MILES DAVIS

BIRDLAND 1951

J.J. JOHNSON
EDDIE "LOCKJAW" DAVIS
BIG NICK NICHOLAS
SONNY ROLLINS
KENNY DREW
BILLY TAYLOR
TOMMY POTTER
CHARLES MINGUS
ART BLAKEY

NEWLY RESTORED RADIO BROADCASTS



THE FINEST IN JAZZ SINCE 1939
41779 BLUE NOTE®



Birdland 1951
MILES DAVIS

1. **MOVE** 6:13
(Denzil Best)
2. **HALF NELSON** 7:33
(Miles Davis)
3. **DOWN** 7:13
(Miles Davis)
4. **OUT OF THE BLUE** 5:54
(Miles Davis)
5. **HALF NELSON** 7:42
(Miles Davis)
6. **TEMPUS FUGIT** 6:44
(Bud Powell)
7. **MOVE** 5:44
(Denzil Best)
8. **MOVE** 6:23
(Denzil Best)
9. **THE SQUIRREL** 8:39
(Tadd Dameron)
10. **LADY BIRD** 5:32
(Tadd Dameron)

TRACKS #1–3: June 2, 1951
MILES DAVIS trumpet, J.J. JOHNSON trombone, SONNY ROLLINS tenor sax
KENNY DREW piano, TOMMY POTTER bass, ART BLAKEY drums

TRACKS #4–7: February 17, 1951
MILES DAVIS trumpet, J.J. JOHNSON trombone, SONNY ROLLINS tenor sax
KENNY DREW piano, TOMMY POTTER bass, ART BLAKEY drums

TRACKS #8–10: September 29, 1951
MILES DAVIS trumpet, EDDIE "LOCKJAW" DAVIS tenor sax, BIG NICK NICHOLAS tenor sax
BILLY TAYLOR piano, CHARLES MINGUS bass, ART BLAKEY drums

Produced for release by MICHAEL CUSCUNA / Sound restoration & mastering: KURT LUNDVALL
Disc transfers on #4–7: MALCOLM ADDEY / Cedar restoration: KEN ROBERTSON
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Miles Davis appears courtesy of Prestige Records. The release is authorized by the Miles Davis estate.



miles davis, kenny drew, art blakey & jimmy heath *at a rehearsal, 1953*

miles at birdland

1951 was a watershed year for Miles Davis, one of many for a man who often helped to change the face of jazz. After establishing himself in New York, particularly with Charlie Parker's quintet (1947-8) and as leader of the highly influential nonet (1948-50) which later became known as the "Birth Of The Cool" band, his career became affected by Parker's opiate of choice that he had managed to steer clear of in the 1940s.

By the time Miles returned to New York, after having played with Tadd Dameron's group at the Paris Jazz Festival in May 1949, Miles began to mess around with heroin and by 1950 found himself with a habit. In the first half of that year there was only one club where he could find consistent work; that was Birdland. Opened in December of 1949, it was a culmination of a new style of jazz venue that was a vital part of the shift from the narrow brownstone boites of 52nd Street over to the more capacious cellars of Broadway. It all began in 1948 with the Royal Roost between 47th and 48th Streets where Miles played with Bird and also debuted the "Birth Of The Cool" band. The Roost fostered Bop City (the only one of these clubs where you accessed the music by going up a flight rather than down) on the corner of 49th; and, in December, The Clique between 52nd and 53rd. The Clique did not survive to see 1950 and in December the space, under new ownership, became Birdland.

The last nonet recording date took place in March of 1950 and Miles's affiliation with Capitol Records was at an end. By midsummer he packed up his family (Irene and their two children) and drove back to his father's home in East St. Louis before moving into his mother's place in Chicago. In December he got a gig at St. Louis's Hi Note club. The story goes that Bob Weinstock, the young owner of Prestige Records,

tracked him down at the club and offered him a contract after calling all the Davises in the East St. Louis phone book and eventually connecting with Miles's father.

Weinstock remembers it differently. "I was in Chicago and asked the local cats if they knew where I could find Miles. Someone came up with his number and I called him in East St. Louis. He said that if I sent him the money he would come to New York." Varying accounts aside, in January 1951, Miles headed for New York. On the 17th of the month he did his first date for Prestige. It just so happened that Norman Granz had hired him to record with Charlie Parker on the same day. So he was with Bird in the afternoon for Granz's then Clef label and his own band, including Sonny Rollins, in the evening for Prestige.

The next time Miles was in the studio for Prestige as a leader was in October. Between the January and October sessions it was again Birdland, by now the focal point of the New York jazz club scene, that afforded him a showcase.

As the Roost had been dubbed "The Metropolitan Bopera House," Birdland, too, had an identifying nickname, "The Jazz Corner of the World." At 1687 Broadway it was not on a corner and closer to 53rd than 52nd but, figuratively, it was the "Jazz Corner."

As you passed under the club's canopy and descended the steps your ears might catch the high-pitched, piercing sound of Birdland's midget greeter/emcee Pee Wee Marquette, renowned for mispronouncing musicians' names if they didn't lay a tip on him (i.e., bassist Teddy Kotick became "Teddy Kotex"). Once at the bottom of the stairway you paused to pay the admission charge. It may have once been 75 cents but I remember it as $0.99 because Billie June Henry from Wichita, Kansas told me that when she was the ticket seller if the person giving her the dollar didn't ask for the penny change she would pocket it. This was in her new-to-New York survival time, long before she wed pianist George Wallington and became a publicist for Columbia Records.

Once inside you noticed a checkroom on the left and a glass booth on the right. When Birdland opened in December 1949, William B. Williams narrated the live history of jazz taking place on stage from this booth. Later it became the domain of Symphony Sid Torin who presided over his nightly record show that also included live performances from the club, three of which are presented here for your listening pleasure. Or, as Symphony Sid would have put it, "These gone 'gennelmen' of jazz will really knock you out."

Moving a bit further into the club you became aware of a long bar on your left, most often inhabited by a mixture of visiting musicians, an assortment of hustlers (pimps, ladies of the evening, garden-variety thugs, et al.) and jazz aficionados who couldn't get a seat in what we called "the bullpen," an enclosed area with chairs that ran parallel to the bar and ended at the left side of the bandstand. On the other side of the bullpen's right-side railing was a sea of tables covered with white linen, populated by celebrities and others who could afford a cover charge. The far wall on the other side of the tables contained a row of elevated leatherette banquettes that began at bandstand right and continued to the front end of the club and along to the back wall toward the glass broadcast booth.

For the most part, I was a denizen of the bullpen where you weren't required to buy a drink but had to resist buying a bag of salted nuts offered for the measly price of 25 cents intended expressly to arouse one's thirst. You could see and hear clearly from this section and the music was "happening." At different times certain clubs become "the" place to be and Birdland held sway longer than most. It lasted into the mid-'60s but by that time the jazz scene had moved downtown. The '50s, when jazz in its purest form was at its most popular in this country, was also Birdland's heyday. It would run an ad in the New York papers stating "Basie's Back." That was all the information the fans needed.

The sets by Miles Davis come from winter, spring and fall but are not offered in chronological order. June precedes February but the group is the same: Sonny Rollins, tenor sax; J.J. Johnson, trombone; Kenny Drew, piano; Tommy Potter, bass; and Art Blakey, drums. Rollins and Drew were part of a group of musicians that also included Jackie McLean, Walter Bishop Jr. and Arthur Taylor who came from a neighborhood in Harlem called Sugar Hill. Miles had started hanging out and playing with them in 1950. Potter had been his bandmate in Parker's quintet; Johnson, modern jazz's leading trombonist, had been part of the nonet; and Blakey had been with him in California in '50 and they had certainly played together in New York. Although this was not necessarily a "working" band it was a highly cohesive unit.

These sets are electric–intense burning (no ballads) with Blakey's relentless, detailed swing a super energy source. Denzil Best's "Move," heard three times, is taken closer to Fats Navarro's tempo than the "Birth Of The Cool" recording although it quotes from his nonet solo in the first version.

"Half Nelson," which appears twice, is Miles's line based on the changes to Tadd Dameron's "Lady Bird." Part of Dameron's arrangement is employed to advantage. In his solo on the first "Half Nelson" Miles is the boxer, moving in and out, jabbing, feinting, punching, counter-punching.

"Down" is Miles's blues, first recorded at the January 17th Prestige date. I titled it because "down" was an expression in usage by musicians at the time. If someone was "down" they were really taking care of business. Here a riff from Gillespie's "Emanon" kicks off Drew's solo.

"Out Of The Blue," based on "Get Happy," was another Davis song I named when Miles recorded it for Prestige in October. Years later it showed up on an Art Blakey Bluebird CD from a 1957 RCA date as "Evans" credited to Sonny Rollins. Hmmm? Here Sonny quotes from Bird's solo on the Red Norvo 1945 "Get Happy."



sonny rollins *with Fats Navarro in the background at Bud Powell's August 9, 1949 Blue Note session*



tommy potter
at Bud Powell's August 9, 1949 Blue Note session

"Tempus Fugit," or, as Bud Powell called his composition, "Tempus Fugue-it," can be summed up by the "Yeah!" uttered by one of the bandsmen immediately after the last note.

The last session has only Miles and Blakey as holdovers. Billy Taylor, who in '51 was house pianist at Birdland and Charles Mingus, who had left the Red Norvo trio, complete the rhythm section. What makes this band unique for Miles is the presence of tenor saxophonists Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, who had given Miles his first gig on 52nd Street in the '40s, and George "Big Nick" Nicholas, a veteran of the Claude Hopkins and Dizzy Gillespie bands (he takes the "Blue Moon" solo on "Manteca"), who was later notable as the leader of the house band at the Paradise right above Central Park West. Both were swing players who used the bebop vernacular in different ways. Nick was a Hawkins man; Davis employed his own version of the Websterian rasp within his idiosyncratic, oblique style.

The third version of "Move" opens the set. Dameron is once again represented with his jumping blues, "The Squirrel" and "Lady Bird," the head stated only at the end of the piece. For those keeping score at home, Big Nick solos before Lockjaw on all and the same order holds for the exchanges. Each quotes "Rhapsody In Blue" on "Lady Bird" and Lock throws in "Duff Capers" for good measure.

Miles Davis At Birdland 1951 reflects a passion for playing in every number. It comes from a time between classic bebop and the so-called "hard bop" that followed hard on its heels. There are many revelations to be garnered, not the least being for those who may have been asleep on Kenny Drew.

This music sounds so natural, so right and so real because it is!

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