

Jazz: From Passionate Ballads to Avant-Garde

By MARTIN WILLIAMS

WHEN trumpeter (and more recently flugelhornist) Miles Davis first came to public popularity in the mid-1950's, his vehicles were occasionally traditional blues or up-tempo jazz originals but more often passionate ballads — and almost anything might become a passionate ballad to Davis's alchemy, even "Bye Bye Blackbird."

The jazz world, musicians and "inside" fans alike, had known of him before of course. Hadn't he been a young, occasionally faltering but promisingly original partner on the first recordings Charlie Parker made under his own name in 1945? And hadn't he, in 1949-50, made a series of recordings as leader of a nine-piece ensemble which, although not in themselves particularly successful, had echoed their way through a fad called "cool jazz," through dozens of TV backgrounds, and even in a widely played cigarette commercial?

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For a while it seemed that, having achieved popularity Davis, like many another American performer, might simply reduce his successes to a formula and repeat himself. And, indeed, his vehicles sometimes got quite sticky — pieces such as "Someday My Prince Will Come" or "Put Your Little Foot Right In" may be said to have two and a half strikes against them. But, again, a burning, transforming lyricism triumphed, a lyricism wherein one economical note from Davis's horn, judiciously placed, might evoke a world of ecstatic melody.

Then in 1959, an avant-gardist unexpectedly broke through the fashionable facade of Miles Davis. Somewhat dissatisfied with traditional procedures for jazz improvising (paraphrase the melody, or fill in a new one using its chordal outline as a guide), Davis took his sidemen into a studio and, report-

edly with a minimum of re-takes, had them inventing with only a succession of a scale or two as their guides, or with only a pair of underlying chords and an indeterminate solo length, instead of a fixed, complex sequence.

The result was *Kind of Blue* (Columbia CL1355, stereo CS8163), a beautiful recital and clearly one of the most important jazz recordings of the past ten years. It set Davis's then-sideman, the late tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, on his path, for one thing, and through him, it helped set a whole generation of players on theirs.

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Davis himself might have rested on his laurels, and for a while it seemed that he intended to. But by 1966, he

was leading an excellent group of young musicians, including tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter (a follower of the early Coltrane, but with something to add), pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams (who, at 17, seemed almost ready to join the immortals on the basis of his splashing, original cymbal work alone).

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With these men, Davis returned to experimentation (to use that ugly, equivocal but somehow necessary word) — not, at first, with full success. But then last year came *Miles Smiles* (Columbia CL-2601, stereo CS9401), an unfortunate title perhaps, but a significant LP for Davis's continuing leadership as a jazz musician, as well as an ex-

cellent recital by any standard and, in the slow piece called *Circle*, a personal triumph for Davis as composer and player. The more recent *Sorcerer* (Columbia CL2732, stereo CS9352) seems a worthy successor to "Miles Smiles." It has the best sort of airy mobility during the leader's solo on "Prince of Darkness." In the title piece, "Sorcerer," it has a fine succession in which four-bar phrases are chased back and forth between Davis and Shorter. And in "Limbo" Williams has a contrapuntal drum line throughout that is truly a wonder to attend.

However, the new *Nefertiti* (Columbia CL2794, stereo CS-9594), if not exactly a setback is something of a disappointment. There are some fine moments. Davis has an energetic, resilient solo on a piece called (in irony?) "Rio." But the recital as a whole has an almost complacent air to it, and the eight-minute title piece seems to me stretched to the point of monotony.

Also disappointing is *Love Cry* by Albert Ayler (Impulse A-AS-9165). Ayler, a tenor saxophonist much influenced by John Coltrane, has shown himself an interesting improviser on past occasion. He has exceptional control of the upper, "false" reaches of his horn, and he has learned (from Ornette Coleman, I would say) to use a deliberately false, harsh intonation for sustained emotional effect.

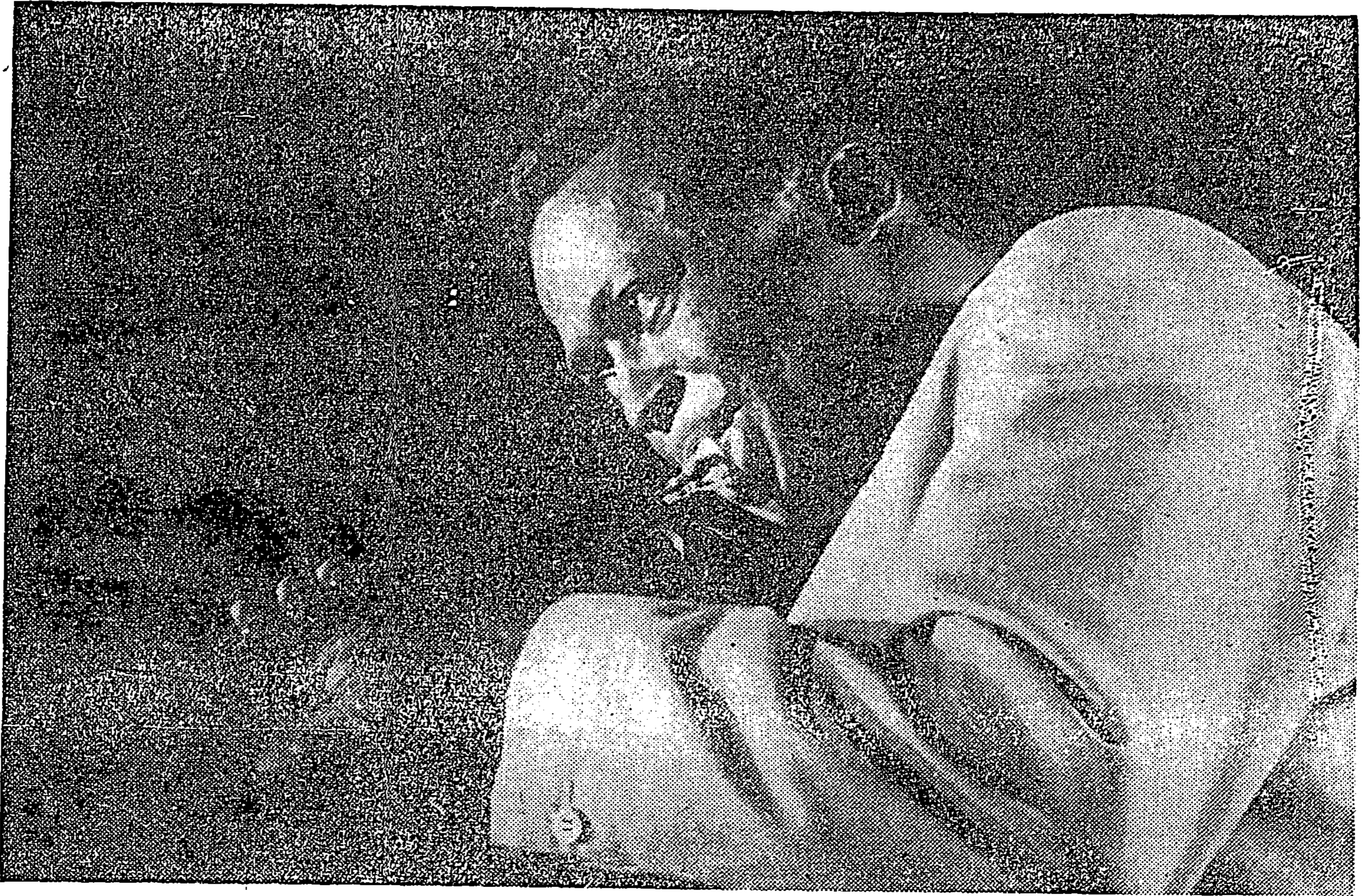
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Ayler is the sort of musician whose work is for some people at first repellent, but he has demonstrated that he can be a very orderly player, able to state and develop a single idea or motive through a series of improvised, linking permutations. Thus, anyone who believes the jazz

avant-garde invites chaos should hear him.

He is probably best introduced by *My Name is Albert Ayler* (Fantasy 6016, stereo 86016) wherein he works with traditional materials, and by *Spiritual Unity* (ESP-Disc 1002) wherein he works with four thematically related pieces of his own, all using simple—perhaps simplistic—folklike ideas. As a start, try "The Wizard" on the latter LP. There is a bizarre beauty to it.

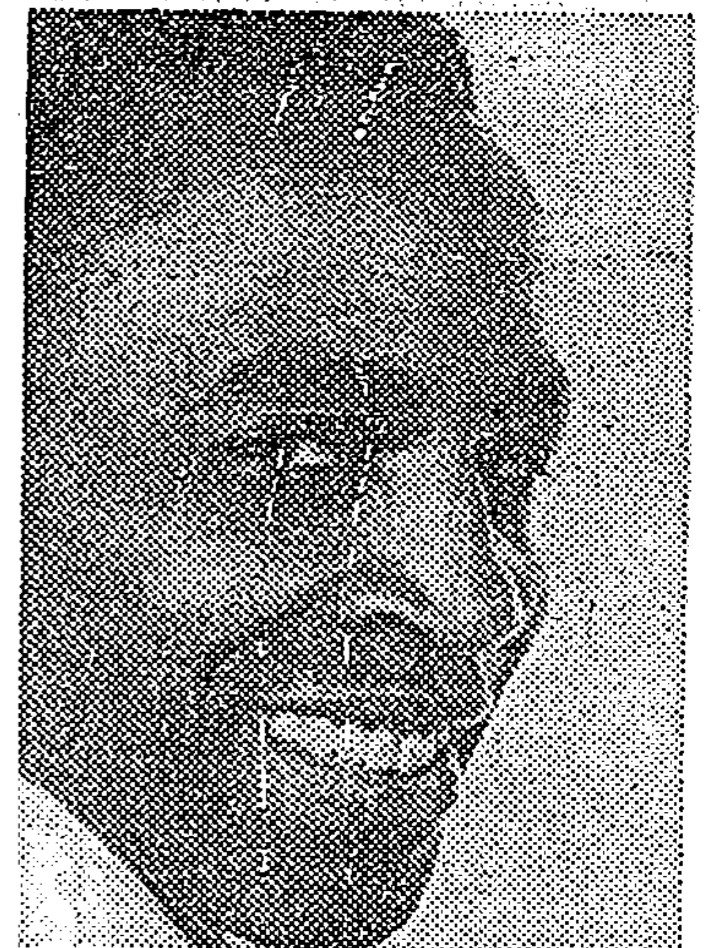
On the "Love Cry" album there is also a great deal that is bizarre. I appreciate the interplay between Ayler and his trumpeter brother, Donald, on "Ghosts" and "Bells," and the honest emotion in Ayler's high-pitched solo on "Universal Indians" (there are no notes in the new jazz, he once suggested, only pure feeling). But there seems to me to be a strident, staccatoed, vibratoed and perhaps self-conscious sameness to much of this music.



Trumpeter Miles Davis

Charles Stewart

His leadership as a jazz musician began in 1959 when the avant-gardist broke through the fashionable facade



ROBERT GUILLAUME has replaced Mort Shuman in "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris," the hit musical now at the Village Gate.