



## MARCUS MILLER

# NO MORE APOLOGIES

By Josef Woodard

**M**ore than most jazz polymaths, Marcus Miller is a complex character to pin down, categorize and otherwise attach a tidy label to. Even so, one word expresses, with minimalist gusto, a pinnacle of his life in music: *Tutu*. That was the 1986 Miles Davis album, considered the masterpiece of Davis' last phase, which Miller produced, played bass on and mostly wrote. Twenty-five-plus years later, the *Tutu* saga continues.

On a recent afternoon at Miller's compact but well-equipped studio and laboratory in a creatively charged part of Santa Monica, Calif.—near the Bergamot Station art gallery compound—he was on the phone for a newspaper interview. The subject: Miles Davis, and, yes, *Tutu*, in advance of a gig in Florida with a project he has done for two years now, playing the entire *Tutu* album live.

This "Tutu Revisited" project began at the behest of the Frenchman Vincent Bessières, organizer of an ambitious Miles Davis exhibition in Paris, which visited Montreal last year. Initially resisting the idea, Miller came around. "I started to think about it and said, 'You know what? What if I got some young kids, who maybe weren't even born when *Tutu* came out, and have them playing this music?' Miles used to do that. He used to say, 'Who's the bad cat out there?' That's how he found me. He asked, 'Who's the bad, funky bass player in New York?' Bill Evans, the sax player, said, 'Marcus.' He was always doing that. Tony Williams. So I was like, 'Let me find some young cats, some fire-breathing cats to play this music and see what we can extract from this music and make contemporary.'

"It was supposed to be just one gig, but it was cool, and we've ended up doing it for almost two years now. Everybody wanted to check it out. It was nice to go back and play some music that I hadn't really played live. I did it in the studio, and wasn't in Miles' band at the time. I played 'Tutu' live, because it was a popular song, and maybe one or two of the other ones, but most of them I hadn't dealt with in a live way. It was interesting to strip it of all the techno and drum machine stuff, and just deal with the compositions."

Miller's storied link to Davis is part of the musical agenda and narrative on *A Night In Monte-Carlo*, Miller's latest—and possibly best—album in a dozen-strong discography.

An elaborate set of music, recorded live and bolstered by orchestrations for L'Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo and special guests Roy Hargrove and Raul Midón, Miller's new album includes a soulful-grooved version of "So What" and "Amandla."

The album sports a well-considered mixture of genres, from funk to standards, and added studio tracks featuring Miller on his "other" instrument, bass clarinet. "Your Amazing Grace" and "Strange Fruit" feature Herbie Hancock on piano, recorded back home in Los Angeles. Also equipped with plenty of Miller's characteristically diverse and spot-on bass chops, the new album sums up the vastness of Miller's musical life so far. It's a complicated story.

**I**n a career stretching back 30-plus years, through his life as a producer, New York session player, L.A. scene-maker, electric bassist of no small chops or influence, bandleader with an evolving musical mission and facilitator of Miles Davis in his final chapter, Miller seems to be an archetypal wearer of multiple hats. Moving fluidly from one persona or task to another seems to come naturally to him.

On that subject of his nimble role-switching, he takes the story back to the top. "I went to the High School of Music & Art, and my senior year, I had orchestration, then I'd have jazz band, then I'd have the classical orchestra, then I'd have small group combo, then a private clarinet lesson. I went to Queens College in New York and it was the same kind of schedule.

"When I went into the music world in New York City, I just kept doing the same thing," he laughs. "Every couple of hours, I'd switch into some other mode. I was doing jingles in the morning, and then was a studio guy doing record dates in the middle of the day. I'd do a gig at a club at night. And when I got a chance, I'd try to write an r&b tune."

A New Yorker born in Brooklyn in 1959,

Miller explains that he has essentially been living in Los Angeles for 18 years, but "wouldn't admit it for a long time." He headed west to work on Luther Vandross albums, and soon realized that the bicoastal residency conflicted with his family life.

As he remembers of that time in the '90s, "The scene was changing in New York. When I was there, it was Seventh Avenue South, Sweet Basil. Then there was a transition period, when it was just the Blue Note and the [Village] Vanguard. Now, it has revived. But for a while, it was like, 'You know what? I'm going to see what this L.A. thing is.'"

Meanwhile, out west, next in Miller's expanding work world came movie-scoring gigs, for such films as *House Party*. He continued with more pop and jazz production (including Wayne Shorter's masterful and still underrated *High Life*), and the slow process of developing his own voice as a solo artist.

Currently, he savors the opportunity to play live, a process he came to fairly late in life. As he says, "In that respect, [my career] has been upside down. Most guys start their careers on the road, and then they settle into being a producer, using all the experiences from the road to inform their production. But for me, I was producing starting at age 23, and was in the studios. I didn't start doing heavy gigging until I was 35 or something like that. So it's backwards.

"It was really nice to get out there and not have headphones on, and to really just let it rip and not worry about the details so much. When you're a recording musician, it's all about the details. I used to focus on the point when I stopped the note, not just when I started it. I wanted to stop it on the 'and' of three, or the last 16th of four. It was that level of detail.

"To be on the road, I loved being able to let go of that. No, I loved the *idea* of being able to let go of that. I never actually let go. People see me playing one note and say, 'Man, you're play-

ing such a simple part.' I say, 'Dude, if you knew all the calculations going on in my head to play this simple note—tone, attack, cutoff, placement—this note is hard,'" he laughs. "That's the way I'm approaching it."

Along the way, Miller has also been unusually adept at moving between worlds normally disparate from one another. He has effectively worked "across aisles," between "real" jazz, post-fusion (including seminal work with David Sanborn in the early '80s) and the slick realm of smooth-jazz, and also between pop and jazz quarters. As such, he's in a position to see the differences of attitude and bias firsthand.

In jazz, he says, "A lot of guys don't understand pop music. They don't understand the value of it. They can't figure out why it's good, and what makes it good. They'll listen to a Stevie Wonder or a Prince record and go, 'Oh man, it's all one chord.' OK, so you don't speak that language. If you don't speak the language, you can't judge it. But for me, if you put on a good Prince record or a good Mos Def record, I understand why it's good. I feel it. So if you've got that in you, then you have the potential to move around in between the different worlds."

From the other end of the spectrum, he comments, "In the pop world, jazz sounds foreign. They say, 'What are you doing?' I say, 'Let me explain it to you.' Then they say, 'Well, how can I enjoy something if you have to explain it to me?' They don't understand that it's just a language. You don't understand Russian, but if you take a couple of lessons or learn how to speak Russian, you'll see the beauty in it."

"It's the same thing on both sides. Pop musicians think that jazz is math, musicians who play so much music that they're bored with what everyone else enjoys. So they need to go beyond and, in going beyond, they're losing what the actual essence of music is. That's what pop musicians feel. Jazz musicians feel like pop musicians are simple and are just appealing to the lowest common denominator."

"And they're both wrong. I'm sitting in a position where I can tell you that you just don't get it. Now, there are bad versions of both. You've got to compare the best with the best. But if you take John Coltrane and take Aretha Franklin, then you'll see. OK, you may not understand Aretha, but she's putting it down, no question. You may not get Coltrane. You may think he's from outer space, but he's putting it down. Both sides just have a little more opening up to do."

While he has found plenty of work in American film, pop, jazz and other entertainment culture, Europe has been very good to Miller, as jazz artist and bandleader, and this new album is another example of that patronage. He was invited by Jean-René Palacio, the head of culture in Monaco, to put together a program for the Monaco Jazz Festival, with the Monte-Carlo Philharmonic at his disposal.

Surveying his varied discography so far, Miller recalls that "the first album I made was

in the '80s. In terms of self-discovery, I had no idea who I was. I was a really popular session bass player. I was playing with Luther, with Aretha, with Miles, all sorts of people. What made me good in those situations was that I could become a different cat. It was still the same mentality, but I knew the different languages. But when it came to making my own records, as an artist, I didn't really have a solid voice or know who I was. So I've been spending the last 25, 30 years just finding that voice."

"On the last few albums, particularly on this one, I'm not apologizing anymore. This is what you would hear walking down the street in New York. You don't hear one sound. If you come from Minneapolis or New Orleans or some other small cities, there is a sound that is associated with those regions. In New York, you can play anything. You just have to play it aggressively," he laughs.

"When I had people tell me that something I did affected them on some profound level, helped them get through a difficult period in their life and gave them strength, it changes why you make music. You can't help but be affected by that."

"At a certain point, I had to say to myself, 'OK, I can't narrow stuff down. I've gotta go with what I feel like is honest. The danger in that is that your record can sound like the radio, like you're just flipping from one guy to the next guy. But it's starting to feel like my musical personality is strong enough that there is a through line, even though I'm going to be hitting you with songs from different areas of the musical world. You'll hear my personality coming through, being the glue that holds the whole thing together. Then, also, with this album, because I'm using the orchestra and have that really distinctive sound, I figured that glues the thing together, as well."

Miller is one of the few bassist-leaders on today's scene, but it wasn't always thus. When he started out in the late '70s, his role models included Jaco Pastorius, Stanley Clarke, Bootsy Collins, Alphonso Johnson and even, from the pop end, Sting. Today, he's one of the last bassist-leader holdouts.

"The thing is, it can be done," Miller says. "Look at the history of the bass-led band. The bass player is also the composer, the arranger, the musical mind behind this group. Lots of times, Charlie Mingus didn't even play a solo.

It was still Mingus' group, no question, because his presence was so strong. It was the same with Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius. These guys were able to lead a band with their whole musical personality."

Bass occupies a unique place in the lineage of jazz instruments, as a foundational voice that has evolved into a soloing voice in its own right, especially in the electric bass domain. But questions of range, tone and personality have dogged the culture of bass.

"For a lot of guys," Miller says, "their solution is to go up high. For me, if I'm playing a tune that's funk-oriented, it's hard for me to go up and play lines. I'm playing the funkier instrument in the band, and I'm going to go up high and doodle around up there when I could be extra-funky in the solo? So I started working on ways to solo and not leave the bass area."

As significant as his commanding and focused electric bass work is to his musical identity and also his reputation, Miller heeds a more expansive picture of his artistic purpose. Closing his new album with a tune featuring Hancock brings the story full circle, in the sense that, like Miller, Hancock has been moving intuitively between jazz, pop and "accessible" realms for decades, and especially in Hancock's current phase. Miller will also join Hancock and Wayne Shorter for a "Tribute to Miles" project on the summer European jazz festival circuit.

As Miller says, "I think you go through different levels, in terms of why you make music. The first level is that it's interesting to you. Maybe the second level is because it's getting you some kind of attention and you realize you're good at it, and you love that. And then you might make music to make a living. And then later, you realize how powerful music is. For me, when I had people tell me that something I did affected them on some profound level in their life, helped them get through a difficult period in their life and gave them strength, it changes why you make music. You can't help but be affected by that."

"When I did 'Tutu,' I was concerned about the South African thing, but it was personal. I didn't expect anybody to be affected by it on a profound level. But I've talked to South Africans who said, 'Do you know how important that song was to us when we were fighting against apartheid?' When you hear that, you say, 'Whoa.' You start to change. You think a little more deeply about what you're doing."

"I'm sure Herbie is aware how profoundly he can affect people, and that's why he's doing what he's doing. It's not like he had anything to prove. He's actually now just free to do what he really feels needs to be done. It is like it's a moral imperative, that he is going to reach people and make a better world."

"And I think I'm trying to head myself in that direction—not that I would ever put myself on his level. But I want to try to do as much good as [I] can with [my] notes." ■