

Miles Davis Biography Mini-Unit



A Mini-Unit Study by [Look! We're Learning!](#)

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Miles Davis Biography

Miles Davis was an American jazz musician who rose to fame during the 1950s. He was born as Miles Dewey Davis III in Alton, Illinois, on May 25, 1926, to Miles Davis II and Cleota Davis. Shortly after Miles was born, the family relocated to East St. Louis, where Miles's father established a successful dentistry practice.

While life for most black people during the 1920s was difficult, Miles and his siblings lived comfortably. Both of Miles's parents were college graduates, which allowed them to live in an upper-class neighborhood. Cleota was a musician, so Miles's interest in music developed at a young age. When he was 13, he fell in love with jazz music and began taking trumpet lessons from a local musician named Elwood Buchanan.

As he entered his teenage years, Miles began to frequent the jazz clubs of East St. Louis to meet accomplished jazz artists and learn from them. The more time Miles spent practicing, the better he became at playing the trumpet. He also learned how to play the piano, which would serve him well later in life.

While many artists learned how to play music by ear, Miles learned the finer points of music theory and sheet music. His superior understanding of melody and arrangement allowed him to play just about any song

with any performer. By the time he was in high school, he was already sitting in with some of the local jazz greats during live shows.

Miles got his first paying gig playing with Eddie



Randle's Blue Devils at age 17. A year later, he received the chance of a lifetime when he was selected to fill in for a sick trumpet player in Billy Eckstine's Orchestra. During the orchestra's stay, Miles played with some of the founders of bebop, including Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and vocalist Sarah Vaughn. Miles was especially drawn to Charlie Parker, whose

style of playing included improvisational solos.

While Miles' father was supportive of his love for jazz, his mother disapproved. She wanted Miles to pursue classical music, which she considered a more respectable career. To please his mother, Miles auditioned for the Juilliard School of Music in New York City and was accepted right away.

As soon as he got to New York City, Miles set about searching for Charlie Parker. It took him several days, but he finally ran into Parker at a local nightclub. The two became fast friends, even moving into an

apartment together. Spending time with Charlie helped Miles to perfect his playing, and he was chosen to record a few sessions with Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. After a few months, Miles left Juilliard and moved back home with his wife and daughter.

It took some time before Miles found a steady paying gig, but when he did, it proved to be a golden opportunity. He began playing with the Charlie Parker Quintet, along jazz greats such as Parker and Max Roach. In 1947, he got his chance to write original songs for the group, recording four tracks that he composed himself.

One of the hallmarks of Miles's jazz was his constant desire to grow and try new styles of music. After playing with Charlie Parker, Miles began experimenting with different melodies and



arrangements. He formed his own group, the Miles Davis Nonet, in 1948. Over the next year, he and the group recorded several tracks, which would eventually be sold as a record called “The Birth of the Cool”.

Despite Miles's early success, his career faltered, especially after he became addicted to drugs. He and his wife had two more children, but their relationship became strained and they eventually separated. Miles's drug addiction became so severe that his behavior became erratic and his work suffered. In the mid-1950s, he went home to his father's farm and broke his addiction.



After he stopped using drugs, Miles began looking for playing gigs. He was still good friends with Charlie Parker, so when Parker performed at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1955, he invited Miles on stage with him. Miles's performance was so good that Columbia Records offered him a record deal immediately after the festival.

Miles put together his own quintet afterward, featuring gifted musicians such as saxophonist John Coltrane and drummer Philly Joe Jones. The group recorded four albums in 1956, including "Cookin' with the Miles Davis Quintet" and "Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet". All four albums were commercial and critical successes. In 1958, Miles put together a slightly

different group with a sixth member, and the sextet recorded the album “Milestones”.

Miles’s greatest recording effort would come in 1959, when the group completed the record “Kind of Blue”. Featuring classical pianist Bill Evans, “Kind of Blue” had a completely different sound featuring a new, experimental type of jazz called modal jazz. The album would go on to be, not only Miles’s best-selling record, but the best-selling jazz record of all time. Since its release, nearly four million copies of “Kind of Blue” have been sold.



Later in his career, Miles would work with other jazz virtuosos, including Herbie Hancock, pianist Chick Corea, composer Quincy Jones, and bassist Marcus Miller. In the 1980s, Miles reemerged with yet another sound, featuring synthesizers and song samples. His album “Tutu” won a Grammy Award in 1987, his fourth at the time.

Miles died in September of 1991. 15 years later, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2009, the U.S. Congress unanimously recognized “Kind of Blue” as an American treasure.

Questions for Review:

1. What were the names of Miles's parents?

2. What did Miles's father do for a living?

3. How old was Miles when he began playing trumpet?

4. How did Miles end up playing in Billy Eckstine's orchestra?

5. What exclusive music school did Miles audition for? Was he accepted?

6. How did Miles meet up with Charlie Parker in New York City?

7. In what year did Miles form his own group? What album did the group record?

8. Why did Miles's career suffer in the early 1950s?

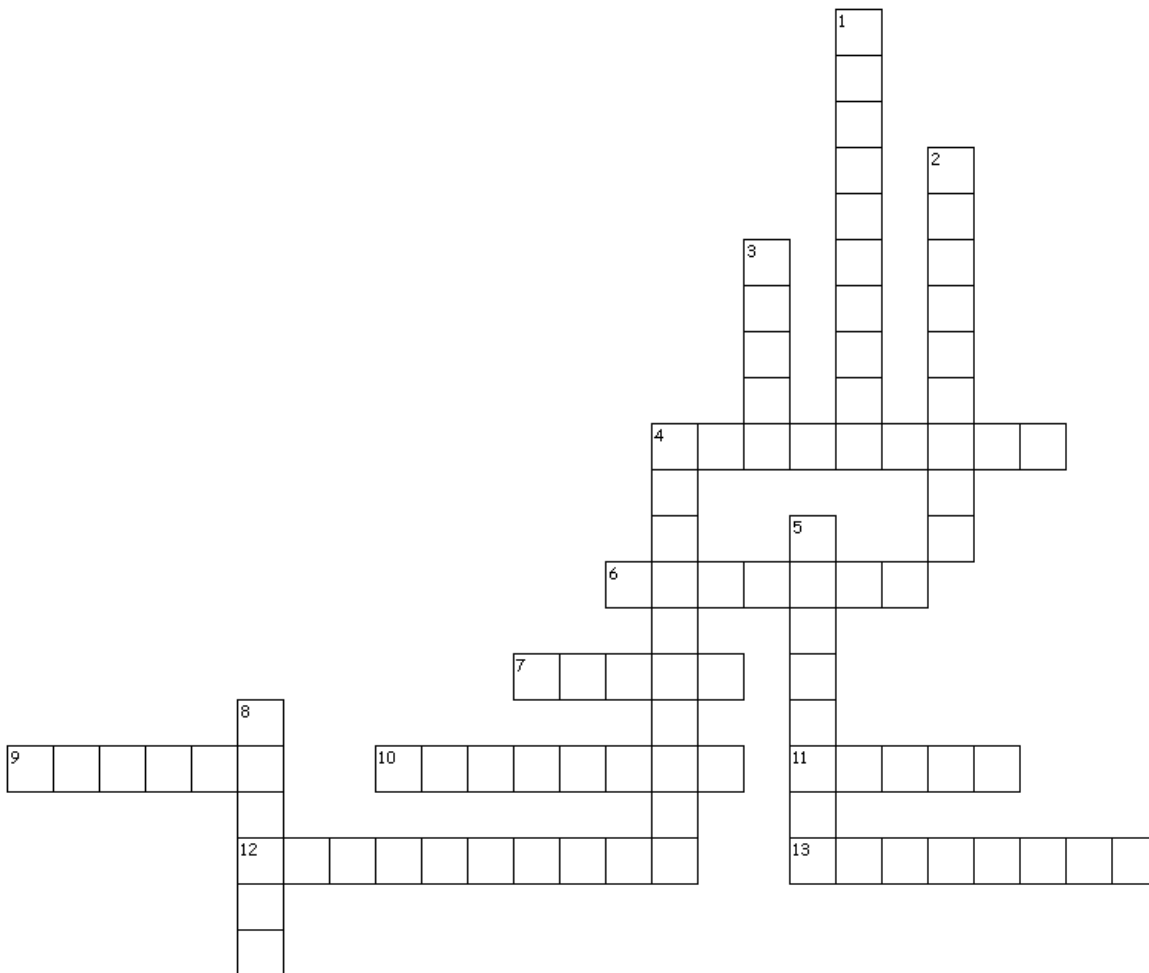
9. What happened when Miles performed at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1955?

10. Name two of the musicians in the Miles Davis Quintet.

11. How many copies of “Kind of Blue” have been sold?

12. What recognition did “Kind of Blue” receive in 2009?

Miles Davis Crossword



Across

- 4. Classical pianist who played with Miles
- 6. Location of the jazz festival Miles played
- 7. Last name of Chick, a pianist Miles played with
- 9. Last name of Miles's good friend Charlie
- 10. Record company Miles signed with in 1955
- 11. Town where Miles was born
- 12. Name of album Miles made in 1958
- 13. Last name of orchestra leader Miles played for

Down

- 1. Miles's best-selling album
- 2. Music school Miles briefly attended
- 3. Style of jazz Miles played during the late 1950s
- 4. First band Miles played with as a teen
- 5. Saxophonist in Miles's quintet
- 8. Award Miles won for Tutu

Miles Davis Copywork

"If you can hear a note,
you can play it. The
note I hit that sounds
high, that's the only...
note I can think of to
play that would fit."

"You don't learn to play the blues. You just play. I don't even think about harmony. It just comes."

– Interview with Miles Davis in *Downbeat*
Magazine: March 6, 1958

Questions for Review Answer Key:

1. Miles Dewey Davis II and Cleota Davis
2. He was a dentist.
3. 13
4. He filled in for a sick trumpet player.
5. He auditioned for the Juilliard School of Music. He was accepted right away.
6. He ran into him at a nightclub.
7. The Miles Davis Nonet formed in 1948. They recorded the album “The Birth of the Cool”.
8. He was addicted to drugs.
9. His performance was so good he received a record deal from Columbia Records.
10. John Coltrane and Philly Joe Jones
11. Over four million
12. The U.S. Congress recognized it as a national treasure.

Crossword Puzzle Answer Key:

ACROSS

4. BILLEVANS
6. NEWPORT
7. COREA
9. PARKER
10. COLUMBIA
11. ALTON
12. MILESTONES
13. ECKSTINE

DOWN

1. KINDOFBLUE
2. JUILLIARD
3. MODAL
4. BLUEDEVILS
5. COLTRANE
8. GRAMMY

Bibliography:

*A note to parents – The following books and websites were used in the research for this mini-unit study. However, some of the books listed below are **NOT** children’s books and they feature themes about racism, drug use, language, and music that children may not be equipped to handle. Parents are advised to read the books themselves and then choose how to share the information with their children.*

Alkyer, Frank; *The Miles Davis Reader: Interviews and Features from Downbeat Magazine*; 2007; Hal Leonard Books

Frankl, Ron; *Black Americans of Achievement: Miles Davis*; 1996; Chelsea House Publishers

Burleigh, Robert; *Looking for Bird in the Big City*; 2001; Harcourt

Wikipedia: Miles Davis

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_davis

PBS Jazz: Miles Davis

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_davis_miles.htm

MilesDavis.com: Biography

<http://www.milesdavis.com/us/biography>

New York Times: Miles Davis Obituary

<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/09/nyregion/knight-jazz-enters-its-royal-cemetery-sir-miles-joins-duke-king-patriarch.html>