

MANIFESTING MILES

As one of the most adventurous contemporary trumpeters, **Theo Croker** is set, in Miles Davis' centenary year, to salute the spirit of the Dark Prince at the Southbank X Montreux collaboration this March. **Jane Cornwell** meets the man with the horn and discovers Croker's plan to honour Miles is to simply be himself...

Theo Croker is in Brazil for the second time in as many weeks, having flown there from Los Angeles where he's had a multi-night, twice-nightly residency at the Blue Note. I am jetlagged after a flight from London to Melbourne. Our Zoom begins with a to-and-fro over which of us is feeling the most wrung out; I concede, mainly because it's morning in Sao Paulo, and he's only just got up. Oh, and partly since his plate-spinning of roles - composer, producer, bandleader, collaborator, Grammy-nominated trumpeter - would test the reserves of a lesser human.

He tells me he's working on an album featuring several rappers, singers and producers, all of them Brazilian.

"It's not a jazz album," says the musician, 40, his locks falling across his face as he centres his phone. "I'm not playing Jobim and imitating Stan Getz. I'm trying to be super-modern and present, and bringing all my harmonic and rhythmic jazz knowledge into the project. There's a lot of twists and turns. When I play this to the people in my close circle, they're always like 'Oh, I didn't see it going that way.'"

A smile. "And I'm like, 'Yeah, because it's not a jazz record,'" he says again.

Nobody puts Croker in a corner. "It's jazz, but not as we know it," said the *London Standard* (okay, me) of his 2025 live rendition (a Brick Lane Jazz Festival commission at the Barbican) of *Dream Manifest*, a meditation on what can co-exist, and an album - his eighth as a bandleader - that experiments with layers acoustic, electric and digital. Expanding the boundaries of jazz includes the right to jettison genre altogether. Concepts, for Croker, are muses.

His sixth release *Blk2Life/A Future Past* sent 'coded frequencies to activate sleeping ancestral DNA'. *Love Quantum*, its 2022 follow up, reframed modern African American music, propelling a mix of neo-soul, hip-hop, R&B and electro-grooves into its own space jazz atmosphere.

"Jazz is dead ... long live the music," intones Gary Bartz, the 1970s-fusion era Miles saxophonist, on the opening track, setting out Croker's stall.

We're here to talk about Croker's 13 March turn at the Southbank x Montreux Jazz Festival Residency, during which - this being the centenary year of Miles Davis - he'll perform Miles Davis Mixtape, a headline show buoyed by a new quartet and a line-up of special guests. Croker's trumpet stylings, with their strong melodies, blue notes and smoky, less-is-more intimacy, have been frequently likened to Davis'. Not for nothing was Croker's quartet asked to

collaborate with the Berlin Philharmonic, directed by Magnus Lindgren, on *Sketches of Miles*, a one-off concert recorded at Philharmonie Berlin in November 2021 as the 12th edition of ACT's 'Jazz At the Berlin Philharmonic' series.

"I'm not Miles Davis, so it is very easy for me not to be Miles Davis," said Croker at the time. "This was simply my interpretations of some of his iconic material."

Davis is a major inspiration. How could he not be?

"He's a big part of who I am," Croker tells me. "The way he plays goes against the grain. He does what he wants to do, plays what he wants to play. In his forties he turned around and got a band of young people together to really bring that energy, which is what I'm doing. What would Miles do at a Miles tribute? He wouldn't just play stuff he's played before."

Mixtape will see Croker working with samples of Davis' voice and music into his own songbook: "We're going to take obscure things from, say, *Bitches Brew*, and create new things out of it, segueing into things from *Dream Manifest* and my other records, layering, gluing them together."

While it's the same cut-and-paste approach he's already employing, he cites a tune by his collaborator, drummer/

producer Kassa Overall - who used the beat for 'Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See' by 1990s rapper Busta Rhymes as the foundation for a take on Davis' interpretation of Eddie Harris' 'Freedom Jazz Dance' - as an example.

"If you're a Miles head, you'll recognise some of the things and appreciate how it's being presented, and if you're not a Miles head, you won't be able to tell what's his and what's mine, which is the cool part."

Croker nearly went down the straight-ahead jazz path. The Florida-born son of a high school principal father and a civil rights activist and guidance counsellor mother whose dad was Grammy-winning trumpeter Adolphus 'Doc' Cheatham, he grew up, the youngest of two brothers, chilling with the legendary likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Jimmy Heath, Benny Powell and Clark Terry.

"I remember them all, and [longtime Cheatham accompanists] Chuck Folds and Earl May. It was normal for me as a little kid to go to my grandfather's events and just hang out. They were always a lot of fun."

Aged eight he started sneaking goes on his brother's trumpet.

"He was naturally better than me. I really had to practice," he says, "but I made people notice. They'd be like, 'Yeah,

“ I find that London, the audience, the scene, the critics and the industry itself to be very supportive of new things. They lead the way ”

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