When Ron Miles teaches Jazz Styles to...

college students, he likes to open the first day of class with a 1926 quote from Langston Hughes:

> "We younger Negro artists who create, now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

It's a smart way to start, emphasizing jazz's essential relationship to blackness and to defiant creativity, the latter of which is sure to resonate with young students. Ron Miles also likes to discuss this quote with his peers, because he truly believes that expressing the full complexity of the human condition is the primary work of every artist at every stage of a career. "That quote gets at the sense that this music and art in general have to embrace everything," Ron says. "To really go as deep as we can, we have to embrace our failings as well as our success; the beauty of the human condition but also the parts that aren't so great, because we're here, and we have to deal with it."

So when Bill Frisell, Jason Moran, Thomas Morgan, and Brian Blade arrived at Ron's Denver home to rehearse for this album, their big hugs for Ron mattered. The December snow that hadn't fallen quite thickly enough to be scenic mattered. The pleasant studio at the back of the brick house whose modesty left money for his children's education mattered. The musicians' deep moments of active listening during the session mattered. The seismic upset of the 2016 U.S. presidential election that had come only a month before mattered. The flattened, calloused pads of musicians' fingers and the bulging veins in their hands mattered. The willingness to travel to Denver and make music with Ron when this record didn't yet have a home, not knowing what place it would find in the world, mattered. And their obvious joy in the intimacy of musical collaboration mattered. "Love fuels my work the most," Ron says. "My love for my fellow musicians. My love for my audience. My love for the tradition that I'm a part of.

* * *

As profound as Ron Miles's relationship to the jazz tradition may be, he's a rare musician who'll admit to having as much of the Bee Gees' Robin Gibb as Miles Davis in his trumpet sound. Omnivore musicians proliferate in jazz, but Ron is different. When he plays pop or country, he doesn't give them a *Pygmalion* treatment; he doesn't feel the need to make over or reform certain genres as he incorporates them into his own sound and style. Ron truly welcomes all musical styles without fear or shame. Unconcerned with coolness and seemingly free of the anxiety of reception, Ron, for example, carries his mutes in a *Scooby-Doo* lunch box without any hipster irony; he simply delights in the lunch box's function and graphics, and so he uses it.

This loving embrace of all things great and small, beautiful and ugly—the Non-Hierarchical Aesthetic Gospel of Ron Miles, if you will—likely is a product of his personal history. Ron was born in Indianapolis in 1963 and moved to Denver in 1974 at age 11. "Growing up here," he says, "it's not like there's tons and tons of black folks around. So everyone in my family had friends from a lot of different places. One sister, I'd go into her bedroom and she'd have *Teen Beat* and *Tiger Beat* stuff all over the walls, pictures of Michael Jackson and Sean Cassidy. So I was hearing all this different music all the time and it just all made sense."

When Ron discovered his affinity and talent for jazz as a teenager, he left pop behind for a time. After earning a music degree at the University of Denver in 1985, he studied the trumpet at the Manhattan School Of Music while taking private lessons from legends like Lester Bowie and Ornette Coleman. His New York stretch coincided with jazz's 1980s conservative turn, when young musicians were

expected to side stylistically and philosophically with either "tradition" or the avant-garde. Ron identified with the progressive faction, and felt most comfortable within it.
After a year in New York City, Ron moved back to Denver and took a teaching job at Metropolitan State University. Having immersed himself in avant-garde jazz, he had to become familiar with the music's early traditions to teach jazz history, going deep into the work of Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington. His realization that early jazz styles were *themselves* avant-garde for their time radically challenged then-prevailing categorizations in jazz. My theory: This shake-up of known categories so profoundly affected Ron that it somehow made him receptive to all music, including the pop and roots styles that he'd heard everywhere in his Denver youth. After this awakening, the Partridge Family and Hank Williams, Burt Bacharach and Prince, were All God's Children in Ron's musical cosmos. "When you get into playing music," Ron says, "that's where the lines can come down: jazz is *this*, jazz is *not that*. If you're lucky you have a chance to rediscover what and who you really are and become comfortable with that. Once I really admitted who I was and what I liked, music just opened up for me."

Thatopennesshasmadeforalbumssobeautifullypersonalthatcalling them "luminous" or "original" feels like shooting paintball splatters at a sunset. Ron's tunes gently apply compositional sophistication to pop and roots musics, with his lyricism connecting any and all stylistic strands. In Ron's home state of Colorado, you can walk along a foothill ridge and look down on one side to a river feeding a lush green valley, and on the other side to a desert sculpture garden of curious rust-colored rock formations. I hear Ron's melodies as the high ridges of his music, melodies as backbone and nerve center for his rootsy sounds on one hand and knotty abstractions on the other. Ron's commitment to lyricism gives him and us a clear and defining perspective on his musical surroundings. His tunefulness keeps his music honest.

"So much contemporary music has a certain intentional difficulty," Ron says. "Some musicians call it 'mo-jazz,' the music with assertively modern stuff like shifting meters. I just write songs, not meters. I write notes and chords, and then I figure out, 'shoot, that is bar 7 and then bar 4.' Things can be tricky to play, and that's fine, but you always want musicians to feel like your song is worthy of the effort."

* * *

"It's impossible and unnecessary to separate spirituality and politics, and art and politics," Ron says. "Because we're in the world that we're in. From the beginnings of this music, particularly black American music, a sense of triumph over adversity has always been a central part." For Ron, being in the jazz tradition means making music that speaks to his time. Not necessarily always topical, but relevant. "We're in some trying times right now, that's for sure," he says, referring to America's political landscape in 2017. "But we've seen this before. Culturally, black folks have had to do this over and over again, fighting injustice and finding a positive solution."

In 1968, a malfunctioning garbage truck crushed and killed two workers in Memphis. With this accident, the ongoing frustrations of black employees over their neglect and abuse flared into righteous outrage. Sanitation workers took to the streets with "I AM A MAN" signs, asserting the fundamental dignity and humanity of workers of every profession. Today, "I Am A Man" carries that specific civil rights history for Ron, but has also taken on broader significance. "It's a claim that we are of a human body," he says, "a human person, and there are all kinds of ways that we express ourselves." To suit the "I Am A Man" theme, Ron wrote this music with a more definitive blues sensibility, he says, though a definitive Ron Miles blues sensibility is not necessarily in 12-bar form; it's intriguingly skewed. I haven't counted the flattened 3rds, 5ths, and 7ths, the blue notes, to see if musicians play more of them here than on his previous albums, but do know that my own embodiment of Ron's music

begins with his intimate, singing tone, and that I feel the blues in that tone here more than ever.

"His sound is so pretty that it's easy to forget how much strength is in it," Bill Frisell says. "There's just this incredible power and clarity in what he does. It's coming from the inside, from the center of where everything comes from. When I play with him it's really easy to just grab a hold of his sound, or lean on it—and because it can be flexible, I can even move through it."

"Ron's tone also really sets the pace," adds Jason Moran. "Those notes of his, they nudge open the screen door, then they slowly close the screen door. They don't come racing out, you know, full speed ahead with the helmet on, bowling over anything in their way."

Ron's Dave Monette cornet, a mellower cousin of the trumpet, allows him to be "inside the music," he says, where he can exert a subtle but valuable influence as he improvises. "His playing sort of goes against what you think a trumpet is supposed to be," says Bill. "He can call and scream out, but he's one of the most amazing accompanists that I've ever played with. He makes everybody sound better. It's like playing with Herbie Hancock, somebody who affects the music from the inside. Everything he plays is more than a solo statement; it's also for the good of the group."

Because Ron believes in transcending traditional instrumental roles, and because he wants everyone to feel free to compose in real time, he gives his band members not their individual parts, but the full score. Each musician ponders his role in a Ron Miles composition on a sheet of unusually wide score paper that extends beyond the edges of his music stand. Ron likes his fellow musicians to have the capacity to make every note purposeful, so that they can practice the musical integrity that he practices himself. "When he hands out a piece of music," Jason says, "he gives you the world. Visually, it tells me everything I need to know about where my part lines up with another line, whether to the rhythm or to whoever else I'm working with in the composition. Ron wants to give the musicians the full score because he cares about how people understand the world around them."

On *I Am A Man*, Ron grows his trio with Bill Frisell and Brian Blade—which released *Quiver* in 2012, and *Circuit Rider* in 2014— into a quintet, with the addition of Jason Moran and Thomas Morgan. Ron makes the most of this expansion with the extended, episodic form of "Darken My Door." What he calls the "chewy pop center" of this tune has been around for a while, and it comes from a dream involving his late mother-in-law. "She wasn't very happy when my wife and I first got together," he says. "I had this dream where she said, 'He will never darken our door again, that guy over there,' pointing at me. And then in the dream my wife stood up for me, she championed me."In the opening, a piano trio pulls off some drama big and vivid enough for a silent film score, and then the music resolves into the aforementioned "chewy pop center," with sustained chords laying down loyalty and support. In the same way that a dream tends to stay with us, though, the music cycles back to the original drama, this time with a touch of wry humor that *de- stresses* it. And if the Ron Miles aficionados were wondering what exactly two chordal instruments would do in his already role-elastic band, listen to the syncopated dance of Bill and Jason trading notes at the start of Bill's solo. No one's stepping on anyone's toes here.

For Ron, the song "Revolutionary Congregation" is about "religion at its essence being revolutionary." He counts as his religious heroes political figures like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Gandhi, "these powerful folks who didn't sit back and accept the old traditions. Their tradition is standing up and fighting for others.

That to me is the thing: the idea of social change and fighting social injustice as a holy cause." If the deepest spiritual conviction for Ron is a commitment to social change, he also finds sources for racial

pride in religion. The song "Jasper" is named after the vibrant red- brown gemstone that shows up in the Book of Revelation "as part of a multi-hued message," Ron says. "Jasper is one of many precious stones that studs walls, and brown feet were definitely jasper-colored. For sure, nothing looks like *Downton Abbey* on Spring Break, like it does in all those movies about the Bible."

Ron calls the ballad "Mother Juggler" a "love song" for his Mom, and for mothers in general. "My Mom got a college degree by going to night school, and I remember my three siblings and I—this was when none of us was much older than ten—we'd all get on a bus with her at night and go to college, sitting in the back of the classroom drawing and doing homework during her classes. Then we'd go home and she'd get up early the next day and get everything ready for us. She had to make everything happen in a magical way."

"Is There Room In Your Heart For A Man Like Me?" concludes the album. "It's one of those love odes that says, 'This is enough, and I'm going to put it all out there,'" Ron says. The music's mood of searching, of collective quest rather than attainment, gives you a felt sense of Ron's métier. Like those Memphis sanitation employees, Ron has a worker's pride, particularly in the musicians' art and craft of improvisation. For him and for jazz, collaboration counts more than results. Process counts more than product.

Throughout the album, the 1968 declaration by sanitation workers accrues other meanings and rhythms and forms, so that *I Am A Man* ultimately sings out as a modernist jazz gospel. With its deep reserves of beauty, faith, and humor, this music becomes a place to which we can bring our own conflicts and doubts, and maybe even resolve a few of them, all while being lifted up by some consummate artistry. In this music, it's safe for us to be nothing more, and nothing less, than fully human. And that's plenty.

—Michelle Mercer

Michelle Mercer lives in Colorado, just down the Front Range from Ron Miles. She is a regular music commentator for National Public Radio and the author of *Footprints: The Life and Work Of Wayne Shorter* and *Will You Take Me As I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period*.