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Miles Ahead — Don Cheadle is Miles Davis

Evie Sullivan · Wednesday, April 6th, 2016

Miles Davis was the epitome of coolness; a musical genius with a myriad of high-profile love affairs and unequaled monetary success, whose life looked like a fairy tale. But it wasn't the glamour and the good times that interested the Oscar-nominated (2004's *Hotel Rwanda*) actor/director Don Cheadle. It was the worst period of his life, when Davis disappeared from the public eye for five years in the late 1970s. What was he hiding from? What happened in this undocumented time frame?

Working from a script he co-wrote with Steven Beigelman, Cheadle not only plays Davis in *Miles Ahead*, he also makes his artful directorial debut with the movie. How much could he research to stay true to events and was he even interested in depicting real events of this rather undocumented time period? While writing the script, he took some events from Davis' autobiography and some tales from friends and sidekicks who offered glimpses into his pain at that time. "Our attempt with this movie was to try to externalize an internal process," Cheadle said at a press conference in Los Angeles. "It's inherently non-dramatic." But the screenwriters understood that an internal process alone would not satisfy an audience. They needed to tweak the material into a drama to make *Miles Ahead* palpable.

"How much in the script can be taken as truth?" is the frequent question Don Cheadle has to answer: "You want me to go down a list? It's all truth. How much of it is fact? A lot of it. But like any movie that's not a documentary, that's not an autobiography ... if you want to do the facts truth thing, which I constantly did, it kind of turns into *Rashomon*. There are events that happened that we point to and we talk about. Miles was shot in a driveby, absolutely true. There was this recording that was produced during this period of time that's never been released that everyone wanted and people were after. He was in a relationship with this studio where they were trying to get the next thing out of him. There was a trumpet player that was hired at Columbia during this period of time that was there to fill the void that Miles had left. So there's tons of facts. I don't want to go through them all and de-mystify the movie by pointing to everything that happened or didn't happen. Clearly we've taken poetic license in places to support the narrative, to create the momentum and create a story that feels like momentum, but it's been very interesting in my own research to tell a story back to somebody who was there, that I read in an article and they say, 'That ain't how that shit happened', like, 'Oh. Okay.' It was constantly that."



Don Cheadle in MILES AHEAD

Does it matter? Not in my opinion. What Cheadle gives us with *Miles Ahead* is a magical account of the genius that Davis was.

"What kept hitting home was just how creative he was and the way he approached his work and his

art,” Cheadle said. “And that he was inexhaustible—except for the period of time we’re talking about—in his search for the next sound and that’s something that for me was inspiring personally for my work to always be like Miles was—on the edge of your discomfort—always feeling like you’re kind of off balance and reaching for something. That’s where the real growth happens. And that’s something that Miles hammered home for me.”

It was also a period of real growth for Cheadle. The whole process that took ten years changed him and he’s still surprised that an actual movie has opened this weekend in New York and Los Angeles in limited release, followed by wide release a week after. “Had the whole thing gone away, I would have been relieved, but it became a personal mandate,” he said. “So we were able to find irrational investors and also crowdfunded. I spent some of my money and deferred my fees ... and found a way to get it done.” He shot the movie over 30 days with an \$8 million budget, always afraid that something would happen that could destroy all his efforts. The production schedule was very intense; there wasn’t enough money or time to do it, like he was accustomed to with big studio productions.

“There was no part of it where fear wasn’t in the sidecar,” he said. “I knew that I was taking on something. Any one of the things that I would have done to take on producing it, directing it, acting in it, writing it and composing music. Any of those things by themselves for someone like me was fear to induce. To do it all. I tried to give this away several years ago. I tried to hire another director so that I could not be faced with that responsibility and be faced with those four things. But that didn’t come to pass. Everybody who I interviewed and I met with said, ‘This is your vision. Why would I? You have to see this through until the end. This is your journey.’”

He is now thankful that he didn’t give up any part of his duties. But it took more out of him than he bargained for. “My wife came down to see me halfway through. She was there at the beginning and then she left and she saw me about a month later when we were up in production, and she said, ‘You can’t ever do this again.’ I lost weight, I was stressing out. She could see it. I wasn’t sleeping. Every ride the next morning in the van was about, ‘How many hours of sleep did you get?’ That was a thing. If somebody would go, ‘I got 8 hours, 7 hours of sleep,’ then we’d be like, ‘How? Give me the mix. I need the powder or whatever you did.’”



Don Cheadle and Ewan McGregor

Don Cheadle was lucky to find a stellar cast that magnifies the movie. The sidekick to his chain-smoking, raspy-throated Davis, is Rolling Stone journalist Dave Brill, played by Ewan McGregor. Together, they embark on an adventure to retrieve a stolen tape with his music that should enable a comeback for the 53-year-old recluse. We also get flashbacks within a flashback as we witness Davis’ courtship and marriage to ex-wife Frances Taylor (Emayatzy Corinealdi), a world-renowned dancer who gave up her career for Davis. Both actors deserve the highest praise for true and real portrayals of complicated people that the genius musician used on his fall into drug abuse and alcoholism. The work of Don Cheadle stands out hands down as his best to date. He took Miles Davis’ famous words, “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there” to heart, and gives us the most raw and most transparent performance of his career.

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