



Don Cheadle stars as Miles Davis in *Miles Ahead*, his directorial debut. (Photo: Brian Douglas, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics)

TROUBLED GENIUS

DON CHEADLE'S GRITTY PORTRAYAL OF A DRUG-ADDLED, GUN-TOTING MILES DAVIS IS THE MOST ANTICIPATED JAZZ FILM IN DECADES

BY ALLEN MORRISON

'IF YOU'RE GONNA TELL A STORY, COME WITH some attitude, man. Don't be all corny with that shit.'

That's Miles Davis, as played by Don Cheadle, talking to a TV producer who is rehearsing the intro to an interview he's about to tape with the legendary trumpeter. The scene occurs near the beginning of *Miles Ahead*, Cheadle's biographical film about Davis' life and music. The lesson in "cool" can be taken as a mission statement for both Davis the musician and Cheadle the actor, who is making his debut as a director with the film. Critics and the movie-going public will certainly debate the liberties it takes with the factual record in pursuit of larger truths about Davis (1926-'91). But one thing is indisputable: *Miles Ahead* is anything but corny.

When the film premiered in October at the 2015 New York Film Festival, the festival's selection committee raved that "every second of Cheadle's cinematic mosaic is passionately engaged with its subject: this is, truly, one of the finest films ever made about the life of an artist." Within days, Sony Pictures Classics had picked up the film, which will open April 1.

Cheadle knows a thing or two about biographical films. The acclaimed actor was nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of hotelier Paul Rusesabagina in 2004's *Hotel Rwanda*, and he won a Golden Globe (and earned an Emmy nomination) for his role as Sammy Davis Jr. in the 1998 HBO movie *The Rat Pack*.

Co-writing the *Miles Ahead* script with screenwriter Steven Baigelman, Cheadle deliberately avoided the usual cradle-to-grave biopic approach, opting instead to focus on just three days in the life of Davis in the late

1970s, when he was deep into the creative impasse that has become known as his "silent" period.

Following a press screening in New York, Cheadle answered the inevitable questions about how much of the story is invented by saying that "to some degree, all biopics are historical fiction." In order to be true to Davis' continual quest to push the music forward, Cheadle felt it was necessary to expand the conventional idea of a biographical film and "to make a movie that Miles would have wanted to see—or star in."

Although the public verdict is not yet in, Davis' family and friends feel that Cheadle hit a home run. Miles' nephew, drummer/record producer Vince Wilburn Jr., who helps run Miles Davis Enterprises and is one of the film's producers, said, "I think Don fuckin' nailed it, period. Don is a badass, and I love him. And you can quote me on that."

Reached by phone at his West Hollywood home, keyboardist Herbie Hancock—who worked extensively with Davis and served as a music consultant for the film—said, "I loved Don's approach to the film. It's not historical, not a documentary. I love the fact that he was being so creative, as a tribute to Miles' own creativity. If you're going to do a film about Miles, it's gotta represent what Miles stood for. He would absolutely have dug this approach. As a matter of fact, Miles would probably have gotten mad if it had been done [as a conventional biopic]. Miles would have said"—and here he imitated Davis' distinctive, gravelly voice—"Fuuuuck that."

Despite the way the film embellishes the record, one thing that feels authentic is the music. Cheadle, a musician himself, hired pianist Robert Glasper to compose the score. Working together, they took impressive pains to get the music right, whether the scene employs original Davis recordings or Glasper's score, which includes compositions that simulate the trumpeter's various eras and styles so faithfully that they could easily be mistaken for lost Davis recordings. For the score's critical trumpet parts, Glasper turned to Keyon Harrold, his former classmate at The New School for Jazz & Contemporary Music. He also assembled a stellar group of musicians to simulate the sound of Davis' groups from the various eras depicted in the film (see sidebar on page 26).

As the film begins, Davis, then in his early fifties, hasn't touched the trumpet in three years. He has become a recluse, holing up in his disheveled, roach-infested townhouse on West 77th Street in Manhattan, where he spends his days snorting cocaine, consuming copious amounts of alcohol and painkillers to deaden the pain from a degenerative hip disorder, and fending off friends, fans, creditors and record company executives with equal hostility.

Forcing his way into this mess is a freelance journalist named Dave Brill (played by Ewan McGregor), who claims to be on assignment from Rolling Stone magazine in order to write the story of Davis' alleged "comeback." After a violent initial confrontation, the mismatched pair gradually develop a wary respect for each other. The two eventually become entangled in a mission to reclaim a tape of Davis compositions that has been stolen by an unscrupulous record producer named Harper and the gifted young trumpeter, Junior, whom he is promoting.

Beneath this melodramatic surface, however, a more important drama unfolds. Davis is haunted by memories, shown in numerous flashbacks, of his past triumphs and humiliations. He is particularly pained by his failed marriage to the lovely dancer Frances Taylor (Emayatzy Corinealdi), whose face famously adorns the cover of the 1961 album *Someday My Prince Will Come*, and who was subjected to his repeated physical abuse. We also get to see him creating some of the music that made him one of the most important musicians of the 20th century.

Cheadle's movie is many things: a buddy action movie; a love story; a feast for fans of the music; and potentially an eye-opening experience for millennial kids who have not

yet discovered Davis' oeuvre. But ultimately, *Miles Ahead* is a meditation on creativity, the mysteries and loneliness of genius—and the toll it can take on an artist's personal life and family.

Jazz fans and Hollywood insiders have long wondered whether this film would ever come to be. It was in development for nearly a decade. In 2006, while representing the Davis family at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,

'IF YOU'RE GOING TO DO A FILM ABOUT MILES, IT'S GOTTA REPRESENT WHAT MILES STOOD FOR.' —HERBIE HANCOCK

into which his uncle had just been inducted, Wilburn announced that he and his cousins—Miles' son Erin and daughter Cheryl—had already chosen their leading man: Don Cheadle. This was news to Cheadle, who had never even met them. A meeting was arranged, and the actor signed on.

There had been other attempts to film Davis' life, none bearing fruit. The actor Wesley Snipes was attached to one such project, which had been championed by former Columbia Records president Walter Yetnikoff. Ex-wife Frances Taylor Davis recalls having been a consultant to that effort as early as 1993. Various projects have involved author Quincy Troupe, with whom Davis wrote his autobiography (published in 1989).

Cheadle, speaking via Skype from Sony Studios in Hollywood during a break from filming his Showtime series *House of Lies*, reflected on what makes this telling of the Davis story unusual. "Our focus was on who Miles was as an artist, not necessarily who he was as a man," Cheadle said. "I wanted to let the *music* run the show, and not try to check off all these points that were supposedly 'important' for people to know about Miles Davis.

"The truth is that, if you think of the biopics you've seen, after five minutes you start to say, 'I'm not sure about that moment.' Most of them take expansive lives and try to squeeze them into an hour-and-a-half, or two hours. You have to make priorities based upon the story that you want to tell. But to do that, you have to omit characters, create characters, elide characters and moments. There's a lot of poetic license that you take with a biopic, but it's still passed off as the 'true story' of whoever. I didn't want to tell a straight-up-and-down story about Miles Davis, because I don't think that's what Miles would want."

Lacking support from a major studio,

Cheadle and the family raised the film's \$8.5 million budget independently, including some of Cheadle's own money and \$325,000 raised from an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign.

When making the film, Cheadle sought input from the trumpeter's relatives: "I asked the Davis family for guidance about what Miles would have liked, and they'd say, 'I don't know. Go for it—make it interesting!' They wanted me to make the movie that I wanted to star in, the one where I'd go into the movie theater and say, 'Yeah, that's *me, muthafucka!*'"

The family had originally considered doing a more conventional biopic. "But Miles wasn't conventional," Wilburn said. "Somebody else can do a biopic, or we could get a documentarian. Look,

everybody's not gonna dig it. But it's the way Miles' life was. My uncle was not complacent. Just like the movie, the music moved around a lot. When you thought you could catch up with him, he'd move somewhere else. Shit, he changed clothes six times a day!"

While the character of Dave Brill, and the exploits he and Miles engage in, are fictional, Davis' descent into a self-medicated state, in which he oscillated between torpor and agitation, was all too real. (In his autobiography, Davis was rather candid about this dark period.) Hancock mostly avoided Miles during these years. "I was scared of him," Hancock said. "He was delusional, paranoid ... he had a crazed look on his face."

Wilburn saw him more often during this painful period, and was instrumental in helping him emerge from it. When Davis decided to resume his career, his first album was 1981's *The Man With The Horn*, a project that began with the trumpeter coaching Wilburn's own band, which plays on the album. Wilburn refuses to take much credit: "People say to me, 'Vince, you helped your uncle to come back,' But I didn't help my uncle do shit. When he was ready to stop doing cocaine and *play*, then he picked up his horn and *played*. And even when he was not sounding good, I'd say, 'Uncle Miles, that's *killin'*.' And he'd say, '*Fuck you*,' because he knew it wasn't good. I just wanted him to come out on top—and he did."

To prepare for the role, Cheadle devoured every book, interview and documentary film he could find: "It was great to have his family there. There were so many sources—Herbie, Wayne, people who played and toured with him. I talked to Frances a lot about their relationship, what they were to each other." The result of all the research is a complex, multi-dimensional depiction of Davis, in which he is sometimes



Davis onstage in Berlin on Nov. 6, 1971

JAN PERSSON

arrogant and manipulative; sometimes slyly humorous; and sometimes the sensitive artist hiding behind that famously fierce exterior.

Cheadle has music in his blood. As a high school student in Denver, he had been a promising saxophonist, turning down a music scholarship to pursue acting at California Institute of the Arts. For the Davis role, he actually learned to play the trumpet, practicing for months and transcribing Davis' solos. "I knew that I would never get anywhere close to Miles' acumen," he said, "but I was really trying to go through what he went through... to try to open up that part of my brain that was like Miles' brain. For me, the exercise of transcribing was part of the process. You're actually *doing it* at that point, you know? There's no acting—you're doing it."

While some of the film's plot elements were fabricated, its unflinching portrayal of Davis' abusive relationship with Frances Taylor Davis is based in fact.

"I was the love of his life," Frances Davis said, speaking by phone from her West Hollywood home. "Every time I went to see Miles in a club, he would immediately stop what they were playing, and he would have the band play Cole Porter's song: 'I like the looks of you, the lure of you' ['All Of You]."

When they first met, Frances was a rising ballet star who had danced all over the world.

By the time she began dating Miles, Frances was appearing in the Broadway production of *Mister Wonderful* with Sammy Davis Jr. "The second time we met," she recalled, "he said to me, 'Now that I've found you, I'll never let you go.'" The following year, she was in the original Broadway cast of *West Side Story*, in which she played one of the Sharks' girls. "I had a big career, but Miles couldn't handle it," she said. "After I had been in the show for eight months, one night he came to pick me up after the show in his Ferrari, and he said to me, 'I want you out of *West Side Story*. A woman should be with her man.' And I froze. I didn't know how to talk back to him. I did as he said."

The abuse needed to be depicted in the film, Frances said. "All my friends knew about it. Many times I had to run for my life." She attributes the violence to Davis' cocaine use, which she says she only learned about from her mother-in-law, as her husband had kept it hidden from her.

The movie version streamlines much of this background, depicting Frances as having a highly successful dance career but avoiding explicit references to *West Side Story*. Still, Frances is glad the film has finally been made, and says she admires the acting by Cheadle and Corinealdi. She admitted to one reservation, however: She would have liked to see more of her dance career depicted.

Considering Miles' abhorrent treatment of Frances, was Cheadle concerned about los-

ing the audience's sympathy for Miles? "The sympathy part is tricky," Cheadle said. Steven [Baigelman] and I were more interested in empathy, not sympathy." The co-writers wanted to include Miles' dark side, but without having it overshadow the entire movie. "It was there," Cheadle said. "It happened, and Miles talked about it in his [autobiography]: 'I did drugs, I was in bad situations with women, I didn't treat Frances right. I felt bad about it.'

"I know there are people who are going to see this part of him and be like, 'OK, I'm off the Miles thing. I'm done. I can't follow you to the end of the movie.'" Other viewers, he felt, would have a more nuanced reaction—not condoning the behavior, but acknowledging the reality and complexity of it. Above all, Cheadle said, his objective was to explore what kind of music comes out of that mercurial personality: "That was always the goal of the story: to ask how he got back to the music."

While the film is a passion project for Cheadle and the Davis family, one of its goals is to inspire a new generation of fans. "I would love for people to have a greater interest in the music," Cheadle said. "I want people to get hip to the fact that the Miles they *think* they know is not the *only* Miles. There's a continuum [in his music] that goes from bebop all the way to hip-hop. Hopefully, people will dig

back into that music. [Young listeners today should] understand that what they're listening to now is sitting on top of these roots. If you're listening to Kendrick Lamar and you love him, thank Miles. If you dig D'Angelo, thank Miles. If you dig speed metal and Jack White—thank you, Miles, thank you, John McLaughlin and Chick Corea—all the leaders that Miles spawned."

The relevance of the Davis legacy to today's music is underscored in the film's final concert sequence, filmed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music before a live audience. It features Cheadle as Miles with a fantasy band that includes Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, members of Davis' second great quintet, playing with young lions of today's music scene: pianist Glasper, guitarist Gary Clark Jr., bassist/vocalist Esperanza Spalding and drummer Antonio Sanchez. Trumpeter Harrold was off-stage, playing the actual horn parts. Emblazoned on the back of Cheadle/Miles' jacket is the phrase

#SocialMusic (with a hashtag conspicuously included). "Social music," as Miles explains in the movie, is the term he preferred to describe his music, as opposed to "jazz," a term which, according to Wilburn, Miles felt carried connotations of slavery. That final sequence accomplishes a dual objective: It conveys the message of Miles' continued relevance, and it contains what could become a key component of the film's marketing campaign.

Will *Miles Ahead*, a movie about how one of the foremost architects of modern music dug deep and found the strength to make a comeback, also serve as a springboard for another Davis comeback, some 25 years after his death?

Just before that blissed-out fantasy concert scene, there is one last bit of dialogue that reverberates. It takes place in the TV studio shown in the film's prologue. Miles is walking out on the hapless TV interviewer, who shouts after him, "Miles, are you coming back?"



Frances Taylor (left) with Davis

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Once again, for one final moment, there's that patented gravelly whisper, as the screen fades to black: "You better believe it." **DB**

Making The Soundtrack

If Don Cheadle looks like he's playing Miles Davis trumpet solos in *Miles Ahead*, it's no accident. He is playing them, note for note—but the audience is actually hearing the original Davis recordings.

That is, unless Cheadle is playing new material composed by Robert Glasper to re-create the sound and feeling of various eras of Davis music for the film's soundtrack. In those sections of the film, the listener is hearing trumpeter Keyon Harrold, who managed to dub in terrific, Miles-like horn parts after the scenes were shot.

Cheadle's insistence on learning to play trumpet well enough to execute actual Davis solos before filming demonstrates the lengths to which he, Glasper, Harrold and a host of other prominent musicians would go to make the music in the film sound authentic.

The first task was to hire a composer. Cheadle asked Herbie Hancock, but he was too busy; instead, he became a consultant to the project. Then Cheadle, a long-time Glasper fan, approached the 37-year-old Grammy-winning keyboardist and struck a deal, with the family's enthusiastic support.

Scoring the film proved to be one of the biggest challenges of Glasper's career. "It was amazing, enlightening, hard, stressful, challenging—all of that," Glasper said.

"I would go into the studio," Glasper continued, "and record what I think he wanted, because, at this point, there's no scene; it hasn't been shot yet. Don sees the scene in his head, and he's telling me the vibe. And I had to go into the studio hoping the vibe I create is what he sees in his mind."

Cheadle wanted to select a piece of music—"like in *Rocky*," he said—that could be used repetitively, depending on the dramatic context. "If you listen carefully to the soundtrack, you'll hear [the Davis composition] 'Fran-Dance' played throughout the movie in different forms. We bring it back as many times as we can."

For the critical off-screen role of Miles' trumpet, Glasper chose Harrold, whom Wynton Marsalis once called "the future of the trumpet."

Asked how he prepared for the off-screen role of Miles' trumpet, Harrold responded, "In a way, I have been preparing for it forever," implying that the music was already part of his identity as a musician. "I mean, I'm so familiar with Miles' voice ... sonically, linearly, harmonically. He's like a father to me in how I approach the trumpet."

"Keyon is something else," Cheadle said. "He's a magician. Many times, he had to write to what I played [on camera], as opposed to me ghosting his solos. I would sing him the kind of solo that I was thinking of, the articulation of it. And he would improvise over what I was fingering, and make it make sense. ... I've never seen it done that way, and neither had our sound designer and our music supervisor. They thought it was impossible."

In addition to Harrold, Glasper employed a core group of young, distinguished musicians to play the score, including saxophonists JD Allen, Marcus Strickland and Jaleel Shaw; bassists Vicente Archer and Burniss Earl Travis II; drummers

Kendrick Scott, E.J. Strickland, Otis Brown III and Justin Tyson; flutist Elena Pinderhughes; pianist Taylor Eigsti; and guitarist Mike Moreno.

Cheadle and Glasper collaborated on various music cues throughout the film, as well as the closing song, "What's Wrong With That," which is performed live in the spectacular finale, a fantasy Miles concert including Herbie Hancock (on Rhodes), Wayne Shorter (soprano sax), Glasper (piano), Esperanza Spalding (bass), Gary Clark Jr., (guitar) and Antonio Sanchez (drums).

Will there be a soundtrack album? "Yes, definitely," Cheadle says. Stay tuned.

—Allen Morrison



Keyon Harrold

DENEKA PENISTON