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## Bios and Interviews

### Marcus Miller: Speaking Balance & Spirit

by Wesley Watkins



**Marcus Miller**

*Tutu Revisited: The Music of Miles Davis featuring Christian Scott*

**Friday, June 11<sup>th</sup>**

Herbst Theatre (401 Van Ness Avenue @ McAllister in SF)

8pm

\$35 / \$55 / \$75

Marcus Miller - bass  
 Christian Scott - trumpet  
 Alex Han - saxophone  
 Federico Gonzalez Peña - keyboards  
 Louis Cato - drums

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 9, 2010

### MARCUS MILLER

His latest recording, *Marcus*, credits **Marcus Miller** on both four and five string bass guitar, fretless bass, various keyboards (organ, Fender Rhodes, Moog synth, clavinet, Wurlitzer), beat and rhythm programming, sitar, guitar, acoustic guitar, “milky way” guitar riff, bass clarinet, B-flat clarinet, drums, bongos, tambourine, shaker, and background vocals. He also wrote original material on the album and produced the entire project. This information alone might lead one to presume that Miller is a completely self-absorbed musical savant, for such extensive musical abilities must consume every waking hour of his life. However, to the contrary, Miller is a Renaissance man who has mastered the art of balance.

“You’ll notice that songs that have really strong melodies, the rhythm usually takes a back seat. And music where the rhythm is driving you, sometimes the melodies take a back seat. Sometimes when the harmony is really complicated and really thick, you can’t feel the rest of the music because the harmony is so intricate. So I try to create music that has a balance between those elements so that one doesn’t over power the other. Or, if I can’t do that, if I have one song that is really melody based, I try to make sure the next song balances that out with a strong rhythm because—

particularly live—when you finish at my concert I want you to have felt every emotion available to you. I want you to feel like you want to dance, I want you to feel like you want to sit down and concentrate on what we’re playing, I want you to experience joy and remember the pain of losing somebody, and how you felt when you first fell in love. All those experiences I would like you to experience in my music and in my show, so I think it’s really important to have a balance so that you can allow people to feel all of those things.”those elements so that one doesn’t over power the other. Or, if I can’t do that, if I have one song that is really melody based, I try to make sure the next song balances that out with a strong rhythm because—particularly live—when you finish at my concert I want you to have felt every emotion available to you. I want you to feel like you want to dance, I want you to feel like you want to sit down and concentrate on what we’re playing, I want you to experience joy and remember the pain of losing somebody, and how you felt when you first fell in love. All those experiences I would like you to experience in my music and in my show, so I think it’s really important to have a balance so that you can allow people to feel all of those things.”



While balancing musical elements allows audiences to access both breadth and depth of emotion, the husband and father of four gains profound insight as a result of balancing his personal and professional life.

“For a lot of musicians—and for a lot of people that aren’t parents yet—the world really is about *them*, and the world is about what can they do to feel better, and what can the world give them to make them feel good. And the biggest difference with being a parent is it becomes not about you. And it’s *honestly* not about you. I mean, it’s not like you have a baby and you go,

‘Okay, you know what? I’ve got to change my perspective.’ It’s not a decision. It just *is*. The only thing that’s on your mind is, ‘What can I do to provide a nurturing environment for this kid, and give this kid what they need?’ And that really helps your music. The first stage of making music is [when] you find out that you’re good at it...so you’re playing for the attention. And then maybe there’s another stage when you’re playing for the healing qualities that it presents for you: it makes you feel better. But then there’s another level that you get to once you’ve made albums and CDs and once you’ve toured the world, once you’ve met people who have been profoundly effected by your music: it stops being about you. Then it starts being about what you can do, what you can present to the world to make people feel good, or make them feel something. And that’s the same as being a parent: it becomes not so much about you. I think it’s a parallel that you reach when you get to a certain point in your life.”

Miller arrived at this place in his musical career long ago. With nearly 600 recording credits to his name, the bass virtuoso has been a first-call session musician since the 1980s for R&B, Soul, and Pop stars alike, as well as straight ahead Jazz greats. And while this is partly due to a technical facility which took years of development—and which still requires hours of daily maintenance—Miller is clear that his ability to reach audiences requires something more.

“I don’t play the fastest, I don’t play the loudest, I don’t play the highest or the lowest, but I think there is something about my spirit that allows me to connect to people. And I think that’s the most important quality of my music. And so when I’m standing on the stage getting ready to go on, I say, ‘Hey, man, just be honest, and make sure that your spirit shows, and everything will be fine.’”

The spiritual component of his music making stems directly from Miller’s upbringing—both familial and musical. Every Sunday his family would go down to the basement of his grandfather’s church and perform for each other. “That scared me more than any concert I’ve ever done! It was a big deal. It was a rite of passage, you know?” In addition, Marcus got in good with the plethora of top-notch musicians hailing from his home town of Jamaica, Queens, all of whom required a particular standard—even definition—of musical excellence.

“I remember seeing a lot of musicians who were really talented go up there and get no response from our crew in the jam session because the thing wasn’t infused with that spirit. It was just a lot of notes. So I think I learned from good people. I grew up in a good, musically spiritual environment where we learned that...you had the notes and you had the rhythm and you had the



harmony, but then you had to infuse it with the energy of your spirit to make it come to life. If you're not really finding that soulful quality to your music, then you're just jivin'."



Accessing and communicating his spirit through music remains a focus of Miller's playing to this day—particularly when improvising. This process often involves mental calculations happening at the speed of inspiration, but the best moments occur when the mind gets out of the way altogether.

"If you're improvising, you're always thinking a few seconds ahead of yourself because you gotta figure out where you're going to go next and what am I gonna do in this moment that is coming up. And sometimes you're going, 'Okay, I hear this line in my head. Can I execute it? Do I have the technique to play what I'm imagining at this moment?' And sometimes you say, 'You know what, I don't think I can make that, so I'm going to come up with another idea.' You're editing, and this is all happening in split seconds. And then there are other times when those questions aren't even there. Think it, and it just comes out of your hands. It's like when you hear people talk about being in the zone. Sometimes it's just there. You don't have to worry about it, you're not second guessing yourself, you become one with the music, and that's the moment that we're all looking for. And you never know when it's going to happen because I'm not sure of everything that it takes to create that moment, but when it's there you absolutely know it."

True to the call-and-response traditions of African American music—both sacred and secular—Miller conceives of this heightened experience in terms of speech where effective communication in a musical language eventually makes way for inspiration.

"It feels like you're having a conversation with somebody that you really know well, and they're *with* you. They're hearing everything you're saying, and you're hearing everything they're saying.... Music is a language, so when I say what you're 'saying,' [I mean] what you're playing on your instrument—you know, you're talking. And when you're saying something and you can feel the response of people understanding or relating to what you're saying, it encourages you. And when the musicians are on the same page, that encourages you. The next thing you know, man, your mind is turned off and you're just playing all spirit."

Even though Miller admits that he isn't quite sure how these moments come to be, he associates them with an openness and a willingness to take risks—the same risks his counter-parts in Jamaica, Queens used to take, and also the same risks taken by his favorite musician: Miles Davis.

"You have to be the kind of person who is open to doing that, because you have to really open yourself up. You gotta be really willing to fail and to look foolish.... When I was in Miles' band, he'd go for a note that he didn't know if he was going to get. And sometimes the note would crack, but it never stopped him from going for that note the next night. He would always go for it. Half the time it would crack, half the time he would make it. The funny thing was when the note cracked. It seemed like that affected the audience more than when he hit it clean, because it showed that he was going for something that he didn't know whether he was going to be able to make or not—as opposed to those musicians who don't miss a note, and it's all slick and it's all glib and it's all, 'Hey, I've done this a million times. I'm so talented!'

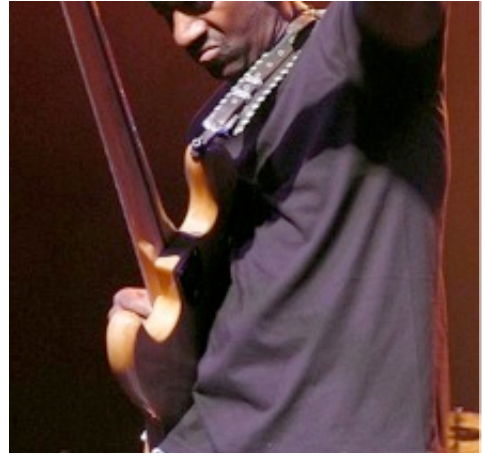
"What would you rather feel when you look at a musician? Would you rather feel like, 'Wow, that guy's really talented,' or would you rather say, 'Wow, man, I'm feeling emotion I haven't felt in years listening to this guy play!' And so I think the people who can get their minds out of the way, and who get the focus off of their technique are the ones who stand a better chance at reaching people. And the musicians who aren't afraid to let their pants fall down and stand there in their underwear are the musicians who have the best chance of really getting to that other place in music."

Akin to these risks is the search every jazz musician takes to find their unique voice. And while all are on the journey, "There's only a few musicians who when you hear three notes you go, 'Oh, man, that's Herbie [Hancock]!' And none of us can tell you how that happened. The only thing is, we stopped trying to sound like other people early on in life. When you first learn, you imitate other musicians...but eventually you gotta stop that and try to find your own notes."



With this charge in mind, Miller will speak new life into a classic Miles Davis collaboration this Friday, June 11<sup>th</sup> as part of the [SFJAZZ Festival Spring Season](#). Miller co-produced and wrote three quarters of the 1986 album, *Tutu*, but when the Cité de la Musique in Paris first approached Miller with the concept in 2009, he reacted with a hesitation that would have made the late Miles smile.

"My first reaction was, 'Nah, man, because Miles hated that. Miles didn't



like looking backwards and trying to recreate the past.' But I really did want to pay homage. I thought it would be really cool—particularly since it was close to 25 years since we did *Tutu*—so I said, 'What could I do?' And then I thought, 'What about if I got some really young musicians that were barely born when *Tutu* came out, and have them discover this music and reinterpret it and create something new for today?' I thought Miles could get behind that, and that's when I got excited about it. So I started looking for the youngest, baddest cats I could find."

And he found them. During a master class at Berklee College of Music, Miller spotted then 20 year old Alex Han on sax. "He was just ridiculous. His soul is so mature, that I was really impressed by him. I said, 'Come on, find me the other bad young cats!'" Enter Louis Cato on drums who is, in a word, "bad!" Miller has been playing with Federico Gonzalez Peña for the last few years. "He was Me'Shell Ndegéocello's keyboardist and musical director for years and years, and he's bad bad bad!" The band also features Christian Scott on trumpet who has been making big

noise in the industry since his 2006 debut album, *Rewind That*. "He's an amazing musician, and I asked him if he would be interested in performing this music. I said, 'Look, I don't want you to try to re-create Miles.... We want to just take this music and see where we can take it.' And Christian was down for that."

"The first rehearsal sounded just like the *Tutu* CD. And I said to them, 'Look, thanks guys for that nostalgic experience, but that's not what I want to do. I want to see where we can take this music into the future.'"

Like the split second decisions made while improvising, the future is now. Expect Miller and crew to pour intense emotion into each note on Friday, hearkening back to the legacy and intensity of Miles Davis as much through the choice of repertoire as their ability to explore and communicate at the spur of the moment. Any Marcus Miller show involves killer grooves and a dialogue between musicians and audience alike. And amidst all the emotions you are sure to feel, you will also know that you have seen the history and future of Jazz all balanced on one spirit-infused night of music.

◀ PREVIOUS

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