



ROBERT IRVING III

REFLECTING BACK TO PASS IT FORWARD

BY EMILY STEINHILBER

Robert Irving III entered Miles Davis' orbit at age 26, just as Davis was returning from a five-year hiatus, and he subsequently became the trumpeter's pianist, composer, arranger and musical director within one of jazz' most consequential working laboratories. Irving's memories reach beyond repertoire into the mechanics of Davis' listening lessons delivered over a piano, introductions to Gil Evans and an insistence that every note carry intention. Now performing with the M.E.B. (formerly Miles Electric Band)—the progressive all-star ensemble including many Davis alumni—and mentoring another generation of musicians, Irving is still exploring what Davis taught him, reflecting on sound, inheritance, Coltrane and the discipline of keeping music alive.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: When you first entered Miles Davis' orbit, before you had decades to understand what that relationship would eventually mean, who was Miles to you?

ROBERT IRVING III: I was only 26 years old, so the depth of my understanding of the breadth of his work was somewhat limited. It was mostly associated with the *Bitches Brew* electric era. I hadn't gone back and really done my homework on the earlier periods—the post-bop period, his development of the cool period and all that. Because I grew up as a horn player and was familiar with all the brass instruments, I related to him as a fellow brass player. He also played piano and understood theory and harmony, so we had that in common.

The first thing that happened when he opened the door was that he was shocked I was the same height as he was, and I was surprised he was as short as I was. He said I sounded like I was six feet tall on the phone. I said, "Well, I could say the same thing about you!" He also knew I loved to cook. At the time, I didn't know he was a gourmet cook. I grew up with restaurateurs in my family, so I had always cooked. That day he and I cooked a meal together. That began this long journey. The depth of who he was came later, and I continue to unpack discoveries and lessons I learned throughout my collaboration with him.

NYCJR: We spend an enormous amount of time discussing how Miles sounded. But how did he listen?

IRVING: When we first met, he had not played in five years. We were going to the studio every week and recording music we had been developing. About two months in, (producer) Teo Macero said to me, "Bobby, this is all great music, but it's not going anywhere without trumpet Miles." On the ride home that evening, I mentioned to Miles that we would love to hear his horn on some of this stuff. Until that point, he had been playing organ at the sessions. He said, "What's the matter? You don't like my organ playing?"

The next week Miles came to the studio with his trumpet. He unpacked it slowly, put the mouthpiece

in and put it to his lips. You could tell he had it in his fingers and he had it in his head, but his lips were completely unforgiving. He sounded like a beginner. He was embarrassed. The sessions were shut down, and we went back home to Chicago. Around Christmas, Miles called me and said, "Bobby, check this out," and started blowing the trumpet. I knew that from September until that moment he had been playing long tones every day, because that's the only way to get back to that point. Over the next years he came all the way back to his strength and color. He had such a distinctive tone and color. Eventually I understood that he had a particular way of listening and hearing.

NYCJR: What did that way of hearing look like when he was teaching another musician?

IRVING: The day we first met, after we had talked for about an hour, he had me sit at the piano and play something for him. I pretty much exhausted my vocabulary of harmonies and idiomatic licks. Like a doctor diagnosing a deficiency in the patient, he came around to the piano and said, "Bobby, check this out." I was trying to get off the piano to let him sit down, and he said, "No, no." He reached over my shoulder so I would have a bird's-eye view and played these really simple but very deep harmonies that I call polychords—chords on top of chords. Because I understood theory, I could see the shapes and hear the tension and release. It made sense to me. It was eye-opening. It opened me to all the harmonic possibilities that existed beyond what I knew.

I sat there for probably 45 minutes exploring those different ideas. Miles sat there and nodded in approval every time I hit on something interesting. Sometimes he would say, "Yeah, you got it. You hear it. You heard that." That was the lesson.

NYCJR: M.E.B. uses the word "extend." As this music moves across generations and musicians, and now an entire century, what has to survive for you to recognize Miles inside it?

IRVING: That sends me back to the development of Miles here in Chicago and the scene that was here. There was this continuity of people listening to one another and passing things on. It's significant to me because of my Chicago roots, but also because when Miles was contemplating doing orchestral work again, Gil Evans eventually became a mentor to me. I had the unique privilege of sitting in a master class with Gil every Saturday for about two months—while Miles cooked lunch. Then I would go hear Gil's big band work and sometimes sit in on piano. I got the chance to hear firsthand how those orchestrations came to life onstage.

That whole continuity of generations passing on knowledge was invaluable. Miles talked about the

musicians who had mentored him. Then Miles passed things to me. For the last 20 years, I've become a mentor myself through the Jazz Institute of Chicago. It's an ongoing continuity and legacy. We carry it and pass it forward.

NYCJR: What did you understand about Miles differently, after studying with Gil Evans?

IRVING: Gil had this special demeanor—very laid-back, very easygoing, very open, very exploratory. That was especially attractive to Miles because that

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 35)

BAR BAYEUX
1066 Nostrand Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11225
www.barbayeux.com

OCTOBER 2026
JAZZ CALENDAR

TUESDAYS 8 - 11 PM Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests	WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Jerome Sabbagh Trio (10/7) Tobias Meinhardt Quartet (10/14) Sam Newsome Quartet (10/21) Noah Stoneman Trio (10/28)
THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Dan Tepfer (10/1), Jeremy Stratton (10/8) Dabin Ryu (10/15), Marc Copland (10/22) Julian Shore (10/29)	NO COVER ONE DRINK MINIMUM
FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Vinnie Sperrazza Quartet (10/2) Julieta Eugenio Trio (10/9) Altus with Dave Adewumi (10/16) Álvaro Torres Trio (10/23), Max Light Quartet (10/30)	
SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(S), followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets: Michael Blake Halloween Tales (10/3), Billy Mintz Quintet (10/10) Peter Watrous Quintet (10/17), Emi Makabe (10/24) Tony Malaby Trio (10/31)	

THE VILLAGE VANGUARD
www.villagevanguard.com

SEPTEMBER 29TH - OCTOBER 4TH
IMMANUEL WILKINS QUARTET
MICAH THOMAS - RYOMA TAKENAGA
KWEKU SUMBRY

OCTOBER 6TH - OCTOBER 11TH
MARCUS GILMORE'S NEW ORCHESTRA
MORGAN GUERIN - JOEL ROSS - DAVID VIRELLES
EMMANUEL MICHAEL - RASHAAN CARTER - EKEP NKWELLE

OCTOBER 13TH - OCTOBER 18TH
RAVI COLTRANE QUARTET
COLTRANE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
(13-15) DAVID VIRELLES - DEZRON DOUGLAS - JOHNNATHAN BLAKE
(16-18) JONATHAN FINLAYSON - GADI LEHAVI - ANWAR MARSHALL

OCTOBER 20TH - OCTOBER 25TH
FRED HERSCH TRIO + 2
TONY MALABY - RALPH ALESSI - DREW GRESS - JOE DYSON

OCTOBER 27TH - NOVEMBER 1ST
AARON PARKS TRIO
BEN STREET - BILLY HART

COMING IN NOVEMBER
ETHAN IVERSON
TYSHAWN SOREY
JOHN ZORN
JASON MORAN

MONDAY NIGHTS ARE RESERVED FOR
THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA

SHOWS AT 8 PM & 10 PM NIGHTLY
178 7TH AVE. SOUTH AT 11TH STREET

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

was where he was. They were partners in crime in that sense. They were both pushing the envelope, looking for the next evolution. Miles pushed me to listen to Schoenberg and the twelve-tone system. Years later, when I started writing my memoir, I went back and listened to Schoenberg. In the second movement of his Violin Concerto, I heard what sounded to me like my melody for “Decoy”, which I had written years before Miles had shared that music with me.

I felt that maybe Miles had intuited that I was already channeling this music. Gil once said that [I soloed] like an arranger. Even then, they recognized something in the way I formulated music. It makes me think about how much musicians can hear in us before we completely understand it ourselves.

NYCJR: I liken that recognition as a “soul song” — hearing a few notes and somehow feeling that you already know them. Would you additionally connect that feeling to resonance?

IRVING: It’s like harmonic resonance. A sympathetic string on one guitar can cause a string on another guitar to resonate at the same frequency. There’s something that happens there, and it’s magical. It’s physics in a way. But it’s consciousness too—physics and consciousness coming together in a way that makes you stop and respond. It happens with audiences. We’ll reach a high point and somebody will say, “I cried when I heard that.” You don’t necessarily know why you’re crying. Something touches you at a very deep level.

We played a concert in Senegal, and afterward a graduate student from the Congo came up to me. He said that the music we had played didn’t exist anywhere in Africa, but it was as if we had read their emotions and played them back to them—emotions they didn’t even know they had. That is what this music is about. It’s reflecting back. It’s about heart. Miles once told me, “Don’t play a single note unless you really need it.” He wanted us to show up with authenticity and intentionality and express whatever was coming through us. It was always pure.

NYCJR: Did Miles behave like someone who worried about whether what he was doing qualified as jazz?

IRVING: Oh, no. Not at all. He didn’t really like to use the word “jazz,” per se. He struggled with how to define the music. At one point he was just calling it social music. I remember seeing him with Wynton Marsalis, and Wynton was quoting these different Miles Davis phrases he had learned verbatim. I chuckled. Miles had moved so far beyond that because he wasn’t trying to preserve anything or repeat anything. It was always about keeping it fresh.

By the time I left the band in 1988, things had begun to change. Miles was getting into Prince and minimalism, and things became more repetitive. That was probably part of the reason I left when I did. It wasn’t as interesting for me. But the larger lesson remained: Miles kept moving.

NYCJR: Did he talk about John Coltrane?

IRVING: He did. He loved Trane. He mostly talked about the fact that John played such long, long solos. There’s the story about Miles asking Coltrane what he was thinking when he played these very long solos. Trane said something to the effect that he was searching for something and wasn’t sure how to get out of it. Miles said, “Why don’t you try taking the horn out of your mouth?!” That was something Miles would repeat in sessions. If somebody were playing too much, he might stop the tape and say, “When we’re finished, I’m going to let you out of here. You

don’t have to play your way out.”

He respected Trane to a very high degree, while he was also critical when things weren’t distilled down to fewer notes. He said the same thing to me: “You probably write one song that could be ten songs. There are ten songs in one composition of yours.” So it was about distilling things down and getting to the essence.

NYCJR: After all these years, what remains unfinished for you in understanding what Miles gave you?

IRVING: My biggest regret is all those moments we didn’t document. We didn’t have cell phones or selfies, and I have very few photos with him. Now I understand the importance of documenting everything possible with this band going forward, because it’s valuable to be able to pass that along to another generation with empirical knowledge—with something on film, something recorded. I’m moving into documentary work myself. I’m motivated and excited, and I have so much gratitude for what Miles imparted to me. I continue to unpack those lessons on a daily basis.

For more info visit robertirvingiimusic.com. “The Miles Davis Centennial Celebration” is at 92NY Oct. 17 featuring M.E.B. with Robert Irving III and fellow Miles band alumni including Vince Wilburn Jr, Antoine Roney, Darryl Jones and Munyungo Jackson. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Miles Davis — *Man With The Horn* (Columbia, 1980-81)
- Miles Davis — *Decoy* (Columbia, 1983)
- Miles Davis — *Rubberband* (Warner/Rhino, 1985)
- David Murray — *The Tip* (DIW, 1994)
- Wallace Roney — *Jazz* (HighNote, 2007)
- Robert Irving III — *New Momentum* (Sonic Portraits Entertainment, 2004-2007)

(MONTCLAIR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

much as possible, all the way to having a no-tickets-required festival.”

In keeping with the theme of America’s Semiquincentennial, the festival presented each performance as representative of a different American city that played a crucial role in the development of jazz, starting with the **Spanish Harlem Orchestra** (SHO). Representing NYC, the SHO (led by pianist Oscar Hernández) kicked off the Downtown Jamboree, rousing the audience with a percussion-driven, energetic salsa jam. The group featured three vocalists (Jeremy Bosch, Marco Bermudez and Carlos Cascante) engaging in rich, complex harmonization. A galvanizing version of “A Night in Tunisia”, which featured a blistering trumpet solo by Alex Norris, was a set highlight.

Singer and NEA Jazz Master **Dianne Reeves** represented The Motor City of Detroit; the versatile vocal legend generally stuck to rock and R&B vernacular, kicking off with a soulful, jazz-inflected cover of “Dreams” (Stevie Nicks), featuring a Latin beat by drummer Terreon Gully. “Café”, a mainstay of Reeves’ setlist, demonstrated her brilliant vocal range and included acoustic guitar by Romero Lubambo (whose Brazilian heritage informed his accompaniment) and an upright bass solo by Reuben Rogers.

The festival’s representative cities naturally included New Orleans. The **Take Me to the River New Orleans All Stars** did NOLA proud with their exuberant, spirited performance, which stuck to the modern side of New Orleans jazz and featured legendary native, percussionist and vocalist Cyril Neville (as well as other members of the Neville family,

including Omari Neville on vocals and percussion, and Ian Neville on guitar). The set included a rousingly funky cover of “Hey Pocky A-Way” by The Meters, of which Cyril’s older brother Art was a founding member.

Vocal and keyboard superstar **Patrice Rushen** has radiated West Coast cool for over five decades, and her LA roots were all over the Downtown Jamboree stage. Rushen was recently named an NEA Jazz Master, and MJF held an onstage ceremony honoring the achievement, with fellow Jazz Masters Reeves, Terri Lyne Carrington, Billy Hart and Regina Carter recognizing Rushen’s accomplishments. The performance hit all the expected notes, spanning her jazz and fusion beginnings to her transition to pop and R&B stardom. The set included such beloved classics as the electro-funk jam “The Hump”, the smash hit “Haven’t You Heard”, and, of course, her signature “Forget Me Nots”. On the jazz side, the groovy instrumental “Kickin’ Back” recalled her early-career jazz fusion output, her electric keys filling in the spaces between Enzo Iannello’s wah-wah guitar and Andrew Ford’s funky bass. “I always try to put a together a show that offers joy and musicality,” Rushen said.

Philadelphia was in the house for the **Christian McBride Big Band**’s closing set. The band performed songs exclusively associated with Philadelphia. As always, they delivered a distinctly modern take on the big band idiom, while still honoring the format’s history. Their version of John Coltrane’s “Equinox” featured tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover’s characteristic virtuosity. McBride himself held it down on his original “The Shade of the Cedar Tree”, which also featured a formidable trumpet solo by Brandon Lee, as well as tenor saxophonist and longtime collaborator Ron Blake jamming by McBride’s side. Superstar R&B singer Bilal joined the band on a number of ballads, providing a soulful top layer to the music, and showing off his legendary voice. The band closed with what McBride called “the ultimate Philly song” — Gamble and Huff’s “TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)”, a party anthem that was a fitting conclusion to the day’s festivities.

The joyfulness radiated by each of the acts fulfilled MJF’s purpose of honoring the American art form of jazz and demonstrating how its history and future are reflective of America itself. “We thought we would take a journey through these seminal cities where jazz helped shape those cities,” said Walker. “Jazz has something to teach us about our democracy, about what we’re striving for as individuals to live as free people that [have] a collective understanding of shared responsibility.”

For more info visit montclairjazzfestival.org



TCB

Celebrating Klaus Koenig's 90 years, TCB Records is proud to release the newly remastered legendary performance at the 1973 Montreux Jazz Festival.

Now available for pre-order on Bandcamp and the TCB website.

tcbrecords.bandcamp.com • tcbrecords.com