

INTERVIEW

Making a film about an iconic cultural figure is a risky business, but actor Don Cheadle merges truth, fiction and contradiction in his new biopic about Miles Davis

Words: **John Holden**

Don Cheadle first learned he would be playing jazz legend Miles Davis a decade ago when Davis's nephew, Vince Wilburn jnr, name-checked Cheadle as the only actor who could pull it off. "Don Cheadle is going to play Miles Davis," he told reporters at his uncle's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame back in 2006.

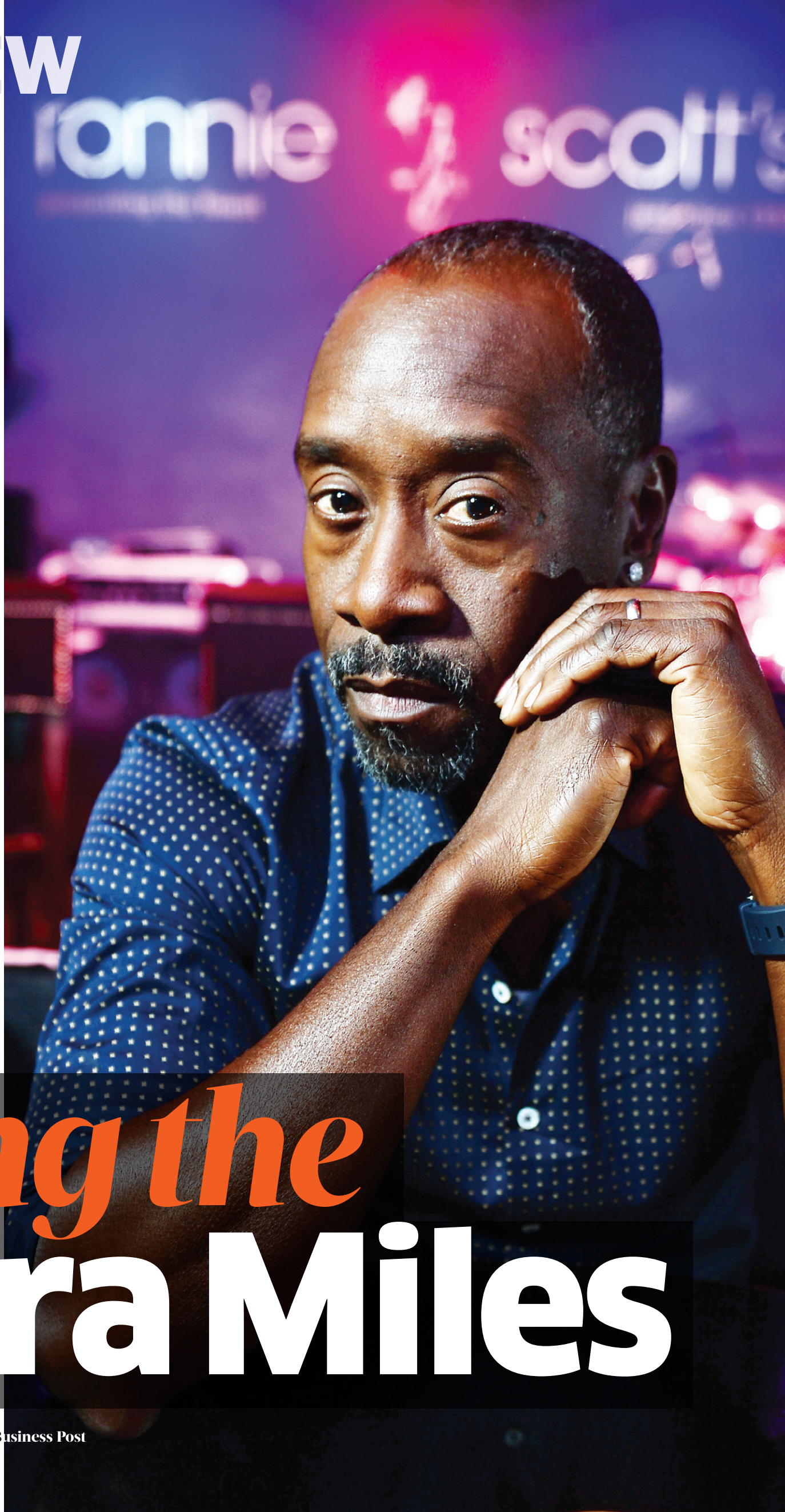
This was the catalyst for what was to become a long and frustrating quest for the Oscar-nominated star of *Hotel Rwanda* to realise his new Miles Davis biopic, *Miles Ahead*.

While the Cheadle brand is one of the more bankable in Hollywood, thanks in part to his continued run in Marvel Enterprises' Iron Man films, he has achieved more affection and acclaim through his leftfield roles. These include Buck Swope in *Boogie Nights* (1997), Sammy Davis Jr in *The Rat Pack* (1998), Paul Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and FBI agent Wendell Everett in *The Guard* (2011). *Miles Ahead* sits squarely in this bracket.

Cheadle has been described as one of the most "watchful" actors in the business. His ability to interact on screen and take a step back so that other characters have space is rare in an industry dominated by egos. It is this quality that makes him endearing, both on and off the screen.

"I've learned that listening is as important to me as actual acting: being present in a scene and really being alive, acting in the space and being in the stuff that's in between, as opposed to just showing up and reading lines," says Cheadle when we meet at the South By Southwest (SXSW) Film & Interactive festival in Austin, Texas.

"What I want from a movie – and I think audience members want the same thing – is the chance to be voyeuristic. I want to be a spy, like I'm getting



Going the extra Miles

'I COULDN'T MAKE A NORMAL BIOPIC BECAUSE MILES DAVIS IS NOT YOUR NORMAL MUSICIAN. HE WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST INNOVATORS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'

to peep in the window and see what's really happening."

Arriving at the festival, Cheadle looks addled by the flashing lights and screaming fans, like someone unaccustomed to the publicity machine. Maybe he is. Later, talking on a one-to-one basis, he is approachable, easygoing and rather too normal for a movie star. But I do get the sense it would be unwise to get on his bad side; I am thankful I am well prepared on the detail of Davis's life and music.

The 51-year-old Kansas City native came to prominence in the 1995 neo-noir mystery *Devil In A Blue Dress*. His per-

formance as Mouse, the trigger-happy but fiercely loyal sidekick to accidental private investigator Easy Rawlins (Denzel Washington) won him significant critical acclaim and propelled him towards a string of intricate film roles.

Yet despite having worked steadily since then, the California Institute of Fine Arts graduate still suffers from anxiety that things will dry up. "At any time, this business retires you, you don't retire from it," he says. "There's very few people who genuinely feel like they've 'made it' – and two of them are wrong."

Having the strength to be present and in the moment in a film scene, while also acutely aware of just how artificial and forced the entire situation is, has proven to be one of Cheadle's greatest qualities.

"That's what happens," says Cheadle. "You don't get to be in the moment and out of the moment simultaneously, so you can't look in on yourself to see what was good or bad about it. You just do it and come out the other side hoping it worked."

Speaking about his new project, *Miles Ahead*, Cheadle is acutely aware that unconventional projects can end careers, if things don't go your way. As director, producer, co-writer and star of the film, he has already faced criticism. However, he stands over his decision to bring the film to fruition. He says he took on all of the roles in the film's production "because no one else would".

"I tried to give away as many of these roles as I could so that my focus could be on acting. But no one else would do it, so I had no choice. It just became the only way to get the movie made. Had I been able to do things differently I probably would have," he says.

The entire film was produced for under \$9 million (around €8 million) – some of which was raised through an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign.

Much of the criticism Cheadle has faced is based on the fact that his biopic is based so "loosely" on true events. The truth is that if the storyline were any looser, it would be straight-up fiction.

Cheadle cowrote the script with Steven Baigelman, who worked on the 2014 James Brown biopic *Get On Up*. Their decision to blur the lines between fact and fiction was inspired, says Cheadle, by the same kind of innovative, improvised spirit inherent in the music for which Davis was famous.

"I couldn't make a normal biopic because Miles Davis is not your normal musician," Cheadle says. "He was one of the greatest innovators of the 20th century and his music has influenced so many people. To do something that felt like it had been done before wasn't the kind of story I wanted to tell, nor was it the kind of story we felt Miles would want told about himself. We wanted to make something more dynamic, something that felt innovative, impressionistic and experiential, like his music."



The man with the horn: Cheadle as Miles Davis in *Miles Ahead*

Picture: Getty

Miles Davis in the 1970s: the electric years

Miles Davis (1926-1991) was a tireless musician driven by an inherent desire to push boundaries and innovate music. While many will perhaps be most familiar with works such as the 1959 album *Kind Of Blue* (the biggest selling jazz album of all time), *Porgy And Bess* (1959) or *Sketches of Spain* (1960), he continued innovating and experimenting well into the 1970s and 1980s and until his death in 1991.

While later albums didn't always enjoy the same level of critical and commercial success as previous works, his 1970s electric period is now recognised as containing some of his most, exciting and experiential projects. Influenced by the sounds of rock, funk and soul – particularly bands such as Sly and The Family Stone, Funkadelic/Parliament and Jimi Hendrix – Davis began introducing more electrics into his own compositions. Early 1970s works such as *Bitches Brew* (1970) and *Live-Evil* (1971) were well received, but his growing interest in electric guitar, bass and even electric trumpet in the mid-1970s alienated some of his fanbase.

Troubled by osteoarthritis, depression and a dependence on alcohol and cocaine, Davis retired from the spotlight in 1975. He re-emerged in 1981 with his first new release in six years, *The Man With the Horn*.

Disillusioned with the music scene, not to mention being high as a kite most of the time, Davis was suffering from the worst creative dry spell of his career. Cue fictional Rolling Stone "contributor" Dave Braden, played by Ewan McGregor, a pushy reporter who wants to write the musician's comeback story and/or document his further downward spiral from up close.

The odd couple warm to each other slowly and before you know it they are driving round the streets of New York City, scoring cocaine, arguing with record company executives, and getting into high speed car chases and 'shoot em ups' in their effort to recover stolen demo tapes of Davis's most recent recordings.

At just over an hour and a half, this is a fast-paced, action-packed affair sprinkled with comic relief. Davis instructs a classical orchestra on improvisation thus: "Be wrong, strong, okay? Otherwise leave it the fuck out."

The film is dotted with flashbacks which are used to show Davis at pivotal points in his career. There is an improvised scene depicting a recording session where Davis works with his long-time collaborator, Gil Evans, on the piece *Gone from the album Porgy And Bess*, and a recounting of the backstory for his relationship with ex-wife Frances Taylor (played by Emayatzy Corinealdi), who eventually left Davis after years of physical abuse and infidelity.

"It could have gone horribly, horribly wrong," Cheadle says, laughing. "But at some point you have to trust that you're not insane and that the film has validity. Besides, we consistently got positive responses from anyone who read the script. People loved it and said the story jumped off the page, which was our aim. They recognised the spirit behind it and what it was we were trying to achieve."

Cheadle has had the continued support of the Davis family during the filmmaking process, whom he says provided him with a wealth of information. "I was very fortunate to have a close relationship with his family throughout," he says.

"One of the most inspiring aspects of Miles's life that continues to excite me was his commitment to innovation – putting himself in unknown places where he would be constantly surprised.

"As an artist, I think that's what we should all be trying to do – putting ourselves in situations where we don't know what's going to happen. This movie has that in spades."

Miles Ahead will be on limited release in Ireland from April 22

"I wanted to create a film that Miles would want to star in," Cheadle said in an interview earlier this year. He even learned to play the trumpet in order to better mimic the style and fingering movements of Davis.

Taking place over two days in 1979, the film shows Davis living as a recluse, a has-been in New York, with a bad hip and a penchant for drugs of all kinds.