



mental_floss presents:

cocktail party
cheat sheet

Miles: Just Sayin' His Name Makes Ya Feel Hep

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The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics – making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter– all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Miles Davis had his thumb in every major jazz movement there ever was – fusion, cool, acid, be-bop, trip-hop, it just don't stop.

Namedropping:

Davis, Miles (1926-1991)
(Pronounced: cool)

The Basics:

Miles Davis was a trumpeter, first and foremost, but also a composer, pioneer, and musical collaborator. Born in St. Louis to a middle-class black family, Davis' father was a dentist, and his mother a music teacher. Encouraged to play from a young age, Miles got his first trumpet at the age of 13. By 15, he was playing in local bands, and landing gigs in the neighboring towns on weekends. After graduat-

ing high school, Miles attended Julliard, but being in New York during the thick of the be-bop movement was too much for him. Refusing to sit on the sidelines, Miles quit school and started playing in bands with Monk (Thelonius), Dizzy (Gillespie), Bird (Charlie Parker) and other A-list innovators. As the saying goes, “Don't let school get in the way of your education.”

Using invention, improvisation and collaboration as his tools, Davis went on to jam for 50 years, helping jazz evolve and merge into new, unforeseen avenues. In fact, some critics claim that jazz stopped moving forward the day Miles died.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Davis' desire to make jazz popular – beyond the cats who were already tuned in – was a key to making albums of all styles. Through his career he collaborated with hundreds of varied rock, soul and funk musicians, and pretty much every major jazz figure was a side-man to Miles at some point: Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans, Wayne Shorter and the list goes on.

Birth of the Cool: Three jam sessions with Miles and the Gang in 1949 and 1950 were

pivotal, defining moments in jazz. Orchestra conductor Gil Evans arranged the sessions which somehow married big-band sounds with more mellow, hip and laid back stylings – difficult to do with nine musicians in the room...The result was, well, cool.

Trying to describe Miles' playing style is like describing Michael Jordan's jumper or Picasso's palette: lyrical, smooth, melodic, intimate. Ya just gotta check it out. (Start with Round About Midnight, 1956, or Birth of the Cool, 1950.)

Conversation Starters:

- Davis (along with Parker, Coltrane, Charles Mingus and Billie Holiday) had a serious heroin habit for many moons. It's been said that if you ever want to know what smack feels like, just take a listen to Kind of Blue.
- Miles and his band were supposed to open for Steve Miller, but since he had no reason to respect Miller or his music, he showed up a couple hours late and closed the show instead.
- Miles claims he wrote the standard, “Donna Lee,” but Charlie Parker got his royalties.
- “The greatest feeling I ever had in my life – with my clothes on – was back when I

first heard Diz and Bird together.” From “Miles, The Autobiography.” A must read.

- Miles trained as a boxer for a while; in fact the Jack Johnson album was made to move to. Dodge and weave!
- Miles liked to listen to Prince, Jimi Hendrix, as well as Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff. Bet he had a decent record collection.
- The covers to “Bitches Brew” and “Live Evil” were both painted by Miles.
- Kind of Blue (1959) was Davis' most popular album, selling over 2 million copies – which, for a jazz record is like selling a billion of Britney's cookie-cut albums.
- In later years Miles funkyed up his sound by adding a wah-wah pedal to his trumpet.
- Bugged down with health and personal problems, a depressed Miles Davis put down his trumpet in 1975 and didn't pick it up for nearly 5 years.
- Davis' last album, Doo-Bop (1992), a collaboration with rapper Easy Mo Bee, won a Grammy. Talk about saving your best for last.