Miles Davis is a hallowed name in jazz. His name conjures visions of sea changes in music, a vast expanse of styles, periods and colors. However, aspects of Miles' canon are overlooked, such as his influences from American popular music of various stripes and eras. In fact, Miles borrowed popular tunes for his bands as early as the 1950s.

Miles seems to have been a musical omnivore who eschewed snobbery for a more inclusive approach to listening and staying aware of many types of music. Popular songs are no exception.

INFLUENCE

Miles was married three times. His second marriage was to Betty Mabry who supposedly introduced him to the music of Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone (in addition to expanding his clothing and fashion sense). It seems plausible that Miles' forays into rock and funk from 1968-1975 were in large part a result of exposure to this music. In fact, Miles, Gil Evans and Jimi Hendrix purportedly had a record date on the calendar but Hendrix died the week before. What a collaboration that would have been!
MUSICAL THEATER

Miles reportedly saw *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway starring Marlon Brando. He cued the Frank Loesser song, “If I Were a Bell,” from the show, changed the key from E flat to F, and it became a jazz standard. He did the same thing with “Surrey with the Fringe on Top” from *Oklahoma*, another Broadway musical written by Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Gershwin’s magnum opus *Porgy and Bess* straddled the divides between classical, opera, pop and jazz. It contains a rich vein of popular classics that can be mined. This is what Gil Evans and Miles did with panache on tunes like “Summertime,” “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” and “There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York.” Miles was using pop songs of various types to create straight ahead, swinging jazz renditions.

PRINCE

Miles was a great admirer of Prince. They performed together on Prince’s concerts. They also reportedly recorded at Prince’s studio near Minneapolis. The mutual respect between these two diminutive giants was palpable.

TINA TURNER

In the same period, Miles did a rarely heard cover of Tina Turner’s “What’s Love Got to Do with It.” The tune shows up on bootlegs and live shows but not on any studio recordings. Miles’ version is interesting and worth searching for.

DAVID CROSBY

Miles recorded the Crosby, Stills and Nash song “Guinnevere” in 1968. It lends itself to a “jazz” treatment with its modal structure and employment of the Dorian scale. As legend has it, Miles met Crosby in NY’s West Village, drove David to his home, and played the version for him. Crosby disappointed Miles by saying he hated the treatment. Regardless, it remains a hidden gem in the Davis oeuvre, a sneaky twenty-minute soundscape including periodic returns to Crosby’s melody, voiced for soprano saxophone (Steve Grossman), muted trumpet (Miles) and bass clarinet (Bennie Maupin). It is sometimes classified as an unreleased track for the extended *Bitches Brew* sessions.

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST

BY MILES DAVIS (Columbia Records, 1985)

This album by Miles is the most well-known introduction to his use of pop tunes in his music. Many of these tunes became staples in his live performances years later, but this recording represents his documentation and interest quite well.

Sting (Track 1) – Sting appears as a guest playing the part of a French-speaking policeman on the first track: “One Phone Call / Street Scenes,” and is credited as Gordon Sumner. Miles was supposedly Sting’s idol, and Miles’ bass player Darryl Jones introduced them to each other.

Michael Jackson (Track 2) – “Human Nature” is the Michael Jackson hit that also became a staple of Miles’s late career live shows. The melody suits the sensitive, plaintive sound of Miles’s harmonic muted trumpet perfectly. The use of synthesizers and flute casts it firmly into the mode of pop music of the time.

Cyndi Lauper (Track 7) – “Time After Time” was a wistful staple of this recording and used in later concerts around 1989-1991. Once again, Miles heard an unlikely pop tune of the day that spoke to him, and in performance it became beautifully his own.

DOO BOP (Warner Bros., 1992)

Received unfavorably by most critics, this was Miles’ last studio recording and was released posthumously in 1992. It features Miles interacting with rappers, following his lifetime M.O. of curiosity about, and interaction with cutting edge artists of the day.

Despite its initial reception, it went on to win a Grammy Award for Best R&B Performance in 1993.
GUITAR
Miles rarely, if ever, used guitar in the 1950s and 60s. His bands were traditional jazz quintets and sextets and were piano based. The first well known interpolation of guitar on a Davis record was George Benson's guest appearance on *Miles in the Sky*. Playing in a distinctively clean jazz style, this gateway guitar appearance by Benson paved the way for the inevitable use of more funky, dirty, blues-based guitarists like John McLaughlin, Dominique Gaumont, Blackbyrd MacKnight, Pete Cosey and Reggie Lucas.

John McLaughlin's epic contributions to *In A Silent Way*, *Jack Johnson* and *Bitches Brew* are well known. A singularly chameleon-like guitarist, John starkly contrasted his acoustic playing in other arenas with a searing, nasty, wailing, "in the pocket" approach to Miles's increasingly rockier and funkier creations. This gave Miles the shredding, bluesy guitar voice that he wanted so much.

Rarely discussed is "Fun," the calypso track where unlikely candidate Bucky Pizzarelli (a guitarist usually found in very mainstream acoustic jazz groups) guests with Miles' working band of Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter. This track is often mistakenly credited to Joe Beck, who made a limited number of sides with Miles too, including "Water on the Pond."

Guitarist Reggie Lucas was a long-time member of Miles' live band and played on *Get Up with It* and *Agartha*. He seems to have played mostly or all rhythm guitar with Miles, laying the foundation for other guitarist Pete Cosey's blues drenched psychedelic solos, or the eerie musings of the now obscure French Gypsy guitarist Dominique Gaumont. Lucas later became the producer for Madonna, creating yet another pop connection to Miles.

In later years, guitar became more of a focal point in Davis' ensembles. Miles featured guitarists Mike Stern, John Scofield, Barry Finnerty, Bobby Broom and Robben Ford, all musicians who hybridized jazz and rock in pleasing new ways. Miles also included his nephew Foley McCreary, who sounded like a rock guitarist but played an instrument he called "lead bass."

In summation, the oeuvre of Miles' ever-changing music spanning decades and a multitude of styles had a barely disguised but rarely discussed secret weapon - Pop music. With this in mind, it behooves all Miles fans to take a second listen.

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For more information about Rob Scheps, visit his website at [robscheptsites.com](http://robscheptsites.com)

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