The Genius of Gil Evans

The genius of Gil Evans was his ability to re-imagine and re-compose a wide range of musical material and present it in his own unique style. Whether as composer, arranger, or re-composer, Gil was without doubt an innovator. The subtleties and complexities that enriched his work, never before heard in jazz compositions, continue to challenge those who perform them. Despite employing the best New York studio musicians for the recordings of Miles Ahead, Sketches of Spain and Porgy and Bess, the many performance errors are evidence of the underlying complexity in his music. His music influenced generations of composers and arrangers. Yet it sounds as original today as it did when it was first performed.

Gil drew inspiration from a diverse range of musical influences. Gil’s oldest son, Noah, recalls that his father would play all kinds of records in their home including Motown, rock (Gil would record an album of Jimi Hendrix’s music in 1974), classical music and world music. Trumpeter Johnny Carisi recalls that Gil was always playing the latest recordings of neoclassical composers such as Bartok, Ravel and Stravinsky. Gil was entranced by sound textures and timbres but he was equally passionate about rhythm. Noah recalls listening to his father playing records of African tribal music where there might be twenty or more drummers playing a complex array of polyrhythms.

Miles Ahead

In 1956, George Avakian, the jazz producer at Columbia Records, suggested to Miles Davis that his next project be a recording with a large ensemble. This was a brilliant move to differentiate Miles in a market overflowing with small group recordings. It also put Miles in a special class typically reserved for virtuosi—that of the concerto soloist supported by an orchestra. Avakian suggested Gunther Schuller who was, amongst a great many other things, the French hornist on the Birth of the Cool recordings, and Gil Evans as possible writers. Miles chose Gil. It’s hard to imagine what Miles Ahead might have been like with anyone else. Avakian left the choice of repertoire for the suite to Gil and Miles, stipulating only that he wanted one original composition called “Miles Ahead” for release as a promotional single. Except for New Rhumba and The Duke which were selected by Miles, Gil chose all the music and in doing so brought together an amazingly eclectic collection of musical material. He synthesized all of this material into a single continuous suite of music that stands as a landmark in 20th century music composition. At the same time, it is both an extremely listenable and approachable work that reveals new details with every listening.

Of all the acclaim given to Miles Ahead over the years, my favourite is that from Dizzy Gillespie who said “Miles Ahead is the greatest. I wore my first copy out inside three weeks so I went to Miles and said, ‘Give me another copy of that damn record.’ I tell you, everybody should own that album.” Dizzy was possibly also a bit envious. He would later ask Lalo Schifrin, whose many works include the Mission Impossible theme song, to write the Gillespiana suite in the hope that he too would have a vehicle of such greatness.

In Miles Ahead there are many different styles of jazz including bebop-style melodies (Springsville), cool jazz (The Duke and Miles Ahead), ballads (My Ship and Lament), popular songs (The Meaning of the Blues and I Don’t Wanna Be Kissed [By Anyone But You]) and Ahmad Jamal’s highly rhythmic New Rhumba which incorporates sections of swing and stop-time call and response. The classical music influences in Miles Ahead are both obvious and subtle. The Maids of Cadiz is a 19th-century art song (The Maids of Cadiz) by the French composer Léo Delibes. Blues for Pablo incorporates melodic material from The Three-Cornered Hat, a ballet by the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla. In Sketches of Spain, Gil would later adapt Will o’ the Wisp from de Falla’s ballet, El Amor Brujo. The pyramid introduction to The Meaning of the Blues is based on a tone row from the second movement of Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto. Gil would use this in retrograde at the end of I Don’t Wanna Be Kissed.

The myriad ways in which Gil incorporated and reworked this material could fill tomes. He manipulated form, texture, harmony, melody, rhythm and meter to achieve his ends. Sometimes a piece would receive very little reworking. In New Rhumba and I Don’t Wanna Be Kissed Gil orchestrated note-for-note transcriptions of Jamal’s piano playing for the ensemble. In other cases, Gil would use just the melody and obfuscate almost every other element. The Maids of Cadiz was originally a bolero in 3/4 time. Gil changed it to a ballad in 4/4 and in doing just that alone recast the piece in an entirely different light. He performed a similar reworking with de Falla’s themes in Blues for Pablo as illustrated on the next page.

Gil’s use of counterpoint is astoundingly effective and reveals the complexity and sheer beauty of his writing,
Listen especially to the inner voices. Gil’s attention to detail was so great that he would make every instrumental part, whether it was solo or not, into a thing of beauty. This was true even of the tuba which was typically relegated to playing long notes or outlining chords. In the writing for the Birth of the Cool, Gil pioneered the use of scalar passages and the higher register of the tuba, giving the music a lighter sound and more fluidity, not to mention more excitement for the tuba player!

**Sketches of Spain**

After Miles Ahead, Gil and Miles embarked on a second large-ensemble project. Porgy and Bess, based on George Gershwin’s opera music, would prove to be an equally great success. Gil reworked the original material in much the same way that he did with Miles Ahead and the result was a very similar sound and style.

George Avakian’s story of how Gil and Miles’ third orchestral collaboration was conceived is further evidence of Gil’s diverse musical tastes and influences. Avakian was the head of two departments at Columbia: Popular Albums and International. He would often lend Gil and Miles 78-rpm samples received from Columbia’s foreign affiliates including India, Africa, the Far East and Polynesia. He said “Gil was especially taken with a 10-inch 78-rpm album by a flamenco singer, La Nina De Los Pienes (The Woman With The Combs). He was fascinated by her wild vocalism and the muffled drums and valve-less brass instruments in the saetas and soleas...this was the inspiration for the Sketches of Spain album.”

It’s not clear whether Miles’ initial encounter with the Concierto de Aranjuez or Gil’s experience with La Nina De Los Pienes came first. In any case, according to Nat Hentoff, Gil went to the library and read several volumes on Spanish (particularly flamenco) music and on the life of the Spanish gypsy. His original compositions, The Pan Piper, Saeta and Solea were based on melodies he heard during this research.

Jack Chambers mentioned the differences between the original Concierto de Aranjuez and Gil’s version in Sketches of Spain including the fact that Rodrigo did not appreciate Gil’s manipulation of his music. Incorporating and reworking the musical material of others in musical compositions is not unique to jazz. Yet when music from the classical world is imported into the jazz genre and reworked, some people find it offensive and even scandalous. Unfortunately it is all too easy to “jazz up” classical music and produce something that is cheesy and in bad taste. Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should! Stan Kenton’s album of Richard Wagner’s music is an example of an idea perhaps best left alone. On the other hand, Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s re-workings of Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker and Edvard Grieg’s Peer Gynt suites are respectfully tasteful. It is interesting to note that Ellington’s Peer Gynt was banned from performance and broadcast in Norway and some other European countries for years because some people thought it desecrated the original music.

For Sketches of Spain Gil thoroughly reworked the second (adagio) movement of Rodrigo’s Concierto. It is arguably better than the original. According to Rodrigo the piece was inspired by and written for the gardens at Palacio Real de Aranjuez, the spring palace resort built by Philip II in the latter half of the 16th century. The composer attempted to capture “the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds and the gushing of foundations” in the gardens of Aranjuez where Rodrigo and his wife walked during their honeymoon. From that description alone, one would expect the music to evoke images of pastoral bliss but the adagio speaks otherwise.

In 1939 as Rodrigo was working on the concerto, his wife was expecting their first child. She nearly died during childbirth and the baby was lost. Pepe Romero, the celebrated Spanish guitarist who recorded perhaps the definitive version of the original music said: “The whole second movement was his [Rodrigo’s] way of conversing with God.” “The melody...” (the ornamented motif which is repeated throughout the work) “...on through all the different instruments in the orchestra is all the different passions and feelings and emotions that he feels: the love for the baby, the love for his wife, asking God not to take her. The movement ends with the ascension of the soul of the baby.”

The Concierto is a very sad, powerful and moving piece of music. It almost comes to a standstill at one point with a recitative section approximately one third of the way through the piece. The “strokes” from the ensemble are said to be those of Rodrigo figuratively stroking the head of his dead son. It was Gil, the master of orchestration, and Miles, the master of the brooding harmon-muted trumpet solo, who gave the music the treatment it deserved. Gil made many changes in the form, melody and orchestration and also wrote a new second section to replace the original guitar cadenza. In many parts, Gil had Miles improvise in place of Rodrigo’s original parts and Miles also gave the written parts his own ad lib treatment, paraphrasing at times. The result was a gem that truly demonstrates the Genius of Gil Evans.