

Remembering the Miles Davis classic
KIND OF BLUE @ 50
JIMMY COBB'S SO WHAT BAND
featuring
EDDIE HENDERSON, VINCENT HERRING,
JAVON JACKSON, LARRY WILLIS
& BUSTER WILLIAMS

In the church of jazz, *Kind of Blue* is one of the holy relics. Critics revere it as a stylistic milestone, on equal footing with seminal recordings by Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Charlie Parker's bebop quintets. Musicians admit its influence and have recorded hundreds of versions of the music on the album. Yet, in a manner that would have made Miles Davis smile, the album no longer belongs exclusively to a limited musical circle; to many listeners, it is simply great music, not just great jazz.

In the five decades since it was recorded, *Kind of Blue* has risen in stature and popularity far beyond any other album of its era, jazz or otherwise. It is one of a very few musical recordings – and certainly one of the very, very few *jazz* recordings – that our culture allows into the masterpiece category. Its cool, understated appeal is universal: classical buffs and head bangers alike swear by its sparse simplicity and emotional depth. Long ago, its influence spread from the jazz community to musicians specializing in many other genres of music. Hollywood has placed the music – and the album itself – into movies as an instant signifier of hip. With reverence copies are passed to friends, and gifts of the album are made to lovers.

Timelessly modern -- as good a definition of "masterpiece" as any -- *Kind of Blue* resonates as strongly now as it did on the two spring days in 1959 when jazz legend Miles Davis assembled his famed sextet in a Manhattan studio: saxophonists John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley, pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Jimmy Cobb (the sole survivor of that all-star lineup.)

Kind of Blue's unflagging ability to find new listeners and expand its appeal is certainly the most obvious proof of its impact. The album has sold millions of copies around the world, making it the best-selling recording in Miles Davis's catalog and the best selling classic

jazz album ever. Significantly, a large portion of those copies were purchased in the past ten years alone; undoubtedly by a younger audience more accustomed to the loud-and-fast esthetic of rock and rap. In the fin-de-siecle, Y2K frenzy, *Kind of Blue* proved a fixture on the top tier of countless “Best of the Century” surveys and “Top 100” polls, rubbing shoulders with the most familiar albums by the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and Bruce Springsteen. The consistent mood linking all five tracks on the album have led many to place it on equal footing with other classic “concept” albums – from Frank Sinatra’s *In the Wee Small Hours* to Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*.

Guitarist John Scofield, one of many alumni of Davis’s talent-packed groups, recalls the album had already become as common as a cup of sugar by the early ‘70s: “I remember at Berklee School [of Music], hanging out at this bass player’s apartment and they didn’t have *Kind of Blue*. So at 2 in the morning he said he’d just go knock on the neighbor’s door and ask for their copy, not knowing the people, just assuming that they’d have it! And they did! It was like *Sergeant Pepper*.”

It seems *Kind of Blue* has always lived a charmed life. Its mass appeal the result of a long, slow and *natural* build among an expanding listenership, until recent years, it never benefited from (and never required) any specific marketing campaign to develop its demographic. Even before Davis’s passing in 1991, most chose that album from his extensive catalog as his defining masterwork. Today, if someone has only one Miles album – or one jazz recording – more often than not it is *Kind of Blue*. For many, it has served as the port of entry to the jazz realm; famed record producer and Davis confidant Quincy Jones hails it as the one album (if that were the limit) that would explain jazz.

What more could one album ask for? Enduring popularity, lasting influence, mythic status, continuing sales. But why *Kind of Blue*? Why this one album, when there are so many other great jazz recordings?

One reason most certainly stems from Miles’s personal mystique at the close of the ‘50s: well-dressed, endlessly inspired, and uncompromising in art as in life. To African Americans he was one of the first black icons whose strong personal stance predicted the social changes of the ‘60s. To an international fanbase, he stood tall and cast a long shadow of smoldering insouciance. “Miles Davis is my

definition of cool,” Bob Dylan, himself no slouch in the hip department, has stated: “I loved to see him in the small clubs playing his solo, turn his back on the crowd, put down his horn and walk off the stage, let the band keep playing, and then come back and play a few notes at the end.”

Another factor was surely the sound of *Kind of Blue* – an unusual mix of influences that combined the elegance of contemporary classical, the gentle grooves of jazz, and the somber feel of the blues. Its melancholy, late-night whisper set it apart from so many of the frenetic, post-bop recordings of the day (“It could have used an up-tempo piece,” hardbop pioneer Horace Silver joshed after hearing *Kind of Blue*.) There’s a marked feeling of suspension, a direct consequence of Davis, in partnership with Bill Evans, choosing to create structures with slow-moving succession of scales (or “modes”, hence the “modal jazz” tag for *Kind of Blue*) – a departure from the fast-moving harmonies that define bebop.

Kind of Blue’s success also had much to do with Davis and Evans’s strategy at pushing spontaneous expression, and avoiding the cliché patterns that had developed since the advent of bebop. The less chords, Davis said in 1958, the more it “gives you the freedom and space to hear things . . . it becomes a challenge to see how melodically inventive you can be.”

Of course, providing such a blank canvas for brilliant improvisers like Coltrane, Adderley, Evans, Kelly and Davis himself, dovetails with *Kind of Blue*’s legendary first-take quality. Save for one track – “Flamenco Sketches” -- the entire album is comprised of the first complete run-through of all the tunes, most of which the musicians encountered for the first time that day in the studio. Like explorers tentatively stepping onto new land, each individual impulse is balanced by a palpable restraint and reverence for the music.

What else might account for *Kind of Blue*’s popular embrace? Other contributing factors include the fact that *Kind of Blue*:

- Featured some of the most memorable, yet startlingly simple compositions – “So What”, “Freddie Freeloader”, “All Blues”, “Blue in Green” and “Flamenco Sketches” – that have all become part of the shared jazz canon, performed repeatedly.

- Included on the album's cover an unusually evocative essay written by one of the architects of the music himself -- Bill Evans -- a rare example of a musician explaining his craft and the specific structures on the album.
- Was released by Columbia Records – in 1959 the Tiffany of record labels – which spared little expense in providing the best production and promotion for its artists, whether pop, classical, folk or jazz.
- Was recorded in Columbia's resonant 30th Street Studio, a converted church remembered as one of the true temples of hi-fidelity age.

The list could go on and on – and does. Yet, when one separates *Kind of Blue* into a litany of its working parts, somehow it can't completely satisfy the desire to explain the album's longstanding popularity and singular stature. So many of those components are common to other recordings, so many terms used to describe Davis's masterpiece are equally applicable to similar music. Written language can only go so far in describing what is, ultimately, indescribable; what words fully capture the lonesome effect of Davis's muted trumpet on "Blue in Green", or the dreamlike, bass-and-piano introduction to "So What"? As the best music resists description, so it seems a level of mystery will always pervade that which resonates strongest and stirs our souls – like *Kind of Blue*.

—Ashley Kahn
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Ashley Kahn is the author of *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*, and other books on music. He often contributes to National Public Radio's "Morning Edition".

No explanation is necessary to explain the need to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Kind of Blue*. And no event seems more appropriate than a touring group under the leadership of Jimmy Cobb – the sole surviving member of the illustrious few who recorded that album in 1959 – playing the music of, and inspired by *Kind of Blue*. Cobb calls his current group **Jimmy Cobb's So What Band**, having chosen a select lineup from the current jazz scene that makes the term "all-

star” seem inadequate in describing their collective experience and top-tier talent.

Jimmy Cobb (Drums) is the legendary master of 4/4, who – at the age of 82 – possesses a swing that is as driving and intricate as ever. Known for a memorable five-year stint in Miles Davis’s rhythm section from 1958 to ’63, he was born in 1929 in Washington DC, and is the product of the city’s vibrant music scene that overlapped rhythm and blues and modern jazz. His well-matched abilities as an accompanist and soloist made him in-demand sideman starting in his teen years; before hitting the road with Earl Bostic in 1950, he had already played with the likes of Billie Holiday, Pearl Bailey and Charlie Rouse. Through the ’50s, he provided steady and sympathetic support for Dinah Washington (whom he married), Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz, Cannonball Adderley, and ultimately Miles Davis. When Davis moved on to another lineup, Cobb and his rhythm mates – pianist Wynton Kelly and bassist Paul Chambers – remained together as unit through the ’60s, performing as a trio, or in the studio on a number of landmark recordings by the likes of Wes Montgomery, J. J. Johnson and Kenny Burrell. From the ’70s on, Cobb remained a favorite accompanist, playing with Sarah Vaughan, Sonny Stitt, Nat Adderley and Joe Albany. Most recently, he has served as an educator, session specialist, and bandleader, heading Cobb’s Mobb – with whom he has recorded three critically hailed albums to date: *Cobb’s Groove*, *Marsalis Music Honors Jimmy Cobb*, and *Cobb’s Corner*.

Eddie Henderson (Trumpet) is one of the few psychiatrists who has simultaneously established himself as an active jazz musician, and can boast of an extensive discography that includes two recent albums based on the music and mood of *Kind of Blue* (2003’s *So What* and 2006’s *Precious Moment*). He grew up in San Francisco, and was inspired by Miles Davis from an early age -- his father was a close friend and doctor to Davis. Henderson studied trumpet at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, before playing with John Handy, Tyrone Washington, and Joe Henderson (no relation). He gained notoriety for his work with the Herbie Hancock Sextet in the early ’70s, which led him to add electronic instrumentation to his own recordings starting in 1973. Henderson later worked with Art Blakey, Mike Nock, recorded with Charles Earland, and led a rock-oriented group. In the ’90s, he returned to playing acoustic hard bop, touring with Billy Harper in 1991, and leading his own ensembles. His new release, *For All We Know*, features John Scofield on guitar.

Javon Jackson (Tenor Saxophone) is, like Roney, a member of the last graduating class of the University of Art Blakey – and stands as a devotee of the hardbop sound propagated by such pioneers as Hank Mobley and Joe Henderson. He grew up in Cleveland and Denver, attended Berklee School of Music, and after Blakey, developed his sound in bands led by the Harper Brothers, Benny Green, Freddie Hubbard and Elvin Jones. To date, he has recorded twelve solid and well-received albums as a leader, beginning with *One for All* in 1991 and, most recently, *Once Upon a Melody* in 2008, an enjoyable tribute to such saxophone greats as John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Wayne Shorter.

Vincent Herring (Alto Saxophone) is a Kentuckian who fell under the spell of a Floridian – the ever-funky and fluid Cannonball Adderley. Herring has proceeded, since arriving in New York City in 1983, to create his own sound and stamp on the jazz circle. After playing with a wide stylistic variety of bands – from Lionel Hampton's swing to Horace Silver's hardbop to David Murray's avant-garde, he settled in with Nat Adderley's group, playing music made famous by his mentor (Nat's brother and partner.) In 1993, Herring struck out on his own. Of his sixteen albums, standouts include 1993's *Secret Love*, 1999's *Sterling Place All-Stars* (with fellow Brooklynites pianist Ronnie Matthews, bassist Richie Goods and drummer Carl Allen), and *Live at Smoke*, recorded in 2007 in one of New York's leading uptown nightclubs.

Larry Willis (Piano) is one the most talented yet unsung pianists of the same generation as McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock. Part of the reason is a restless (and somewhat reverse) approach to jazz styles: first being associated with free jazz ensembles, then fusion during the '70s and finally proving himself in hard bop groups in the '80s and '90s. A native New Yorker, Willis graduated from the Manhattan School of Music and immediately joined bands led by Jackie McLean and Hugh Masekela, and recorded with Lee Morgan and Stan Getz. After adopting synthesizer and electric piano in the '70s, he worked on sessions with Cannonball Adderley, Joe Henderson Richard "Groove" Holmes, and joined the rock/jazz fusion group Blood, Sweat & Tears in 1972. In the '80s, he returned to a more acoustic path, playing with Nat Adderley, Woody Shaw and others. Willis has made albums as a leader since 1970, on the whole preferring tighter lineups of quartets and quintets. 2008's *The Offering*

features fun and fractured overview of jazz styles (including a funky treatment of the “Star Wars Theme”).

Buster Williams (Bass) is simply one of the most instantly recognizable and respected standup bassists in jazz today. He has ridden the stylistic shifts in the music scene – from acoustic to electric and back again – with aplomb, and left an indelible mark on all the bands fortunate to include him. Born in Camden, New Jersey, Williams fell under the spell of Oscar Pettiford and pursued music studies in Philadelphia. The roster of stars with whom he toured through the ‘60s includes great players like Jimmy Heath, Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt, and vocalists Dakota Staton, Betty Carter, Sarah Vaughan and Nancy Wilson. As a funkier and more amplified sound found its way into the scene, he worked with the Jazz Crusaders, Miles Davis, and Bobby Hutcherson/Harold Land, but it was with Herbie Hancock’s groundbreaking group Mwandishi – in which Williams juggled both standup and electric bass – which his legend was made. He later joined groups led by legendary pianist Mary Lou Williams and Ron Carter. Williams’s work as a leader – beginning in 1976 – and as a member of both the Timeless All Stars and the Monk-tribute group Sphere, have secured his A-list status. From the ‘80s to the present, it’s difficult to find a jazz headliner he has not accompanied. In 2008, Williams began releasing a series of live albums exclusively for download through his company, Buster Williams Productions.