

Miles Study Guide

Miles by Miles Davis

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Plot Summary

Miles is the autobiography of Miles Davis, one of the greatest jazz musicians of the twentieth century. Miles grows up in a wealthy black family in Illinois where he discovers his love for music. As a young man, Miles moves to New York City where he plunges into the jazz scene by spending time with music greats, Charlie "Bird" Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Eventually Miles launches his own career and has several bands of his own over forty years of playing the music he loves. Miles Davis is born on 26, 1926, in Alton, Illinois, a town on the Mississippi River north of East St. Louis. He is named Miles Dewey Davis III after his father and grandfather but everyone in the family calls him Junior. Miles is raised in a well-to-do family; his father is a dentist and his mother is a talented pianist. Miles is interested in sports as a young boy but his passion for music is ignited around the age of twelve after hearing music from Harlem played on the radio. After graduating high school, Miles moves to New York City to attend the Juilliard School of Music but he drops out because he wants to learn jazz from playing with legends such as Charlie "Bird" Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Miles' gift for music is clearly evident and he has the enviable position of playing with Bird, Dizzy, Charlie Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Clark Terry, Max Roach and others. Before long, Miles breaks out and forms his own bands, hiring and firing musicians to support his evolving styles. Miles' personal life mirrors the volatility of his musical career and he has three children with Irene Birth, a woman he never marries. Miles does marry two times; first to Frances Taylor and later to Cicely Tyson. Throughout the years, Miles is involved with many women even during the times he is married. His use of heroin and cocaine also become huge destructive forces in his life which wreck not only his music but also his personal relationships. Miles has a self-destructive bent to his personality and his fierce protection of black people, especially black musicians, alienates him from mainstream critics and media. As Miles ages, he suffers from sickle cell anemia and diabetes, both of which compromise his stamina but he perseveres in his music and his vision for the future of music. Through it all, Miles is a survivor and he outlasts many of his jazz contemporaries from the age of bebop. Miles dies in September of 1991 from a stroke, pneumonia and respiratory complications.



Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Miles is the autobiography of Miles Davis, one of the greatest jazz musicians of the twentieth century. Miles grows up in a wealthy black family in Illinois where he discovers his love for music. As a young man, Miles moves to New York City where he plunges into the jazz scene by spending time with music greats, Charlie "Bird" Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Eventually Miles launches his own career and has several bands of his own over fifty years of playing the music he loves.

Miles Davis is born on 26, 1926, in Alton, Illinois, a town on the Mississippi River north of East St. Louis. He is named Miles Dewey Davis III after his father and grandfather, but everyone in the family calls him Junior. Miles' father is a dentist and the recipient of degrees from three colleges. Miles' mother, Cleota, manages the family and keeps her jazz piano skills a secret from her family for many years. Miles has an older sister, Dorothy and a younger brother, Vernon. The family moves from Alton to East St. Louis where the family prospers in spite of the Great Depression.

Before delving into music, Miles jumps into athletics, especially baseball, football, basketball, swimming and boxing. The boxing comes in handy because East St. Louis is filled with gangs who like to torment other kids, especially skinny ones like Miles. Miles hates going to the black schools because they are dirty and the children are treated poorly. Miles does enjoy going to his grandfather's farm in Arkansas where he and his sister and brother would fish and ride horses.

In East St. Louis, Miles gets a paper route to have his own spending money and he buys barbecue from a joint owned by old man Piggease. Miles believes that he gets his sense of black pride from his father and his sense of style from his mother. As a dentist, Miles' father, Dr. Davis, is a prominent member of the black community and Mrs. Miles likes the prestige but Miles' parents never get along very well. Dr. Davis buys a farm in Millstadt, Illinois, which Mrs. Miles thinks is a waste of money. Dr. Davis also loses lots of money gambling and Miles remembers many fights in the household.

Miles discovers music by listening to a radio program called "Harlem Rhythms" when he is about seven or eight-years-old. Miles also recalls loving the music coming from the churches when he visits his grandfather in Arkansas.

By the time he is twelve-years-old, Miles is heavy into music, taking trumpet lessons in addition to his athletics. In high school, Miles is positively influenced by his music teacher, Mr. Buchanan, who gives him private trumpet lessons. Miles also plays the trumpet in the high school band and does not understand why others do not think he is as cool as he thinks he is. At this time Miles also becomes seriously interested in clothes and wears Brooks Brothers suits and shirts with high tab collars.



Miles meets Clark Terry, the jazz trumpeter, and he becomes Miles' new musical idol. Miles listens avidly to the jukebox music and continues to perfect his trumpet playing. By the time he is sixteen, Miles plays some gigs on weekends with a jazz band and builds a reputation as a good jazz trumpeter. It is also at this time that Miles meets Irene Birth, his first serious girlfriend who convinces Miles to call bandleader Eddie Randle about a job. Miles gets the trumpet job at the Rhumboogie Club in St. Louis with Eddie Randle who lets Miles also write and arranging music.

By the end of 1944, Miles has been playing at the Rhumboogie Club for a year and is amused that Clark Terry now comes to the club to hear him play. Miles and Clark become good friends and Miles also meets "Fats" Navarro and Sonny Stitt, jazz musicians who become lifelong friends.

It is also at this time that Dr. and Mrs. Davis separate and Dr. Davis moves to his farm. Miles and his mother do not get along and she is enraged when Miles' girlfriend, Irene, becomes pregnant because Mrs. Davis had wanted Miles to attend college. Miles graduates high school early and begins to think of leaving the St. Louis area to live in New York City. Miles travels with another band for the summer and returns to St. Louis where he plays with Billy Eckstine's band including Charlie "Bird" Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Buddy Anderson Art Blakey and Sarah Vaughn for a short time. After this, Miles attends Juilliard School of music in New York City in the hopes of being in the heart of the jazz music scene.

Miles is eighteen-years-old when he arrives in New York City in 1944 and quickly adjusts to the rapid pace of the city. After getting settled in his student housing, Miles goes to Minton's Playhouse in Harlem where aspiring jazz musicians hang out in the hopes of meeting influential people and other musicians. Other outlets for young musicians are the clubs on 52nd Street where white people and critics come to listen. Minton's is the laboratory for bebop music where black jazz artists improvise and try new stylings.

For weeks Miles tries to find Charlie "Bird" Parker or Dizzy Gillespie at either Minton's or one of the 52nd Street clubs. Miles does connect with Dizzy but it is weeks before either one sees Bird in a small club and Miles is shocked by Bird's disheveled appearance. For the next couple of years, Dizzy and Bird are Miles' main contacts and influences in the world of jazz music. Miles also meets Thelonius Monk, an innovative jazz pianist and Freddie Webster, a trumpeter. With all these real world influences, Miles is bored at Juilliard and soon drops out of school in favor of learning from his new friends.

Miles makes his first recording in 1945 with a jazz band and plays his first nightclub job at the Spotlite Club on 52nd Street. Miles also plays with Coleman Hawkins' band which backed up jazz singer, Billie Holiday. Miles fills in when the regular trumpeter is too high on heroin to play. Bird is considered to be almost a god in the jazz industry by musicians and customers alike and Miles is infatuated by his playing but not his lifestyle which is filled with drugs, loose women and alcohol. When Dizzy Gillespie quits Bird's band, Miles steps in and enjoys playing but does not learn as much from Bird as he learns from Dizzy and Monk.



Even though Miles is playing with the best in the business, the critics are not favorable toward him. Miles believes it is because they think he is arrogant because he refuses to be a happy grinning black man like artists like Louis Armstrong who have built their careers on putting on a show for white people.

In December of 1945, Bird and Dizzy go to Los Angeles and Miles goes home to East St. Louis accompanied by Irene and their baby daughter, Cheryl. Miles joins Bird and Dizzy in Los Angeles soon after and they play at a club called The Finale. It is there that Miles meets Charlie Mingus, noted jazz composer and bassist.

In early 1946 Irene is pregnant with Miles' second child, a son named Gregory. Miles is still in Los Angeles and is learning how to get the money he needs by dating rich white women. Times are difficult for the jazz musicians in Los Angeles because the West Coast is not into the style as New York is; plus heroin is harder to obtain which is a difficulty for many especially Bird. Bird starts to drink heavily and sets his hotel room on fire one night and is sent to Camarillo State Hospital for rehabilitation.

In August of 1946, Billy Eckstine brings his band to Los Angeles and hires Miles. They play gigs for a few months and then head back to New York by bus. It is on this trip that Miles first uses heroin and cocaine. By the end of the year, Esquire magazine names Miles its New Star award for trumpet.

In the opening section, Miles establishes that he comes from an affluent black family which maintains its prosperous standing even through the Great Depression. Miles learns independence early and also learns the troubles that can occur between men and women as he watches his parents' marriage disintegrate. Miles also learns early that black people have a harder life than white people as he is harassed early and often in school.

It is this inequality that will be an undercurrent of anger for all of Miles' life. This is noted in his descriptions of the patrons and critics of the clubs on 52nd Street in New York City. "I hate how white people always try to take credit for something after they discover it. Like it wasn't happening before they found out about it—which most times it always late, and they didn't have nothing to do with it happening. Then, they try to take all the credit, try to cut everybody black out. That's what they tried to do with Minton's Playhouse and Teddy Hill. After bebop became the rage, white music critics tried to act like they discovered it—and us—down on 52nd Street. That kind of dishonest shit makes me sick to my stomach. And when you speak out on it or don't go along with this racist bullshit, then you become a radical, a black troublemaker. Then they try to cut you out of everything. But the musicians and the people who really loved and respected bebop and the truth know that the real thing happened up in Harlem at Minton's."

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Style

Perspective

Description

Tone

Description

Structure

Description