

# THE CONVERSATION



## Miles Ahead: a film that remains (mostly) true to jazz legend Miles Davis

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Brian Douglas/Icon Films

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At the very end of *Miles Ahead*, the recently released film about Miles Davis, we are – finally – in jazz heaven. Davis, impersonated to a fault by Don Cheadle (who also directed the film), is playing a gig before an adoring crowd, unveiling his new “social music” as he called it right at the beginning – a “fusion” of jazz, rock and funk (the tune is actually written by the film’s composer, Robert Glasper).

As can be seen by some details (which may well be lost on many audience members), such as the hashtag #socialmusic on Miles’s shirt and the make of some of the instruments (notably the keyboard, which is a recent model), this scene, although it first seems to be part of the main 1980s narrative, actually follows it, and is set now, in the audience’s present. Jamming with the fictional Miles are his real-life collaborators, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter (now in their 70s and 80s, respectively), and the much younger jazz luminaries Esperanza Spalding, Gary Clark, Jr. and Antonio Sanchez.

Although this time shift is confusing at first, a further clue is provided when rapper Pharoahe Monch is heard over the subsequent end titles, testifying to the continuity of black music (the “changing same”, in the influential critic Amiri Baraka’s words). The music, we are told, unites past, present and future; it transcends all boundaries of age, race and gender, even that between fiction and reality.

In other words: Miles lives! And it (almost) works: like in the equally ecstatic (but more ambiguous) finale of the recent *Whiplash*, the euphoria of the music suggests that anything is possible. This is the kind of heaven in which, according to a musicians' joke, God thinks he is Miles Davis.

## Rags to riches

But the path to this moment of transcendence is arduous. We meet Miles at rock bottom, plagued by ill health and drug addiction, broke, lonely, pursued by creditors and living in filth (if rather opulent filth). He hasn't played in public or released any music for five years, and, in the most devastating scene, manages to produce only grunts and squeals on his instrument. (In jazz films, such as *Young Man with a Horn* and *Paris Blues*, trumpet prowess typically symbolises virility: we don't need Freudian analysis to figure out what the pathetic sounds mean.) But soon Miles's musical voice is magically restored.

What has led to this sudden transformation is less clear, but we're led to believe that it has to do with the encounter with the rising trumpeter Junior (Keith Stanfield), in whom Miles recognises a younger version of himself, and who is able to reconstruct traces of genius from the master's incoherent session tapes. The role of matchmaker is played by Dave Brill, who (unwittingly) brings Junior and Miles together. Brill (played by Ewan McGregor in an uncharacteristically underpowered performance) is a shady journalist supposedly working for *Rolling Stone* magazine, and it is through his perspective that most of the story is told.



Don Cheadle and Ewan McGregor in *Miles Ahead*. Icon Film Distribution

While the introduction of a white intermediary replicates problematic conventions in the cinematic representation of African-Americans, as if predominantly white audiences would be unable to relate to blacks directly, the ensuing relationship between the hapless Brill and the imperious if eccentric Davis nicely subverts common racial stereotypes.

But unfortunately, the largely fictional plot, involving the theft of the supposedly priceless session tapes (whose underwhelming content is later pored over by Junior and the uncomprehending Brill) by music industry gangsters, complete with more drugs, fistfights, shootouts and a car chase, is utterly ludicrous. Whether the farcical nature of these scenes is a redeeming feature or just a sign of desperation on the part of the creative team is hard to say.

## Past and present

Mercifully, the crime story is primarily a framing device. Not untypically for jazz films, much of *Miles Ahead* is told in flashbacks, with Davis reminiscing about his past glories (covering roughly the years 1956-66). The ostensible focus is on his relationship with his first wife, Frances Taylor (Emayatzy Corinealdi), the tragic failure of which is implicitly blamed for his crisis. In a clever conceit, the dramatic breakup between the two is overheard by Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock in their (much younger) fictional selves, the same musicians we see and hear in the flesh at the very end, connecting the low and high points of the movie.



Frances Taylor played by Emayatzy Corinealdi. Brian Douglas/Icon Film

But this is a music film, so another rationale for the flashbacks is to re-enact seminal performances of Miles's greatest tunes (using the original audio recordings). The effect is ironic if not downright contradictory: while the film and its protagonist keep telling us that the music needs to move on and indeed leave the idea of "jazz" behind altogether, they dwell lovingly on its glorious past. The triumphant transfiguration at the end notwithstanding, jazz is depicted firmly in the past tense, doubly removed from the present by a setting in the past in which it already only figures as a distant memory.

But what impresses is the film's honesty. Davis is depicted in all his complexity, not denying (if perhaps slightly downplaying) his drug abuse and misogyny but not allowing these aspects to entirely obliterate his genius. More importantly, it remains true to the music, placing Davis's contribution in a continuing, living history of African-American music, rather than planting him on a pedestal. And this is why the inclusion of young musicians in the final gig is so important.

One can sympathise, too, with Cheadle's decision to avoid the traditional biopic (the deadening ponderousness of Clint Eastwood's *Bird*, on Davis's erstwhile mentor Charlie Parker, looms large). But whether that justifies the conventional crime caper narrative as framing device is an entirely different matter.



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