter’s heightened self-consciousness, the deliberately cracked notes revealing signs of “narcissism” (1997:222). Wilfrid Mellers hears it as something altogether different: a “lovely blue lullaby, poetic in sonority, sleepy in rhythm” (1987:356). So what is the subject of the Strawberry Woman’s song? Does Davis transport the listener to Catfish Row, to some interior psychological realm, or to the hazy borderland at the edge of slumber? In a way, the ambiguity enhances the music’s appeal, giving it a multivalence missing from the opera’s folkloric naturalism.

One critic who has noted the album's elusive locus of meaning is Amiri Baraka, who hears the music produced by Davis and Evans as having an alluring yet unreal quality. "Miles's horn itself is so beautiful," Baraka writes, "except there is a feeling in us that maybe all of this is a dream. A film. An invisible pageant of feeling." *Porgy and Bess*, he concludes, is "great movie music" (Baraka 1996:71). I'll return to Baraka presently, for I believe he comes closer than any writer to grasping the essence of the Davis-Evans collaboration. For now, his inspired comparison of *Porgy and Bess* to "movie music" serves as a starting point for understanding how this intriguing album came to be.

\* \* \*

The Davis-Evans *Porgy and Bess* was one of many jazz and pop recordings from the late fifties that sought to capitalize on interest in the film produced by Samuel Goldwyn, directed by Otto Preminger, and starring Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and Sammy Davis, Jr. Though Goldwyn announced he had acquired rights to the film as early as 1957, it was not completed and released until July of 1959. A list of selected jazz treatments of *Porgy and Bess* (see table 1) reveals that 1959 was the year many of these recordings were issued, timed to coincide with the distribution of the film.<sup>1</sup> Most of these albums simply took the best-known numbers from the opera and recast them with new arrangements and improvised solos. One of them, *Porgy and Bess Revisited*, was more unusual, with each character in the drama portrayed by a different instrumentalist (Cootie Williams played Porgy, Rex Stewart was Sportin' Life, and alto saxophonist Hilton Jefferson was Bess). In a June 1959 review of four recent jazz responses to *Porgy*, John S. Wilson singled out the Williams and Stewart album as the best of the lot thus far, criticizing Gil Evans for his "slow, mournful" arrangements and Davis for the "shaky breathiness" of his trumpet playing (Wilson 1959). Evans was not content to follow a medley approach with *Porgy*, nor, like arranger Russ Garcia before him (in album versions for Bethlehem and Verve), did he attempt to duplicate the overall sequence of Gershwin's opera, from beginning to end. Instead, he constructed a kind of large-scale orchestral suite (as he had done on *Miles Ahead*, though now minus the composed transitions) that reordered numbers yet retained much of the original work's dramatic thrust and emotional core.

This interest among jazz musicians in tackling *Porgy and Bess* also reflected broader trends in the music industry beyond the tie-in with Preminger's movie. Jazz recordings of hit Broadway musicals proliferated during this period, as artists hoped to match the success of André Previn's trio with *My Fair Lady* in 1956. In 1959, for example, such recordings as *Gypsy* by the Teddy Wilson trio, *South Pacific* by Bob Crosby's Bobcats, and *Li'l Abner* and *Pal Joey* by Previn were available. Jazz was also beginning to

**Table 1**  
Selected jazz interpretations of *Porgy and Bess*, 1956–1997

Artist/Group	Year	Record Label	Arranger
Mel Tormé, Francis Faye, Betty Roché ( <i>Porgy and Bess: A Jazz Version</i> )	1956	Bethlehem	Russ Garcia
Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald	rec. 1957; issued 1959	Verve	Russ Garcia
Miles Davis with orchestra	rec. 1958; issued 1959	Columbia	Gil Evans
Ralph Burns and his Orchestra ( <i>Porgy and Bess in Modern Jazz</i> )	1959	Decca	Ralph Burns
Rex Stewart, Cootie Williams, et al. ( <i>Porgy and Bess Revisited</i> )	1959	Warner Bros.	Jim Timmens
Bob Crosby's Bobcats	1959	Dot	?
Porgy and Bess All-Stars	1959	United Artists	Bill Potts
Mundell Lowe All-Stars	1959	Camden	Mundell Lowe
Hank Jones ( <i>Singin' Impressions of Porgy and Bess</i> )	1959	Capitol	Hank Jones
Oscar Peterson Trio	1959	Verve	Oscar Peterson Trio
Modern Jazz Quartet	1963	Atlantic	John Lewis, members of the MJQ
Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass, Stéphane Grappelli, Mickey Roker	1976	Pablo	Oscar Peterson, Joe Pass, et al.
Joe Henderson	1997	Verve	Joe Henderson, Conrad Herwig, Kevin Hays

turn up on television and film soundtracks, providing atmospheric background for shows featuring suspense, mystery, crime, and action—as in Henry Mancini’s music for the *Peter Gunn* television series, Elmer Bernstein’s for *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and Miles Davis’s for Louis Malle’s film *Elevator to the Gallows* in 1958. The deepening connection between jazz and visual media has relevance to the *Porgy* album, since both Gil Evans and many of the project’s orchestra musicians had worked for film and television studios. Critics noting this connection have reacted differently. While Baraka hailed the album as “great movie music,” Stanley Crouch claimed that without Davis’s horn, many of Evans’s arrangements would merely sound “like high-level television music.”<sup>2</sup>

But there are other commercial and musical reasons to consider for Davis’s involvement with *Porgy and Bess*. Producer George Avakian described the album as part of a comeback campaign he orchestrated for Davis, whose career in the first half of the fifties had been derailed by drug addiction and spotty performances. Avakian wanted to revisit and expand the sound of the nine-piece group Davis had used for the *Birth of the Cool* sessions in 1949. He was also intrigued by the contemporary “Third Stream” movement—experiments to combine American jazz with techniques drawn from European art music—and had arranged for Davis to record part of an LP with Gunther Schuller, *Music for Brass*. This album convinced Avakian that “a similar, less ‘classical’ setting could attract a whole new audience [for Miles] without upsetting his growing fan base” (Avakian 1996:31).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the first three Davis-Evans collaborations—*Miles Ahead*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Sketches of Spain*—offered a diluted Third Stream mixture of jazz, pop, and classical ingredients, the latter supplied by symphonic orchestration (French horns, tuba, double reeds, harp) and concert hall repertory (compositions by de Falla, Rodrigo, and that crossover pioneer, Gershwin).

Rather than a strategic career move, Davis spoke of *Porgy* simply as marking another stage in his artistic development. In his autobiography, he claimed it was his idea to record the work after he had seen his soon-to-be wife Frances Taylor dancing in a production of it at City Center (Davis 1989:229). He also linked *Porgy* to his growing interest in European concert music and his attraction to the new directions opened up by modal jazz. Through pianist Bill Evans, Davis was discovering Ravel and Rachmaninoff and studying modes used by the Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian. In a well-known interview with Nat Hentoff from 1958, the trumpeter compared the modal practice of Bill Evans and Khachaturian to the *Porgy* arrangements devised by Gil Evans. Jazz, he told Hentoff, was returning to an “emphasis on melodic rather than harmonic variation” (Hentoff 1962:167).

By way of example, Davis cited the arrangement for "I Loves You, Porgy," in which Gil Evans had written only a scale for the trumpeter to solo on: no chords. The results are heard halfway through the piece (1:47) when, over an oscillating F to C pendulum in the bass, the orchestra sets up floating color chords based on the A Phrygian mode, and Davis uses the same mode for improvising. It is a painterly effect, with the trumpeter producing sharply defined lines over a soft background wash. This passage conveys the fresh possibilities for freedom and open space offered by modal jazz. As Miles said, "When you go this way, you can go on forever" (Hentoff:166). At the same time, the music graphically illustrates Bess's comforting words to Porgy in her aria: "I wants to stay here/Wid you forever/an' I'd be glad." As we know, though, Bess won't stay with Porgy but leaves him behind when she heads north with Sportin' Life. (The very next track on the album—and the final one—is "There's a Boat that's Leaving Soon for New York.") What Davis and Evans evoke so powerfully in "I Loves You, Porgy" is the vision of a stable, nurturing happiness that doesn't exist—and probably never will.

Despite such glowing moments of promise in the Davis-Evans *Porgy and Bess*, there is an unmistakable aura of sadness and yearning that hovers over the album. It surfaces most in romantic ballads like "Bess, Oh Where's My Bess" and "My Man's Gone Now," but it's there also in the religious numbers and street cries, in "The Buzzard Song" and "Summertime." Some might relate this pathos directly to Heyward's story and Gershwin's score—though in fact the opera features many more lively and dramatic sections to provide contrast. (Porgy's upbeat "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'," for example, is missing from the Davis-Evans version. It might have given a lift to the proceedings, but the idea of Davis putting on the mask to proclaim "nuttin's plenty fo' me" and "I got no car, got no mule"—when he was driving a white Ferrari convertible at the time—was ludicrous.)

Baraka, though, interprets the music of Davis's *Porgy* not as melancholy ruminations, not even as a gloss on the opera, but as a portrait of two different sides of the trumpeter's aesthetic: the hip, street-smart, bluesy African American vernacular confronting what Baraka calls the American "cushion" or "bottom"—the "lushness and pretension" and "sensuous well-being this society sports."<sup>4</sup> In Baraka's view, Davis's trumpet depicts an African American seeking to integrate—or at least find a place within—mainstream America. He writes:

It is the bluesiness of the Davis conception . . . submerged in all the lushness that gives these moods an intelligence and sensitivity. There is yet a searching quality in Miles's horn, above, beyond, below, inside, outside, within, locked out of the lushness, the lovely American

bottom. It is a searching, a probing like a dowser, used for searching out beauty. (Baraka 1997:71)

What Baraka identifies as the fusion of “African American” and “American” qualities in Davis’s aesthetic might also be understood as a musical model for social integration. Given the escalating sequence of recent events in the Civil Rights movement—from *Brown v. Board of Education* and Rosa Parks to Eisenhower sending federal troops to Little Rock—the Davis-Evans projects in the late fifties demonstrated how blacks and whites could join talents to form a creative coalition. The large, interracial cast for *Porgy* included not only the musicians on the album, but extended out and back to the Gershwins and Heyward, Gullah-speaking Sea Islanders, even Ravel and Khachaturian. As Davis observed in his autobiography, “Black and white people were starting to get together.” The album’s cover photo drove the point home, implying an erotic connection between a possibly mixed-race couple—an image that has nothing to do with Porgy and Bess or the world of Catfish Row but with new personal freedoms that were possible on the cusp of the sixties.<sup>5</sup> And on the album’s high-spirited last track, New York City was celebrated as the Promised Land, a place of pleasure and loosened social codes far removed from the problems of poor black folk living down South on Catfish Row.

But if the Davis-Evans *Porgy and Bess* sent a hopeful message about race relations and drew power from the fusion of an “African American” and “American” aesthetic, it also sounded a warning about trouble yet to come. The album opens not with the soothing lullaby “Summertime” but with Porgy’s disturbing song of the buzzard, portent of evil and misfortune. Songs of loss and absence recur throughout, from “Gone, Gone, Gone” to “Bess, Oh Where’s My Bess” to “My Man’s Gone Now.” The prevalence of minor keys gives a somber cast to the album. And as if to reinforce an undercurrent of foreboding, the only Gil Evans original included in the set—titled “Gone,” and based on Gershwin’s “Gone, Gone, Gone”—features Davis not as the introspective, romantic balladeer but as Baraka’s favorite jazz anti-hero: the “cool man, bad dude, hipster” (Baraka 1996:41). Much of “Gone” features Davis soloing only with rhythm section—no padded “cushion” here, but the lean profile of black jazz musicians taking care of business and playing the blues. When the orchestra reenters after Davis’s solo choruses, it’s like the credits rolling at the end of a private-eye television series. The punchy brass accents say, “Look out—don’t mess with me!” The music glamorizes Davis as a tough urban character—someone out of a Chester Himes novel or the godfather of Richard Roundtree’s Shaft.

A few months after *Porgy and Bess* was released, Davis found himself in a real-life dramatic episode that directly challenged the album’s vision of

interracial harmony, underscoring instead qualities of tragedy and conflict hinted at throughout Evans's rescoring of Gershwin's work. Davis was standing in front of Birdland in Manhattan, taking a break after playing a radio broadcast. As one version of the story goes, he helped a white woman get into a cab. A white policeman came up and told him to move along or he'd be arrested. Davis refused, saying he was working at the night club and pointing to his name on the marquee. A detective appeared and fighting broke out, with Davis throwing punches and the two whites using blackjacks. More police arrived, and the trumpeter was led away with a bleeding head wound to the precinct station, where he was charged with assault and battery and resisting arrest. He spent the night on Riker's Island. At the trial, Davis didn't take the witness stand because his lawyer told him "the white judge and white jury would mistake my confidence for arrogance" (Davis 1989:240). Eventually the arrest was ruled illegal and the charges dismissed. A suit brought against the police department by Davis and his lawyers was unsuccessful. This experience transformed Davis: "[It] made me bitter and cynical again when I was really starting to feel good about the things that had changed in this country" (ibid.:238).

If *Porgy and Bess* showed Davis striving to seek reconciliation with the mainstream, searching for beauty in the "lovely American bottom," as Baraka has said, then the Birdland incident served as a brutal reality check. On the streets of New York, a celebrated black artist found out that society had not changed as much as he believed and that justice under the law was no more guaranteed for him than for the humble residents of Catfish Row—or in our own time, for such innocent black victims of police brutality as Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo. Unlike Porgy, though, Miles would not smile and shrug this off—"nothing" was never going to be "plenty" for him. But in his music, Davis at least could dream of a better place and time, a land where sweet strawberries ripen on the vine and Bess and Porgy's love lasts forever. The dream was tempered by Davis's first-hand knowledge that for African Americans—for all Americans—it was going to take a mighty long pull to get there. His art would bear eloquent witness to both the pleasures and perils of that journey.

#### Notes

\* Editor's Note: This paper was originally read at "Rhythm-a-ning: A Symposium on Jazz," Columbia University, New York, N.Y., May 6, 2000. Many thanks to Carol Oja for making this paper available to the journal and to Thomas Payne for his valuable editorial comments.

1. The film has been out of circulation since 1972, when Goldwyn's lease on the rights to *Porgy and Bess* expired and the Gershwin and Heyward estates refused to renew.



2. See Crouch (1996:31). In another critical assessment of the Davis-Evans collaborations, Crouch writes that their recordings “were inclined toward the pallid textures that resulted from the impressionistic influences on Evans and from the disavowal of the varied Negro vocal inflections that had meant so much to the richest instrumental timbres of the idiom” (1998:311–12).

3. Though Avakian produced *Miles Ahead*, he had left Columbia by the time of *Porgy and Bess*, which was produced by Cal Lampley.

4. Baraka takes his image of the “bottom” or “cushion” from Davis, who applied it to Gil Evans’s orchestrations for bandleader Claude Thornhill. According to Baraka, “Davis says Thornhill’s music drew him because he wanted a music with more melodic access and a ‘cushion’ (bottom) of harmonies that made his own simple voice an elegant, somewhat detached ‘personality’ effortlessly perceiving and expressing” (Baraka 1996:46).

5. The two figures in the photo were Davis and Frances Taylor, with heads and upper bodies cropped to render their identities ambiguous.

### References

- Avakian, George. 1996. Miles and Gil Remembered. Liner notes to *Miles Davis & Gil Evans: The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings, 1957–1968*. Columbia CXK 67397.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1996. Homage to Miles Davis. In *The Miles Davis Companion*, edited by Gary Carner, 41–51. New York: Schirmer.
- . 1997. Miles Davis: “One of the Great Mother Fuckers.” In *A Miles Davis Reader*, edited by Bill Kirchner, 63–73. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Carr, Ian. 1982. *Miles Davis: A Biography*. New York: Morrow.
- Crouch, Stanley. 1996. Play the Right Thing. In *The Miles Davis Companion*, edited by Gary Carner, 21–40. New York: Schirmer.
- . 1999. Miles Davis in the Fever of Spring, 1961. In *Always in Pursuit: Fresh American Perspectives*, by Stanley Crouch, 295–323. New York: Vintage.
- Cruse, Harold. 1967. *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. New York: Morrow.
- Davis, Miles, with Quincy Troupe. 1989. *Miles: The Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Giddens, Gary. 1997. Miles Wiles. In *A Miles Davis Reader*, edited by Bill Kirchner, 217–23. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Hentoff, Nat. 1962. An Afternoon with Miles Davis. In *Jazz Panorama*, edited by Martin Williams, 161–68. New York: Crowell-Collier Press.
- Mellers, Wilfrid. 1987. *Music in a New Found Land*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Morrow, Edward. 1993. Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s “Porgy.” In *The Duke Ellington Reader*, edited by Mark Tucker, 114–17. New York: Oxford University Press. First published in *New Theatre* (December 1935): 5–6.
- Piazza, Tom. 1995. *The Guide to Recorded Jazz*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Wilson, John S. 1959. Four More Jazz Approaches to *Porgy*. *High Fidelity* (June): 92.