

The Making of One of Jazz's Most Influential Recordings

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Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Shirley Griffith. If one album had to explain jazz, a strong candidate would be "Kind of Blue" by the trumpet player and bandleader Miles Davis. This week on our program, Steve Ember and Gwen Outen tell the story of "Kind of Blue."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



"Kind of Blue" has influenced musicians for more than forty years. It is also a favorite of listeners. The Recording Industry Association of America marked the sale of three million copies in the United States as of two thousand two.

(MUSIC)

Like many other albums, "Kind of Blue" was made in two recording sessions. These took place for Columbia Records in New York City in March and April of nineteen

fifty-nine.

VOICE TWO:

Stories about the making of "Kind of Blue" say there was nothing unusual about the project. When the musicians arrived, Miles Davis gave them some short, simple descriptions of the music they would play. He is said to have written these notes just a few hours earlier. His piano player, Bill Evans, helped him write some of the music that would get the musicians started.

Miles Davis did not want to tell them too much about what to play. He wanted the music to flow naturally. Such improvisation was nothing new for musicians. Yet the five songs on "Kind of Blue" represented a perfect mix of improvisational talent and musical experimentation.

The first song is called "So What."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Miles Davis played trumpet and led the group. Julian "Cannonball" Adderley played alto saxophone; John Coltrane played tenor saxophone. Paul Chambers was on the bass, and James Cobb played drums.

(MUSIC)

Miles Davis had a talent for bringing together great musicians. But it also meant that he had to form new bands again and again. Band members would become successful enough as individuals to form their own groups. The band that Miles Davis put together for "Kind of Blue" was no different.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This song is called "Freddie Freeloader." On this song, Wynton Kelly plays the piano; he replaced Bill Evans.

Listen to how the band works as a team, but also how the musicians play individually over the music. Listen especially to the competing saxophones of John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Miles Davis and his band were experimenting with a new kind of sound on "Kind of Blue." This is the sound of a traditional jazz chord progression:

(MUSIC)

But Miles Davis designed the music on "Kind of Blue" around a modal form. This kind of system permitted the musicians more freedom. After "Kind of Blue," jazz musicians used the modal form more and more.

Here is another song from "Kind of Blue." This one is called "Blue in Green."

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Miles Davis and his band were not the only artists testing new ways to do things. There was, for example, the painter Jackson Pollack. His experiments in form and color were playful but went against tradition, just like "Kind of Blue."

Pianist Bill Evans himself saw similarities between the music and a form of Japanese art. Some compared the album to the ideas of Zen Buddhism. At that time, a lot of Americans were becoming interested in Asian spirituality.

This song is called "All Blues." Listen how naturally the music appears to develop from one point in the song to the next.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Miles Davis was born into a wealthy family in Illinois in nineteen twenty-six. He received a trumpet for his thirteenth birthday and began jazz lessons.

In nineteen forty-four, he moved to New York. He entered the Julliard School of Music. But he left the school the next year to work with great musicians like Billy Eckstine and Charlie Parker.

In nineteen forty-nine Miles Davis released "Birth of the Cool." This recording also had a big influence on jazz. At that time, listeners were used to the often forceful, fast-moving beats of Louis Armstrong and others.

Cool jazz became especially popular on the West Coast.

VOICE TWO:

In the nineteen fifties and sixties, the civil rights movement grew in the United States. Here was a tall, talented, good looking -- and very strong-willed -- African American man. He wore Italian suits and drove European cars. There were many women in his life, although he was violent with women.

Still, many people saw Miles Davis as someone who stood up to a system that often kept African Americans from economic success.

VOICE ONE:

Miles Davis died in nineteen ninety-one in California, at the age of sixty-five. He is remembered most as one of the best trumpet players ever. Miles Davis played more softly than many of those who came before him. He also did not work as hard to hit as many high notes or low notes. He found his unmistakable sound somewhere in the middle. There was also his sense of timing and the use of silence in his music.

Miles Davis had a talent especially for sad love songs. This one is called "Flamenco Sketches," the final song on "Kind of Blue."

ANNOUNCER:

Our program was written by Robert Brumfield and read by Steve Ember and Gwen Outen. Internet users can download MP3 files and transcripts of our shows at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Shirley Griffith, hoping you can join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.