

*This sample is an excerpt from The Semiotics of Sorcery: Miles Davis and the Magic of “Bitches Brew,” a paper I wrote for Glam: Studies of Musical Styles and Composers I took in the Spring of 2015. It won the Rufus Hallmark Prize for best essay written on a musical topic in 2016. This sample includes the introduction of the paper as well as a section on Miles Davis as a genre subject.*

“Nothing sounds like ‘Bitches Brew’,” musical scholar Victor Svovrinich declares in his book “Listen to This! Miles Davis and ‘Bitches Brew’,” a broad exploration of the album’s development, production, post production, and reception. Svovrinich’s statement is compelling, but not novel. In the past decades, “Bitches Brew” has been praised by multiple critics, scrutinized by scholars, and occupied the forefront of musical studies. Its modal cadences, its organic grooves, and its electrifying sound resonated with a countercultural movement, defined an epoch in musical history, and reinvented the traditional jazz aesthetics. “Bitches Brew” emerged as a complex mélange of diverse musical traditions and coalesced elements of 1960s culture. In playing uncompromised black music, “Miles didn’t try to represent the visible world” but, rather, create an impressionistic landscape of “a dark world” and “play the sounds that were nowhere to be found” (Svovirinich 20, 35, 37).

The reception and interpretations of “Bitches Brew” differ, but the rhetoric used to describe the creation and performance of the album is remarkably similar: to musicians, scholars, and critics alike “Bitches Brew” is pure, unadulterated magic. In the warm August days of 1969 in which the entirety of the album was recorded, Miles Davis emerged as the sorcerer of a pot composed of musicians and instruments governed by Davis’s almost indecipherable use of symbols and the subsequent creation of a ritual space. Davis’s tyrannical leadership over the course of his music translated into dense and abstract musical sketches. Miles’s musicians became active participants in his creative process and subsumed his artistic vision. Lenny White, the lead drummer in the recordings of “Bitches Brew” recalls the album as “a big pot and Miles was the sorcerer. He was hanging over it, saying, ‘I’m going to add a dash of Jack DeJohnette, and a little bit of John McLaughlin, and then I’m going to add a pinch of Lenny White. And here’s a teaspoonful of Bennie Maupin playing the bass clarinet.’ He made that work” (Tingen 5). However, Davis was doing more than adding teaspoons, dashes, and pinches of sounds. On the contrary, in recording “Bitches Brew,” Miles Davis amalgamated history, social unrest, the Civil Rights Movement, Woodstock, Rock and Roll, and a broad jazz tradition to forge the illusion of a radically new sound, that “[illustrated] both continuity and change” (Svovirinich 21).

In analyzing the emergence of Miles Davis as a sorcerer, it is important to identify the key ingredients that constituted his pot and were consummated in the creation of “Bitches Brew.” “Bitches Brew” belongs to a broader musical tradition and represents a pivotal point in Miles Davis’s career. In this investigation, my aim is to bridge the different interpretations of “Bitches Brew” to highlight the album’s chimerical qualities. Using Fabian Holt’s definition of genre, I will argue how “Bitches Brew” manifests its magical qualities in recorded sound, performance, text, and visual representations. To that end, I will draw on different primary and secondary sources to argue that Davis’s creation of a ritual space engaged both his musicians and his audience through an established system of semiotics. This system and the ways in which it was manifested eventually culminated in the creation of genre, and the critical establishment of Miles Davis as a genre subject in the transformation of jazz (Holt 11). Drawing from the historical context in which “Bitches Brew” emerged, its three-day recording process, its live performances, the intriguing album cover, and Ralph Gleason’s liner-notes, I will place Miles Davis’s record as both a musical and historical phenomenon that reflected a changing social and aural climate in the United States.

[...]

#### *The Essence of Things: Miles Davis as “Bricoleur” and Genre Subject*

The materialization of Davis’s vision heavily relied on an intricate system of communication between Davis and his musicians. According to Dave Holland, Davis’s “approach was that if he needed to tell someone what to do, he had the wrong musician” (Tingen 6). Holland’s statement reflects Svorinich’s assertion that “Miles’s players had to be on their toes, waiting for any small musical cue” (25). This was particularly difficult during the recording of “Bitches Brew,” where musical guidance was reduced to a minimum. In his article “A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance” Christopher Smith describes the conditions under which Miles Davis improvised with his repertoire of musicians. Focusing on Miles’s work in the late 1960s, Smith describes the creation of a ritual space that emerged through improvisation in Miles’s recorded works and live performances (42). Using testimonies from Miles’s musicians, Smith analyzes how Miles created a system of semiotics in order to establish moods that would dictate the course of his music. This system of sonic semiotics, Smith argues, forged a sense of community between Miles and his band mates and

awarded his music a ritual quality. Additionally, Smith suggests that Miles's creation of sonic symbols projected Miles as having absolute control over the musical evolution of his jazz pieces.

Smith's description of Davis's semiotic system resonates with Dick Hebdige's theory of subculture in that both Smith and Hebdige recognize the manipulation of symbols as essential in creating a ritual space. To Hebdige, subculture represents "expressive forms and rituals of subordinate groups" that devise signs that become a great source of value (2-3). To underscore the importance of semiotics, Hebdige quotes linguist Valentin Voloshinov, who declares that "a sign does not simply exist as part of reality – it reflects and refracts another reality" (13). Voloshinov's statement mirrors Smith's conception of how a ritual space operates. To Smith, Miles Davis's "deliberate incompleteness of directions" rendered a musical "interaction within a ritual space that took the participants out of their usual mode of perceiving, interpreting, and reacting" (44). In creating a ritual space governed by a system of semiotics, Davis transcended the modes of reality and entered a magical realm. This, realm, as explained by Levi-Strauss in "The Savage Mind," operates similarly to sorcery, and "[is] capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them" (Hebdige 103). As Smith argues, these improvised combinations were governed by sonic cues, "small, highly significant bits of musical information which the players use to instruct and forewarn one another of impending shifts and comment on musical events as they occur" (44). To the extent of Smith's statement, Miles Davis creates a system of signs using bricolage or "the means by which the non-literate ...man responds to the world around him" (Hebdige 103). In that regard, Davis becomes a bricoleur, "relocat[ing] the significant object [the musical cues] in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs...[when] a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed" (Hebdige 103).

Miles Davis's creation of ritual space using a system of musical symbolism is also in line with Fabian Holt's definition of genre. To Holt, "genre is a fundamental structuring force in musical life. It has implications for how, where, and with whom people *make* and *experience* music" (2). In the introduction to his book, "Genre in Popular Music," Holt aims to unravel the functions of rituals in musical traditions and understand the contextual dimensions in which music is heard and created (2-3). Holt argues that genre is created based on "conventions and expectations established through acts of repetition performed by a group of people" (4). Therefore, genre formation "is in turn often accompanied by the formation of new social

collectivities" (Holt 4). Genre, as a collective experience, very much reflects Davis's interactions with his musicians during the recording process of "Bitches Brew" and places Davis as a critical genre subject in the emergence of jazz-rock. If, as Holt argues, names of genres evoke spatial and physical conditions, jazz-rock represents a vast melting pot of Western and African musical traditions that echo the hectic socio-cultural climate of the United States in the 1960s. Miles Davis's formation of a genre space elevates Davis's status from a musician to that of a psychic. In doing so, Davis conjures a musical genre that reshapes the historical narrative of jazz and frames the genre's future. Acknowledging Davis's domain over this subcultural, genre, and ritual space, it's not surprising that, often, "Davis's bands were praised for their telepathic communication" (Svorinich 25).