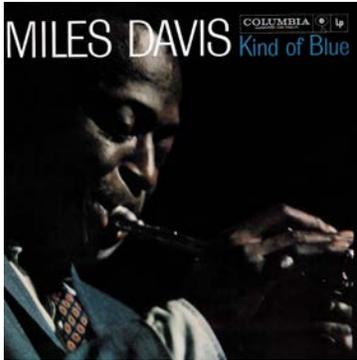


“Kind of Blue”--Miles Davis (1959)

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Essay by George Grella, Jr. (guest post)*



Album cover



Original label



Miles Davis

Tens of thousands of insightful words have already been written on the musical features of Miles Davis’ “Kind of Blue.” Heard from some 60 years (it does not seem that long) of music that has come since, “Kind of Blue” doesn’t sound as revolutionary as many of those words argue, and in hindsight, it wasn’t. Important, yes, but in a more incremental way--modal jazz playing did follow, but as another dialect in the language of jazz. Even Miles, inevitably, moved on to other things, ones that turned out to be truly revolutionary.

The album was recorded and released in 1959, one of the key years in jazz history. The music was changing rapidly and drastically. John Cage could have been speaking about the music of that year when he said, “We are all going in different directions”—Ornette Coleman’s “The Shape of Jazz to Come,” Charles Mingus’ “Mingus Ah Um,” and Dave Brubeck’s “Time Out” (the last two on Columbia, along with Miles’ album), were all issued that year. Four dramatically different statements about how to organize jazz music, each avant-garde in its own way, each arguing for the technical possibilities and aesthetic reach of the music.

These new ideas had been developed in practice, rehearsals, when musician wrote out music, and on bandstands, but in the odd relationship that improvised music has with recordings, the LPs released that year documented what had been happening and also paradoxically set these currents of change in stone, establishing the history that had just gone past into a permanent now.

In the context of these recordings, “Kind of Blue” is unique. The others are coherent statements for what each artist stands for in an ideological sense. “Kind of Blue” is, in the abstract, a statement of what Miles stands for, but rather than laying down guidance for a future path, as the others did, it’s just a snapshot into what Miles was thinking about in 1959, which in the case of an artist who was always on the move, was the equivalent of a still from a film reel.

Musical analysis is not the best means to approach this album. With the singular distinction as the best-selling jazz record of all time, where it exists in, and what it reflects of, American culture is far more salient. This is especially so as jazz has dwindled to a cult-like niche in this

country, meaning there are hundreds of thousands of people for whom this is the only jazz record they own—"Kind of Blue" is the alpha and omega of their jazz experience, a heuristic of "jazz" in its entirety. The album has a grip on the cultural imagination through the cool hand of Miles Davis.

Miles was cool. He was integral to the start of the cool jazz movement through his Birth of the Cool band and his collaborations with his musical soul mate, Gil Evans. Although he moved on, as he always did, from that contrapuntal style, his playing remained cool all the way up to "Bitches Brew" and reflected his inner self. Certain about his own ideas, yet insecure, sensitive, diffident—if not hostile—to the world around him, the care he took in his playing, the discrete dimensions of each tone and the precise placement of notes in time, carved out a space for Miles, one just separate from the rest of the world. This space stood tangentially to the culture at large, and was cool.

Is cool blue? Does standing outside the mainstream, undaunted by influence, keeping true to oneself, make one blue? Blue is loneliness, it's not just blue but a mood indigo.

On paper, the cool space should be well populated. This is the Emersonian space of self-reliance, of "Be yourself; no base imitator of another, but your best self. There is something which you can do better than another. Listen to the inward voice and bravely obey that. Do the things at which you are great, not what you were never made for." It is the space where one finds the rugged individualists who expanded and populated the frontier, the cultural icon of the entrepreneur, the Founding Fathers and the slogan of exceptionalism that they, unwittingly, birthed—it is the prime myth of America.

Of course, America is a far more heterogenous, messy, complex place, and a better country (maybe even exceptional) for it. "Kind of Blue" is messy and proud and important in that way. Miles explores some of the possibilities of what came to be called modal jazz, and his sideman follow along with him to varying degrees, or not at all. On a parallel track is pianist Bill Evans, whose idea of the beautiful was intimately close to Miles' own. The rhythm section of bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Jimmy Cobb is there to keep things swinging. Wynton Kelly sits at the piano bench for the blues, "Freddie Freeloader," and he plays blues that are an appreciably different hue than "Kind of Blue." John Coltrane, already pulling further and further away from Miles, tries to fit his own interest in vertical harmonies into Miles' horizontal structure and flow of time. Cannonball Adderley does see what modal player has available, but his ingratiating extroversion is better suited for public music, rather than this deeply private album.

Miles' space on the record is different than that of the other musicians, except for the visits from Evans—the two give the impression of sitting in a quiet room together, silently enjoying each other's company, feeling no pressure to speak. Miles is as apart on the album as he was from the rest of the culture, including jazz culture, refusing to be gripped by the past and other's ideas of how things should be. Beyond demeanor, that is the self-awareness on which cool depends.

That's where the ambivalent, fraught relationship of the cool individual vis-a-vis American culture lives. Economically, socially, and politically, there is constant pressure to repeat,

conform, don't rock the boat. But being true to oneself means rocking that boat, so does generally being an African-American.

What "Kind of Blue" demonstrates and preserves is the value of cool. May we learn from it eternally.

George Grella started as a musician and composer then accidentally became a writer. His music writing career began in earnest in 2008, when he started the Big City blog, and since then has contributed to, among others, "Signal to Noise," "Downbeat," WQXR, the New York City "Jazz Record," "NewMusicBox," and "Music & Literature." He currently writes for the "New York Classical Review" and is the music editor of the "Brooklyn Rail."

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.