

Midnight with Marcus Miller

Daily Dispatch

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BackBeat

with Cornelius Thomas

THE countdown to the recent North Sea Jazz Festival, Cape Town started at the Victoria Junction Hotel on the Broadway of the good old Cape. While musicians and media people arrived, the place buzzed as a stand-up bassist jammed in the unseen background.

The excitement in the press room of the Victoria lifted to another level as Brooklyn's wonder-son bass guitarist and clarinetist, Marcus Miller, stepped up to the mike.

Responding to a question about life after Miles Davis, Miller explained that after Miles (with whom he had played for decades) had passed away, he looked around, asking himself, "Well, who am I gonna play with now?"

So he formed his current backing group, which has Roger Byam on sax, Bernard Wright and Leroy Taylor on keyboards, Charles Bell on drums, Dean Brown on lead guitar, and Michael Stewart on trumpet.

"South Africans don't know them that well," Miller continued at the press conference, "and that's why we're excited to play in the festival."

"I've been working with

a lot of the musicians who ... were always excited about what they were doing, always asking 'what can I do next' and 'what new is going on and how can I incorporate it into my music?'"

The iconoclastic son of Cato Manor, Sipho Gumede, kicked off the festival on bass mood at the outside stage, Manenberg, by strumming the guitar into *Township Jive*, and having the audience dance Africa from tune one. The throngs were also looking forward to Victor Bailey, who played a starring role in the 2000 festival.

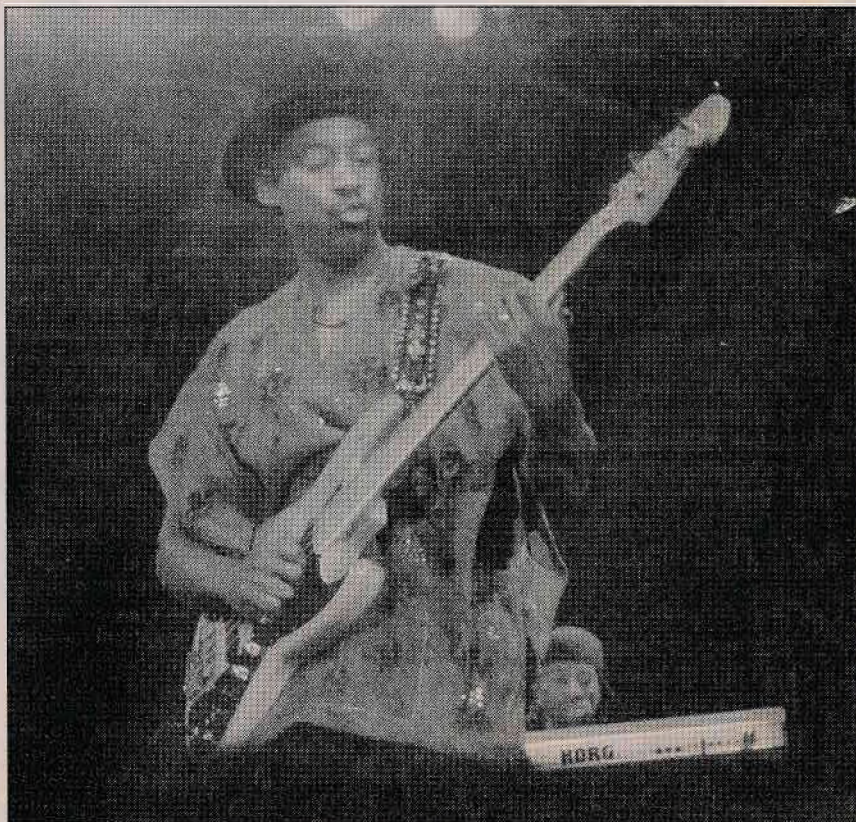
But first, just after midnight March 30, it was Marcus Miller time.

A pulse in the background, an ominous beat; and Marcus — "with the hat" — exploded onto Kippies.

In *People Make the World Go Round*, he inspired the band to intensity and fullness that left no room for personal interpretation.

Thumbing the bass guitar with lip-curling intensity, Marcus was making his own statement, far from the shadow of his mentor, Miles Davis.

Responding to his own 'what can I do next'



STRUTTING HIS STUFF: Jazzman extraordinaire Marcus Miller drives a runaway jazz train on Kippies stage at the North Sea Jazz Festival, Cape Town.

observation, Marcus changed "call and response" to "challenge and you-better-play-till-your-heart-hangs-out" on the Crusaders tune, *Maputo*.

The band responded with improvisations, each member going his own way, until Marcus commanded them back to *Maputo*, thumb-banging

the deeper strings.

"This is the very best you can get," reckoned an East London jazz connoisseur, "When I close my eyes it's like I'm truly at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Holland."

Meanwhile Marcus strutted the stage, demanding fullness of sound, making standards spill out as brand new

compositions, and banging the bass until a runaway jazz train raced ecstatically through hearts and heads.

Like it or not, Marcus Miller, like Victor Bailey, was colonising the South African jazz mind with the bass guitar.

Only this time South African jazz lovers embraced the colonisers.