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CD Review

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Better Than Blue: Davis Strikes Lightning Without the Flash

Despite its modest title, *Kind of Blue*, a Miles Davis–led album from 1959, is a seminal achievement in jazz. In the 1940s, the speed, complexity, dry sound, and unpredictability that constituted bebop revolutionized the jazz landscape and represented a revolt against the more popular swing tunes (Gridley 88). Other movements, in turn, countered bebop, including resurrected New Orleans jazz and cool jazz (Gioia 278). With its quieter, smoother performances (Gridley 113), the latter movement complemented the increasing comfort levels of Americans, who became attuned to technological advances like high-fidelity sound and television in the 1950s (258). Yet it also shied away from the formulaic, mass-market sheen of many Tin Pan Alley (96) and swing songs (71) from the previous decades.

Trumpeter Miles Davis was the cool movement's hardest pioneer. Born in Illinois but raised in St. Louis, the Juilliard dropout and Charlie Parker protégé (Gioia 225-6) formed his "Birth of the Cool" nonet in 1947 (281). After vanquishing years of depression and heroin addiction, his career re-blossomed in 1954 (293-4). Five years later, saxophonists John Coltrane (tenor) and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley (alto), pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Jimmy Cobb joined him on *Kind of Blue* (297-9). Although some aspects of the songs do hint at other movements, their softness and Davis's intimate trumpet style, keen timing, well-shaped notes, and rhythmic looseness (Gridley 131-2) make it an exemplar of cool jazz.

"Freddie Freeloader," the album's second track, may be its liveliest song. It has a 12-bar blues form with duple meter and the proper chord changes. Instead of ambling through the almost 10-minute piece, the musicians bypass an introduction and dive in at a moderately fast tempo. The

ensemble begins the first chorus on its very first beat. As the trumpeter and saxophonists play pairs of notes in harmony, the pianist comps along. Time is kept by a walking bass and on a suspended cymbal, and Cobb strikes the drum rim for a "tick" on every fourth beat. The second chorus features the same tune, and the first solo starts in Chorus 3. On the piano, punchy chords in the left hand accompany an improvised single-note melody, which continues through the sixth chorus. The bass keeps thrumming each beat but the drum activity increases in Chorus 4, with Cobb ticking off every second beat by Choruses 5 and 6.

After an anticipatory drum roll, the trumpet solo opens in the seventh chorus. Compared to bebop, it includes relatively few notes. The ones we hear are often syncopated, drawn out, and middle register in pitch, but Davis instills each one with suppressed feeling. In the rhythm section, Cobb adds a cymbal clap at the beginning of Chorus 9 and more prominent drumming by Chorus 8. Six choruses later, Coltrane enters on tenor saxophone. The bebop influence is evident here as waves of notes roll out with great frequency. The rhythm section sustains its pattern of comping piano, walking bass, and increased drumming (after Chorus 15), as it does during the alto saxophone solo. Once the tenor sax has faded in the 18th chorus, the alto sax revs up after the fifth beat for a mildly virtuoso run. It continues into Chorus 23, where, after the seventh beat, piano takes over again in a series of staccato chords. Here, the drums remain steady but the bassist improvises. Choruses 25 and 26 repeat the ensemble opening, with some conclusive notes in the last eight beats.

The technical and rhythmic aspects of this piece evoke many jazz styles: quick saxophone lines (bebop), comping piano and walking bass (swing), soloist showcases (after Louis Armstrong), and of course syncopation. But the velvety harmonization by the horns, light piano-playing, plethora of pauses, and mellow texture place it most firmly in the "cool" category.

These traits also tinge the fourth track, "All Blues." Like "Freddie," its form consists of 12 bars per section and its tempo is moderately fast. Unlike that song, it contains several bridges and has not duple but triple meter, which allots six beats for each measure. This meter lends the 11-

and-a-half-minute piece a restless quality, as if its bars keep ending prematurely. In the introduction, the first four of those bars feature the rhythm section: the piano trills over brushstroked drums and a walking bass riff. In the second set of bars, the saxophones mimic that riff in harmony. The first chorus opens with some doleful trumpet notes, while the other instruments repeat their previous lines. All three horns merge in the second four-bar set to play slow ascending and descending notes and then return to the original statement. In the last section, the piano disappears for two bars and reemerges as a trill while the horns rise and fall together even more slowly. The four-bar introductory statement with the saxes creates a bridge into Chorus 2, which simply repeats all of Chorus 1 with the trumpet. The musicians play the trumpet-less riff once more for four bars and increased drumming leads into the first solo. For Choruses 3-6, the trumpeter intersperses syncopated notes with pauses and longer lines. The piano punctuates this melody with the initial riff, improvised chords, and brief legato runs while the bass retains the riff, the suspended cymbal sounds the beat, and the drums remain active.

After another bridge with the time-keeping drums and the riffing bass and piano, the alto saxophone begins its improvisation (Choruses 7-10). As Adderley demonstrates his technical skill in Chorus 9, the rhythm section stays fairly constant. Still, the drummer adds some restless offbeats and the pianist occasionally breaks from his chord repetitions to create more melodic lines. He returns to the riff with the rest of the rhythm section in the bridge to Chorus 11. There, Coltrane's tenor sax solo (through Chorus 14) contains deliberately paced lines, faster but melodically simple lines (Chorus 12), and intricate, bebop-inspired lines (Chorus 14) as the rhythm section maintains its previous patterns. Some surprises also occur: the saxophonist suddenly dips to a low note and the pianist glides down the keyboard in Chorus 13. The next bridge is followed by a two-chorus piano solo that consists of legato and staccato chords, riffs, and freer improvisations. The drummer also starts ticking after every three and a half beats. The last two bars of Chorus 16 revisit the introductory riffs, which persist through the following bridge along with saxophones and piano trills. Choruses 17 and 18 repeat the arrangements of Choruses 1 and 2 and of the bridge between them.

One last bridge comes in before Chorus 19, in which Davis spits out the same syncopated note until he blends with the saxes for slow melodic climbs, descents, and a fadeout.

The "cool" aesthetic is clear in this piece. The initial use of a brush against the drum suggests the intention to mute the sharpest percussive sound. Dynamic and melodic rises and falls seem prominent, and that sense of equilibrium highlights the leisurely pace and contrasts the bouncy beat and riffs. Despite its title, this piece does not sink under the weight of bluesy introspection but glides along placidly.

"Flamenco Sketches," the fifth track, further heightens this ambiance. The tempo of the nine-and-a-half-minute song is slow and its meter is duple, but unlike the compositions above, it does not have a specific song form. Instead, with its basis on modal scales, each soloist can shift through five different scales in as many four-bar sections as he wishes (Gioia 299). An unhurried call and response between pairs of bass notes (on the first and second beats) and legato piano chords (initially on the third and fourth beats) introduces the piece. Four bars later, assured but delicate trumpet notes share space with the bass and piano. Davis winds through the scales for six sections, changing each time until he lets the fourth scale span two sections. In the second chorus, Coltrane does the same thing on the tenor sax. He quickens his playing at some points but he adheres to the scale changes throughout the six-section solo. Adderley waits until the seventh beat of Chorus 3 to enter with a performance of greater overt energy and a more perceptible vibrato. His first, third, and fourth scales carry over into their successive sections and his chorus ends after eight sections. In Chorus 4, the pianist surrounds his first few notes with thoughtful pauses. He employs chords and creates a distinct but brief melodic line as he saunters through seven sections. In this chorus, the first and third scales last twice as long as the other ones do. The improvisations correspond with Davis's solo in Chorus 5. As in the first two choruses, he extends only the fourth scale into another section. For about four bars, he almost completely mutes his trumpet. He changes his scale once more in the sixth and final section. There, the rhythm section slows and halts with a cymbal trill after only about two bars.

In this composition, the fluidity of the improvisations applies to structure, as well. The piano is particularly smooth and deliberate and the trumpet is especially soft. Both modes of playing enhance the song's subdued nature. The relatively rapid saxophone-playing offsets this aura, but it feels so anomalous here that it conversely builds up the hushed atmosphere. In addition, the fact that the album includes another version of "Sketches" (Track 6) indicates that the song's distinctiveness depends not so much on composition as on performance. True to its name, the musicians can redraw this piece in as light a manner as they choose.

Based on just a sampling of songs, *Kind of Blue* appears to be a solid cool jazz album. Its title accurately notes its shades of past styles, specifically the blues in its form but also a bit of bebop and a spot of polished swing in its rhythm and texture. Yet the "blue" could also refer to the songs' emotional depth. Backed by an able ensemble, Davis's ponderous trumpet melodies reveal a poignancy that would have gotten lost under showier performances. Hence, *Kind of Blue* both suggests its own reliance on jazz traditions and defines the unique mood of the cool.

Bibliography

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