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# Arts & Leisure

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## Film

# Middle-Aged Man Without a Horn

Don Cheadle portrays Miles Davis in a difficult time.

By ALAN LIGHT

CINCINNATI — The elevator opens on the 20th floor of Carew Tower, a landmark 1930 office building overlooking the Ohio River here. On this overcast July morning, though, the space is not a bank or an insurance company, but the headquarters of Columbia Records circa 1981.

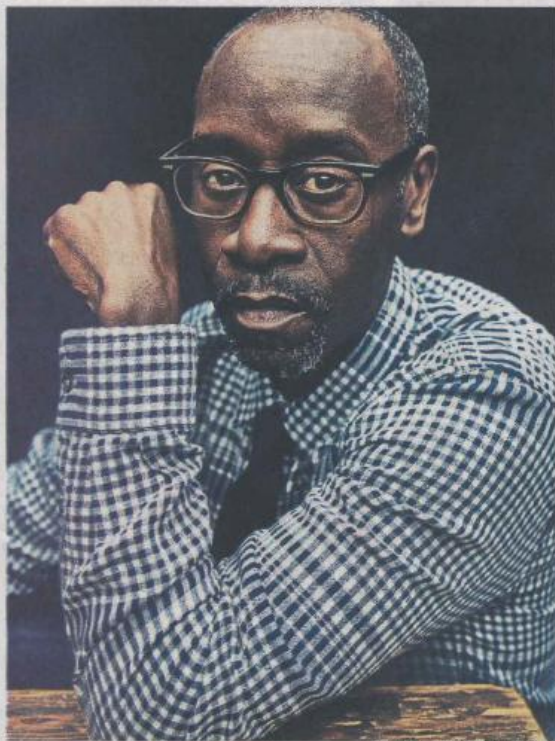
The "Walking Eye" logo, familiar from the red label of so many LPs, hangs behind the receptionist's desk, and album covers from Columbia artists of the time — James Taylor, Leonard Cohen, Elvis Costello — adorn the walls. Looming to one side, in signature long curly wig and oversized wraparound sunglasses, wearing a blue smoking jacket with an elaborate print, is the unmistakable presence of the trumpet genius Miles Davis, as played by Don Cheadle.

It's the midpoint of a six-week shoot for "Miles Ahead," an unconventional biopic that is to be the directorial debut of Mr. Cheadle, the Emmy-nominated star of Showtime's "House of Lies." In today's scene, Davis, accompanied by an off-the-leash Rolling Stone reporter (Ewan McGregor), bursts into the Manhattan office of George Butler, the head of Columbia's jazz division, and accuses the company of teasing the news media with hints of a comeback from his self-imposed hiatus before he's ready to come back.

"You can't wait to saddle me back up again," a cooly belligerent Davis rasps. "There is no Columbia without me." When an oily executive replies that legally the label can do whatever it wants with Davis's music, he responds by drawing a pistol from his jacket and shooting out a lamp.

No such confrontation over recordings ever took place. In his 1989 autobiography, "Miles," Davis claimed that he never even picked up a trumpet from 1975 to 1980, the years he didn't release any new music or perform in public. "It just went out of my mind because I was involved in doing other things," he wrote. "Other things which mostly weren't good for me." Davis was exaggerating the extent of his break from making music, though. Over a hurried lunch between takes, Mr. Cheadle (wig still on, jacket off) said that he had heard some recordings Davis made during this period. "There's a hook, a snippet, and then there's nothing," he said. "It's baby steps. You can hear the engines just starting to turn."

Fascinated by this difficult period in Davis's life, Mr. Cheadle, 48, made it the unlikely focus of "Miles Ahead," developing a story about the theft of an unreleased tape and jumping from there to examine Davis's history and especially his marriage to the dancer Frances Taylor (Emayatzy Cordero), who replaced Zoe Saldana in the role.



WILLIAMS + HIRAKAWA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

"For me, when someone has been prolific for that long, and then they go quiet for five years, that's when I go, 'What's that about?'" he said. "That he had done this recording during that time that was

A story of a jazz genius is 'chock-full of truths,' if not necessarily facts.

never released and no one ever heard. There was just a lot of intrigue to me, a lot of mystery. It felt like an opportunity."

Miles Davis was a towering figure in jazz for more than five decades, steering it into new styles from cool jazz to hard bop to jazz-rock fusion while leading a glamorous, sometimes scandalous life. The idea of a Davis movie had kicked around a long time. For a while, Wesley Snipes was at-

tached. Films about musicians have a mixed track record, though, and if any original recordings were to be included, the filmmakers needed to get approval from the Davis estate.

But when Davis was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2008, his nephew Vincent Wilburn Jr. (who had played drums in his uncle's band during the comeback period) announced at a news conference that the family was moving forward with a film about Davis, and that Mr. Cheadle was going to play the role.

"I'm a big fan of his, back to 'Devil in a Blue Dress,'" Mr. Wilburn said in a telephone conversation, referring to the 1995 detective film starring Denzel Washington, "and he had certain facial expressions that reminded me of Uncle Miles."

No one, however, had approached Mr. Cheadle about the idea. But the actor — a



BRIAN DOUGLAS



BRIAN DOUGLAS

"There was just a lot of intrigue to me, a lot of mystery," Don Cheadle said of Miles Davis's musical hiatus in the late 1970s, enough to build a film around. Top, Mr. Cheadle in costume as Davis, but in the role of director, and above as an earlier version of Davis.

music fan who played saxophone as a teenager and had seen Davis in concert in 1981 — sent word that he was interested. He began meeting with Davis's youngest son, Erin. Over time, the idea of concentrating on the musician's silent years, rather than his triumphs, began to emerge.

"I was initially a little puzzled by the idea," Erin Davis said. "But we were also trying to think in terms of what Miles would have liked, something he would want to see or be a part of. He didn't like 'Bird' — Clint Eastwood's 1988 Charlie Parker biopic — "so we might as well try an original concept instead of doing it the same kind of way."

Mr. Wilburn said that Mr. Cheadle did not want to do "a cradle-to-grave movie" like "Ray" or "Walk the Line," "trying to fit the life of a man who changed the course of music four times into two hours or less" (instead, there are plans for a documentary companion to "Miles Ahead").

While there's no shortage of outrageous tales about Miles Davis, who died in 1991, the "Miles Ahead" story takes some narrative liberties, including car chases and

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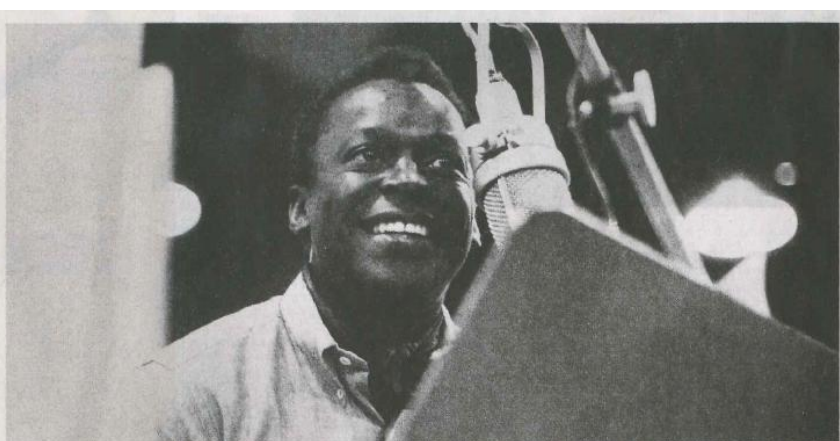
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DON HUSTON/SONY MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT

Miles Davis in 1959, during recording of "Kind of Blue," the best-selling jazz album of all time. Even his management style influenced "Miles Ahead."

# Middle-Aged Man Without a Horn

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gunplay. "There's a lot of factual things in our script," Mr. Cheadle said, "but we wanted to do something that was more chock-full of truths than chock-full of facts." The approach raised some concerns for the Davis family.

"I wanted to make sure that it wasn't all cars, women and drugs," said the musician's daughter, Cheryl Davis. "We know that Father wasn't all good, and nobody is trying to sugarcoat that. But I don't remember my father as a gun-toting man. I remember him as arrogant, proud and very aware of what his pursuit was in life."

Once the vision and the script, written by Mr. Cheadle and Steven Baigelman, were on track, and the family was on board, the project went through different iterations (the filmmakers considered doing it for cable), locations and budgets, finally settling on a number that one of the producers, Lenore Zerman, put at "a good deal under \$10 million, for a movie spanning multiple time periods."

Cincinnati was chosen, after Ohio gave the production a significant tax incentive;

the exteriors in the Over the Rhine neighborhood approximate the look of Manhattan in decades gone by. And as the shoot drew near, "Miles Ahead" started a crowdfunding campaign on the website Indiegogo, clearing a goal of \$325,000.

"The money was essential, because the script had been broken down and streamlined so much that every penny counts," said another producer, Pamela Hirsch. "But it was also important to Don to have the fans be part of this journey and watch it grow."

So add street-level marketing to Mr. Cheadle's responsibilities, which, in addition to writing, directing and starring, also included learning to play the trumpet (for the film, he used an instrument lent to him by Wynton Marsalis), consulting with the onetime Davis band member Herbie Hancock and working on the score with the acclaimed young jazz pianist Robert Glasper. By the time he returned home after the Cincinnati shoot, Mr. Cheadle had about a month to begin editing before production started for the new season of "House of Lies."

"I don't know what I imagined," he said by phone after the 30-day shoot had wrapped. "But even knowing going in that it was going to be crazy pants, it was crazier and harder than that. The wave doesn't stop coming."

He said that he even took some lessons in management from his subject's famously hands-off approach to rehearsal. "Sometimes, I had to be like Miles and say, 'I can't tell you how to play the saxophone,' and trust people to bring their own creative thing to it."

If making "Miles Ahead" has been daunting — and this is all before preparing the final film for the festival circuit, finding a distributor and getting it out into the world — Mr. Cheadle was able to find inspiration in one of music's most restless, visionary and fearless figures.

"I know that people may be like, 'That's not what this movie is supposed to be,'" he said. "But Miles was a searcher, an innovator. If he was alive today, he'd be working with Kendrick Lamar or DJ Skrillex or Kanye. So that's the highest hope for this — to move it forward."