

Public Enigma Number One ‘To some he is

BY PHILIP WATSON

Jazz legend Miles Davis’s autobiography is all about black power, white powder and the overpowering lure of women. There aren’t too many autobiographies like this one. Miles Davis’s long-awaited account is not so much warts and all, as veins, nostrils, cocks, tits and lots of other protruding parts and all. This man uses the word ‘motherfucker’ like most people use punctuation marks.

That *Miles, The Autobiography*, (published by Macmillan on 22 February, priced £13.95) is a candid story comes as little surprise. Miles and his music have always been controversial, and his outspoken views on jazz (or ‘black music’ as he prefers to call it), fellow musicians, women, the white Establishment and ‘these yet to be United States’ arouse strong feelings.

To many people, Miles is no less than a musical genius, and the most important, most influential living jazz musician. To others, he is overwhelmingly arrogant – earning him such sobriquets as ‘the Prince of Darkness’ – and according to one former female friend writing in *Vanity Fair* recently, ‘an inhumane, sadistic misogynist’. Whatever the truth, it is precisely because of these contradictions that this book has been so long-anticipated. Is this the truth at last about Miles Davis, about Public Enigma Number One?

For, although Miles has openly been ever the womaniser, the snappy dresser, and the lover of such luxuries as Ferraris and Lamborghinis, he has always been fastidiously secretive about his private life, especially the period from 1975 to 1980, when he was in a self-imposed internment born out of illness, drug addiction and creative dereliction.

Davis describes the period in inimitable style: ‘Mostly during those years that I was out of music, I just took a lot of cocaine (about \$500 a day at one point) and fucked all the women I could get into my house . . . I had so many women during this period that I lost track of most of them and don’t even remember their names . . . But after a while, all that fucking ain’t nothing but tits and asses and pussy.’

Certainly fidelity is not one of Miles’s strong points.

While he was living with his ‘unofficial’ wife, Irene, in the 1940s, he was also learning other tricks with a singer called Ann Baker. ‘Ann was the first woman to tell me “a hard dick has no conscience”. She used to just open up my hotel door and come right in and fuck me. She was something.’

Miles also had a particularly individual style of instigating divorce proceedings. When his second wife, Betty, told him that he couldn’t leave her, he replied, ‘Oh yeah? Well bitch, I already got the papers made out, so you’d better sign if you know what’s good for your ass!’

Others in the book get similar onslaughts, especially his fellow musicians. Some of the music’s sacred cows are severely milked. Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker, ‘was a great and a genius musician, man, but he was also the slimiest and greediest motherfucker who ever lived in this world’, and Louis Armstrong is attacked for ‘the way he had to grin in order to get over with some tired white folks.’ Only Prince (‘the new Duke Ellington’) is consistently praised.

Miles is just as direct physically. A man who has trained as a boxer and who will ‘fight at the drop of a hat if I think someone has wronged me’, Miles has knocked out some of his fellow musicians, and he even confesses to hitting Frances, his first wife, just because she said Quincy Jones was handsome. But Miles has been the victim of violence too, in 1959 being clubbed with a blackjack by a policeman after being asked to move along outside the New York club he was actually playing at. The incident did nothing to temper his views about the white Establishment.

Certainly Miles Davis has always been uncompromising, musically and personally – always insisting that he be accepted for the value of his chameleonic music alone. It’s an approach that may well make Miles an irascible bastard to know, but without him there’d be no landmark albums like his most recent release *Aura* – recorded five years ago but possibly his finest work for 20 years – no *Birth of the Cool*, no *Sketches of Spain*, no *Kind of Blue* and no *Miles Smiles*. In the end, motherfucker or not, it’s as simple as that. ■



the Prince of Darkness...

MILES DAVIS PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVING PENN