

Good evening everybody...

Welcome to Week 3 of FIVE WEEKS FOR MILES.

Tonight's chapter is called PLUGGED NICKEL – “The Shorter Years”, and tonight we'll take a deep dive into what historians now call The Second Great Quintet.

And for a lot of musicians — myself included — this is the deepest well in all of Miles Davis music.

Not necessarily the most famous Miles band...
...but maybe the most exploratory.
The most telepathic.
The most dangerous.

This is the period where Miles stopped merely innovating within jazz...

...and started breaking jazz open from the inside.

Tonight we're gonna try to step into that world.

But to understand how revolutionary this band became...
you have to understand the road Miles took to get there.

So let's rewind for a minute.

Miles arrives in New York in 1944.
Eighteen years old.
Fresh out of East St. Louis.
Officially attending Juilliard...

...but reeeeeeally -- he came to New York to find Charlie Parker...
Bird.

And at that moment...Bird was the future.

Bebop was exploding.
This wasn't establishment jazz.

This was radical music.
Dangerous music.

Bird.
Dizzy.
Bud Powell.
Max Roach.
52nd Street.

And Miles gets thrown directly into the fire when Bird hires him to to replace Dizzy Gillespie.

Now technically, Miles was never the virtuoso Dizzy Gillespie was.

Dizzy could overwhelm you with velocity and brilliance.

Miles understood something else.

Space.
Drama.
Restraint.
Psychology.

Miles realized very early:
you don't need to play MORE than everybody else...

you need to sound DIFFERENT than everybody else.

And that idea changes jazz forever. (pause)

After the Parker years... in the 1950's, Miles starts hearing something beyond bebop.

Less density.
More spaciousness.
More orchestral sounds.

And that becomes "Birth of the Cool" -- the famous 1949 Capitol Records nonet recordings with Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz and a laundry list of west coasters.

That album, some say, basically invents cool jazz.

And already you can hear Miles becoming more than a trumpet player.

He's becoming an architect...

A conceptual bandleader....

A sonic futurist.

Now the early 50s are rough.

Heroin addiction nearly destroys Miles.

His playing suffers, he becomes argumentative in the studio, musicians stopped wanting to work with him & his reputation suffers. The momentum he'd built after the Parker years begins slipping away, and eventually Miles leaves New York for a period... returning home to East St. Louis to get clean.

Famously, he quits heroin cold turkey at his father's farm around 1953.

And when he re-emerges later that year, he comes back with force, signing to the Prestige label and putting out

Walkin'.

Bags' Groove.

Blue Haze.

This isn't the hyper-dense complexity of bebop anymore.

This music breathes harder.

Hits harder.

Swings harder.

And from there comes the First Great Quintet:

Miles. Coltrane. Red Garland. Paul Chambers. Philly Joe Jones.

Cookin'. Relaxin'. Workin'. Steamin'.

And during this period, something fascinating is happening.

Miles is becoming increasingly economical, choosing notes carefully and playing long languid solos, while Coltrane is exploding outward, creating Sheets of sound, endlessly searching, pushing harmony beyond its limits.

Then in 1959: a sort of musical miracle takes place: Kind of Blue is recorded... and becomes the greatest selling jazz album of all time, and possibly the most influential jazz album ever recorded.

And what's revolutionary about Kind of Blue isn't complexity...

...it's freedom.

Kind Of Blue is about Miles removing clutter... harmonically... rhythmically... melodically...

Fewer chord changes.
Hyper simple 2-note melode
More atmosphere.
More space.

And the world just loved it... and still does today... last week concert featured us playing the entire Kind of Blue recording as the 2nd set – and this place was rammed out. How many of you were here last week?

But I call Kind of Blue a miracle because after that recording in 1959, Trane would do 1 more tour in 1960, and then leave the band... he does get coaxed back into the studio in '61 to appear on "Some Day My Prince Will Come", but it was time for Coltrane to move on as he was continuing to evolve in a different direction – so he leaves – as he had to, become the force of nature he was destined to become forming that earth-shattering quartet with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones.

And after Trane leaves... Miles enters a strange transitional period... I think of it as a period of mourning. He does all kinds of things in 61 and 62 including more orchestral recording with Gil Evans (Sketches of Spain in late 61, Quiet Nights in early 63), he's touring with Hank Mobley and the Kinda Blue band -- they record live at the Blackhawk, fires him... and people love it – but Miles didn't...

Cuz he was looking for something new to do and cycling through tenor players desperately looking for that new sound ensemble sound.

And now – it's 1963... and here is where it gets interesting – every the restless explorer & seemingly sick of the very sound he created with Kind of Blue -- he fires everyone he'd worked with previously, and hires a buncha kids... out goes the Kind of Blue band, and in comes

the 26 year old Ron Carter on bass
The 23 year Herbie Hancock on piano
and – are you ready – the 17 year old Tony Williams on drums.

And man – Tony is often accredited with being the driving force of that era...

Dig that -- a teenager...redefining modern jazz drumming.

And Tony's concept was revolutionary:
he played in a manner where time itself could become fluid.

The bars could stretch... Contract... Float.... Explode....

And Miles LOVED this instability.

Because Miles hated comfort.

... and these 3 young men were fully on board for the weirdness.

So now there's 4 of these weirdoes doing new things... cool. But because Miles came up with Charlie Parker to him an ensemble was not complete without TWO horns in the frontline.

So now Miles was desperate. He was looking for another sideman on tenor to join this new group of jazz astronauts and do what Trane did -- inspire... so he cycles through many...

Sonny Rollins
Sonny Stitt.
Hank Mobley.
Jimmy Heath

George Coleman.
Sam Rivers.

All incredible musicians... and he hated them all. And what were they guilty of? Not being Coltrane.

Or, more to the point, not being that next thing that would help him evolve to the next state that he could feel coalescing around him. He was searching for somebody who could survive that NEXT evolution, and none of these cats were doing it.

But one of the great turning points in this evolution happens in 1964.

The Philharmonic Hall concert at Lincoln Center.

Now the story goes that right before the concert... Miles tells the band they're not getting paid.

It was a civil rights benefit concert.

And the younger musicians — especially Tony, Herbie, Ron — were furious. George Coleman has been tapped to play tenor and was less upset as legend goes – but the youngsters were livid – especially Tony.

I mean – they were already nervous cuz this is Philharmonic Hall... at the Lincoln Center...one of the most prestigious stages in America in the 60's.

And now they find out: no money.

So the band walks onstage emotionally charged.
Agitated. Combustible.

And you can HEAR it in the music.

The fast tunes become absolutely ferocious.

“Four.”

“Seven Steps to Heaven.”

“Walkin’.”

Tony pushes the tempos into insanity, and the band sounds almost violent on fast tunes

Meanwhile the ballads become stretched...
fragile...psychological... haunting...

And Columbia LOVED it – they released all the fast tunes as an album called “Four & More”, and all the slow tunes as “My Funny Valentine”... and then in 2004, 40 years later, they re-integrated everything into a 2-CD boxset called “The Complete Concert: 1964”

And I honestly think this concert changed Miles forever.

Because instead of controlling the chaos...

...Miles leaned INTO it... just said “yes” to everything that happened around him that night. Poor George Coleman got beat up badly... on Seven Steps to Heaven he can barely get through a solo cuz the tempos are so so so fast.

But Miles realized:
this volatility...
this danger...
this unpredictability...

...was the future of the jazz artform – at least when it was in his hands.

So, from then on -- if the music became predictable... he would deliberately sabotage it. They all would. They would literally take turns doing so.

This was becoming something else entirely.

It was a whole new way of playing jazz.

But no tenor saxophonists could handle it... no one... and not for lack of trying – cuz Miles cycled through some of the best in America.

And then -- right at this moment, just as this new playing style is coming into focus... the unimaginable happens – while in the throes of hating every tenor saxophonist EVER to sit in that chair – a man walks into the midst of this chaos... steps into this assemblage of superheroes comprised of Herbie, Ron, Tony & Miles – and could hang.

Finally a tenor saxophonist worthy of this new kind of playing shows up.

Enter -- Wayne Shorter.

And suddenly Miles finally has the tenor player he'd been waiting for.

Because Wayne wasn't just a saxophonist.

Wayne, as a composer, was already changing the DNA of jazz composition.

His tunes don't resolve normally.

The forms blur.

The harmonies drift.

The melodies feel dreamlike and mysterious.

Wayne could function inside this new unstable environment Miles was creating.

And once Wayne joins...

the Second Great Quintet becomes fully operational.

Now it's important to understand the timeline here.

Because Plugged Nickel doesn't appear out of nowhere.

First comes the Philharmonic Hall concert in 1964...

the emotional explosion that becomes Four & More and My Funny Valentine.

Then Wayne joins the group.

And the 1st recording with that squad is E.S.P. in 1965.

And E.S.P. is important because it's the FIRST true studio statement of the Second Great Quintet.

Miles.
Wayne.
Herbie.
Ron.
Tony.

The chemistry is now officially there.

And E.S.P. is the blueprint.

You can hear the architecture forming:
the elasticity...
the abstraction...
the conversational interplay...
the harmonic ambiguity...

...but it's still somewhat controlled... still somewhat organized...

Then the band spends the rest of 1965 touring relentlessly...
playing night after night after night...
pushing the music farther and farther outward.

And by the time they arrive in Chicago in December of 1965...

...the thing has completely detonated... it's was now fully
untethered... other dimensional...almost supernatural.

And Columbia recorded all 3 nights the band played... and then sat on it. They were terrified of what was going on... so only those people who were there to bear witness knew what happened that night. Yes – the group would record lots in studio – but this one night was so insane it wasn't until '82 did an American release happen – 17 years after the concert itself a 2-LP compilation was created from those recordings.

Perversely, Columbia waited until 1995 before printing all 3 nights to an 8-CD boxset in 1995 – a full 30 years after the concert. The Live At The Plugged Nickel Box Set then retailed for about \$116.97 U.S., a prohibitive price for most listeners... which means most listeners have not heard Wayne Shorter at what many felt was his recorded best. His outstanding 1960s albums on Blue Note and his studio work with Miles contain much wonderful playing, but on the Plugged Nickel box, Wayne's characteristic searching stands out, with jaw-dropping results.

And what makes Plugged Nickel especially fascinating... is that they're STILL mostly playing older Miles repertoire and standards.

"If I Were a Bell."
"Stella by Starlight."
"My Funny Valentine."
"All of You."

These are not radically avant-garde compositions.

The revolution isn't happening in the tunes themselves.

The revolution is happening in HOW they're playing the tunes.

And for me...

that's what makes Plugged Nickel one of the most exploratory moments in Miles' entire career.

Because the freedom isn't compositional yet.

It's INTERACTIVE.

The band decides:

"We are no longer going to behave conventionally."

Some terms musicians today often used to describe this era of playing were:

“playing against the time.”

“conversational interplay”

“controlled freedom

Meaning:

Don't accompany normally.

Don't resolve normally.

Support the soloist, but there should be some unpredictability therein.

I think to think of it as a group dance, with 1 person leading, but everyone being part of the bigger ethos.

Tony might imply double-time while Ron plays half-time...
while Herbie avoids obvious harmonic resolutions...
while Wayne floats completely outside... right into outer space
and all the while Miles, ever the leader of men, would drop these tiny little phrases that somehow redirect the entire gravity of the band.

It sounds like the music is disintegrating...

...but it never actually falls apart.

And that too is a miracle.

And that's why musicians like me obsess over these recordings.

Because the level of group ensemble listening is terrifying.

Everything is happening in real time.

Everything is risk.

Everything is reaction.

So I think of it this way:

E.S.P. was the blueprint in early '65
and Plugged Nickel is the explosion in late '65

And from there...
the Second Great Quintet launches into one of the greatest album
runs in jazz history:

E.S.P. — 1965
Live at The Plugged Nickel – also '65
Miles Smiles — 1967
Sorcerer — 1967
Nefertiti — 1968
Miles in the Sky — 1968
Filles de Kilimanjaro — 1969

And you can hear the band evolving in real time across those
records.

E.S.P. still has traces of hard bop structure.

Miles Smiles starts dissolving form.

Sorcerer becomes darker and more abstract.

Nefertiti flips the entire jazz hierarchy upside down — the horns
repeating melodies while the rhythm section improvises underneath.

Miles in the Sky and Filles de Kilimanjaro begin introducing electric
instruments and grooves...

...and suddenly the doorway to jazz-rock fusion in the 70's starts
opening.

But to me, as a Miles historian -- Plugged Nickel was the bridge, and
one of the most important catalysts to what happen to Miles and the
Second Great Quintet with Wayne Shorter

It was the sound of jazz mutating in real time.

So tonight...
we're gonna attempt some of that madness.

We'll be performing many of the same tunes played during those
Plugged Nickel nights...

trying to channel some of that danger...
that volatility...
that beautiful instability...

...that feeling that the music could either levitate...
or completely derail at any second.

Because that was the beauty of that band.

Nothing safe.
Nothing polished.
Nothing rehearsed.

Just five jazz daredevils , diving off of cliffs and following whoever
dove first into the unknown...

Welcome to Week 3 -- Plugged Nickel – The Shorter Years...

Please allow me to introduce you to some of the finest musicians this
country has produced:

Bass – Chris Banks

Drums – Jacob Wutzke

Piano – Nick Maclean

Tenor saxophone -- Joel Bracken

(After Intros)

Now after all that talking – I'm going to do something that will shock
many of you – I'm not going to talk much for the next hour, aside from
introducing soloists, or quickly naming the tune. The way this music
was meant to be taken in viscerally. Let it flow over you... don't try
and understand what's going on, don't try and decode it, just let it
happen and pull on your emotions.... You've bought a ticket on a
freight train barreling into the unknown... welcome ... your 1st stop is
called "Agitation"...