



*Jazz Profiles* from NPR Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue* [by Jim Luce](#)

Kind of Blue brought together seven now-legendary musicians in the prime of their careers: tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers, drummer Jimmy Cobb and of course, trumpeter Miles Davis.

Miles Davis and his cool, measured trumpet style had been attracting attention in the jazz world since the mid-1940s. By 1958, at age 32, Davis was an international jazz star whose playing set the standard for jazz musicians of the day.

And just as younger artists looked to Miles for guidance and inspiration, he looked to them for raw, new talent and innovative musical ideas. In the mid-1950s, Davis discovered gold in the subtle sounds of 25-year-old pianist Bill Evans, who he recruited into his late '50s sextet. Evans would prove an essential contributor to the Kind of Blue sessions. Listen to Bill Evans reveal how he witnessed Miles' artistic evolution

Even before Kind of Blue, Davis was experimenting with "modal" jazz, keeping the background of a tune simple while soloists played a melody over one or two "modes," or scales, instead of busy chord progressions -- the usual harmonic foundation of jazz.

In addition, Bill Evans introduced Miles to classical composers, such as Bela Bartok and Maurice Ravel, who used modalities in their compositions. Davis also drew on his knowledge of the modal qualities in the blues.

With Evans (left), Miles worked up a few basic compositional sketches, and when the musicians arrived at the studio on March 2, 1959, they were given these outlines. Davis wanted to capture the musicians' spontaneity -- and he wanted to capture it on the first take.

The first tune recorded, "Freddie Freeloader," is representative of the "first take" magic on the record, and it features the happy, swinging playing of pianist Wynton Kelly, who had recently joined Miles' sextet.

The second tune recorded that day ended up as the lead and probably best-known album track. "So What" took an unusual tack: bassist Paul Chambers stated the opening melody, and with Bill Evans playing rather unorthodox chords underneath, the song serves as somewhat of a fanfare or overture, hinting at what lay in store for the listener.

Miles Davis was at a musical peak in the 1950s and had been preparing the ideas that would become *Kind of Blue* for years. A year before the recording, Davis slipped Bill Evans a piece of paper on which he'd written with the musical symbols for "G minor" and "A augmented."

"See what you can do with this," Miles said. Evans went on to create a cycle of chords as a meditative framework for solos on "Blue in Green."

The second day of recording did not take place for seven weeks. When the band finally gathered again, this time minus pianist Wynton Kelly, the first tune recorded was essentially a series of Flamenco- and North African-derived scales.

Ashley Kahn, author of *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*, says that the resulting recording possesses an almost spiritual quality as the musicians -- particularly Coltrane -- seemed to take a reverent approach to the composition.

For the tune "All Blues" Miles again played with the simplest of elements. He took a standard 4/4 time blues and gave it a waltz feel in 6/8. Evans said this was again part of Davis' genius -- creating a simple figure that becomes much more. The setting allowed alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley to return to his big band roots.

To the musicians who recorded it, *Kind of Blue* was just another session when it was released in August, 1959. But the disc was quickly recognized by the jazz community as a classic. Jazz musicians were startled by the truly different sound on an album that laid out a clear roadmap for further modal explorations.

"So What" became the tune, the one that every musician -- not just the practitioners of jazz -- simply had to know. The other tracks also quickly became standards and the individual solos throughout the record continue to inspire musicians to this day.

*Kind of Blue* still sells dozens of copies an hour, steadily expanding its audience more than 40 years after its release. Musicians from all genres perform, record, and study the album's songs, and the influence of the songs on culture beyond music continues to grow.

Drummer Jimmy Cobb puts it all down to simplicity -- the reason *Kind of Blue* has remained so successful for so long. And because of its inherent balance, historian Dan Morgenstern adds, the album never wears out its welcome.