

MILES DAVIS AND MODAL JAZZ
The inevitability of the *Kind of Blue* album

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Modal Jazz and *Kind of Blue*

On March 2, 1959, Miles Davis concluded a nearly ten-month break from working with his sextet in order to return to the studio and begin recording his landmark album, *Kind of Blue*.¹ As he arrived at the first of two recording sessions, Davis had in mind a new approach to jazz that would signify his transition away from the hard bop style that had defined the previous decade. This was Davis's chance to introduce to listeners a new style of music known as modal jazz. Although several of his recordings had already exhibited tendencies toward this musical approach, *Kind of Blue* was the first album to fully embody the modal style. Through these recording sessions, Davis defined modal jazz for other musicians who were looking to break away from the current musical paradigm.

The first track on *Kind of Blue*, entitled "So What," may be considered the quintessential modal tune, and its structure contributes to a straightforward definition of modal jazz. Most jazz compositions consist of a single melody written over a sequence of changing harmonies; it is often this complex arrangement of harmonies that makes the music interesting and provides improvisers with a sense of structure during each solo. "So What" abandons the idea of forward-moving harmonies by utilizing only two distinct chords, each of which lasts for an extended period of time before changing to the other.

This characteristic of "So What" leads to the following definition of modal jazz: **modal jazz exists when the rhythm section plays a single harmony for an extended period of time while the soloist bases his (or her) improvisation on a scale from which that harmony derives.**² In traditional jazz, improvisers were known for tailoring their solos to match a complex

¹ Eric Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and His Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 105.

² My definition of modal jazz is the result of consultation with several sources that shed light on the subject. For additional renderings of this definition, see:

sequence of varying harmonies, which meant that, at any given moment, there were only a few notes from which to choose if the solo was going to sound “correct.” In modal jazz, the lack of changing harmonies allowed musicians to improvise using a larger selection of notes; in the case of the recordings from *Kind of Blue*, soloists were permitted to improvise using entire seven-note scales, rather than only the three or four notes found in individual chords. Because jazz musicians commonly referred to these different scales as “modes,” Davis’s new approach to improvisation quickly became known as “modal jazz.”

The definition provided above is an ideal starting point because it accurately describes the most fundamental characteristics of the modal approach; such an explanation, however, ultimately fails to account for the implications and foundational concepts behind Davis’s work on *Kind of Blue*. Most books cap their definitions of modal jazz with a reference to static harmonies, as though a lack of harmonic motion is the ultimate goal. These definitions miss the point, for static harmony is not an end in itself. Instead, it is a means to achieve the underlying purpose of modal jazz: melodic freedom.

For Davis, this was a natural point of arrival. He had always been more concerned with melody than with chord changes; this is why, on his earliest recordings, his solos were simpler and more tuneful than those of his contemporaries. In Davis’s eyes, the focus of improvisation was the instant composition of a meaningful melody rather than a mere restatement of chord

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1. Ingrid Monson, “Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz,” in *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 150.
 2. Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: A Biography* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982), 93.
 3. John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 175-76.
 4. Eric Nisenson, *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and His Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 134-35.
 5. Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz (Revised and Updated Edition)* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2007), 485.
 6. Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis (Tenth Edition)* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2009), 265-266.

changes. The modal jazz of *Kind of Blue* permitted improvisers to construct melodies without having to worry about shifting harmonies. This was the musical setting Davis had been seeking since the beginning of his career, and, with *Kind of Blue*, he finally realized an approach to jazz that matched his unique improvisational style.

Bebop: The Early Years

While modal jazz would inform many of the jazz recordings following the 1959 release of *Kind of Blue*, Davis's new form of music was a sharp contrast to the jazz tradition of the preceding two decades. David H. Rosenthal provides a foundational definition of the type of jazz that emerged in the early 1940s: bebop was characterized by “fast tempos, complex harmonies, [and] intricate rhythms. . . . Bebop tunes were often labyrinthine, full of surprising twists and turns.”³ Players frequently borrowed chord progressions from popular tunes, adding and substituting new harmonies and melodies to challenge their improvisational abilities.⁴ Charlie Parker's “Donna Lee,” for instance, was actually composed over the harmonic changes to the popular song, “Indiana.”⁵

The result of adding new chord changes was a staggering degree of harmonic complexity that welcomed only the most agile improvisers. At its core, bebop was a tool for putting musicians' virtuosity on display. One of the best-known and most challenging bebop tunes is “Confirmation,” written by Charlie Parker. In this piece, chords frequently change every two beats, forcing soloists to have a firm grasp of a variety of different harmonies. Improvisers must be able to play notes that consistently match these rapidly shifting keys; if they do not, it will sound as though they have “missed” the chord progression and played a series of wrong notes.

³ David H. Rosenthal, *Hard Bop: Jazz and Black Music 1955-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 12.

⁴ Gridley, 164-65.

⁵ Rosenthal, 12.

Combined with the lively tempo of the average bebop tune—frequently more than two hundred beats per minute—the demand for virtuosic improvisation became one of bop music’s most distinctive features.

Miles Davis and the Charlie Parker Quintet

In 1946, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie had completed a standing gig at Billy Berg’s club in Los Angeles, and Gillespie was ready to travel back to New York. He had actually provided plane tickets for the entire band, when Parker, a devout heroin addict, abandoned the rest of the group and sold his ticket for drug money. Having chosen to remain temporarily on the west coast, Parker was called into a recording session for Dial Records, where he found himself working with nineteen-year-old Miles Davis. This was one of Davis’s earliest experiences recording with Parker, and the resulting takes covered several bebop standards, including “Yardbird Suite,” “Ornithology,” and “Night in Tunisia.”⁶

Parker returned to New York in April of the following year, but Gillespie had made up his mind not to welcome the drug-addicted saxophonist back into his group.⁷ As a result, Parker began forming his own ensemble, and he asked Davis to join what would become the Charlie Parker Quintet. The band opened on 52nd Street in April 1947, where it quickly became apparent that Davis’s contribution to the group was going to be quite different from Gillespie’s.⁸ Whereas both Gillespie and Parker were known for their rapid and technically complex improvisation, Davis exhibited a tendency toward less virtuosic material. He frequently opted to stay in the middle register of his trumpet and played fewer notes, presenting simple ideas in a carefully executed manner. This may have been part of Parker’s plan—by replacing Gillespie with Davis,

⁶ Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 88-89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

Parker provided a foil for his fast-paced, note-filled solos.⁹

An example of the contrast between Parker and Davis can be heard on a 1945 recording of “Now’s the Time.” During his solo, Parker adheres to the bebop tradition of displaying his own virtuosity: his improvisation is filled with rapid, double-time licks that travel up and down the range of the instrument. This type of playing is not intended to produce an accessible melody; instead, it is utilized to show off the performer’s abilities. Davis, on the other hand, follows Parker with a much more subdued solo that can hardly be considered virtuosic. He relies entirely on steady eighth notes, deviating from Parker’s rapid, note-filled lines to create simple and concise material. His solo can almost be described as lyrical; it sounds as though Davis is seeking to improvise a melody that listeners might walk away singing in their heads.

In many of Davis’s recordings with the Charlie Parker Quintet, this contrast to Parker’s technical prowess becomes part of the trumpeter’s signature sound. “Billie’s Bounce,” from the same 1945 session, features Parker soloing over four choruses and making use of his trademark improvisational patterns. Each line becomes a display of technical ability, and Parker adeptly mixes double-time passages with triplet figures and wide leaps from beginning to end. When Davis responds with his own solo, he improvises for just two choruses, and the material he provides sounds pared-down when compared with Parker’s. Davis plays numerous series of repeated notes, stays within a comfortable range, and relies on eighth notes and long tones instead of the quick double-time passages that Parker previously employs. In this and other recordings—including tunes such as “Yardbird Suite” and “Scrapple from the Apple”—Davis has a tendency to sound “out of his element,” playing solos that lack the rhythmic and mechanical complexity of traditional bebop improvisation.

While there is some debate regarding whether or not Davis lacked the technical mastery

⁹ Shipton, 472.

to compete with Parker's ability, one acquires a better sense of Davis's true virtuosity from his solos on Quintet recordings of "The Hymn" and "Bird Gets the Worm." During each of these tunes, Davis matches Parker's complex improvisation with rapid solos of his own, navigating through a flurry of notes that demonstrate his ability to keep up with the fast tempo. While he never quite reaches the uppermost register of the trumpet, it is still evident that he possessed the technical proficiency to compete with the most skilled bebop improvisers. The implication, then, is that Davis's contrasting approach to improvisation was deliberate. Such intent is made clear by his own recollection of a 1946 recording session: "I remember playing with a mute on that date so I would sound less like Dizzy. But even with the mute I still sounded like him. I was mad with myself, because I wanted to sound like myself."¹⁰ While Parker and Gillespie sought to highlight their own virtuosity, Davis broke away from the traditional bebop approach in exchange for performing more melodic and lyrical solos.

Hard Bop: The Evolution of Jazz in the 1950s

Bebop had revolutionized the jazz scene of the 1940s. Whereas jazz musicians previously performed in big bands as audiences danced to their favorite swing tunes, bebop was performer-centered—the product of skilled musicians who wanted to push their own playing ability. Unfortunately, this type of music began to turn away audiences, being far less accessible than its predecessor of the 1920s. One reason for waning interest was simple: no one could dance to bebop. Tempos were too quick, rhythms were complex, melodies were difficult to sing, and tunes lacked the comfort of repetition and predictability. Bebop ultimately called for audiences to *listen*, rather than simply "feel" the music, and it challenged listeners to actively recognize a soloist's ability to improvise over a series of chord changes. Forced to hear such long stretches of

¹⁰ Davis, 90.

improvisation—during which the familiarity of a favorite melody was entirely absent—audiences began to lose interest.¹¹ They wanted a break from the challenge of appreciating bebop and a return to the toe-tapping, groove-oriented feel that had made the swing era so popular.

Hard Bop: A Response to Bebop

Hard bop was the answer to bebop audiences' woes in the early 1950s. At its core, hard bop was a musical style that pared down the complexity of bebop in an attempt to popularize jazz once again in mainstream culture. The first step in this process was to slow down the average tempo of each composition. Deviating drastically from the rapid two-hundred-beats-per-minute of 1940s jazz, hard bop tunes were performed at a more moderate pace that allowed improvisers to play in a relaxed style.¹² Such a significant shift paved the way for one of hard bop's most important features: simple, catchy melodies. Whereas bebop melodies sounded highly improvisatory, hard bop composers sought to develop more memorable tunes that listeners could walk away humming. In a 2000 interview with Alyn Shipton, pianist and composer Horace Silver explained, "I try to write the kind of music that, when I play a new tune, has the kind of simplicity and depth that people will go home singing, and carry with them."¹³ This trend of more recognizable melodies was evident in Davis's music throughout the decade; his 1954 recording of "Bags' Groove," for instance, is characterized by a single short phrase that repeats three times to comprise the entire main melody.

One necessary development conducive to simpler tunes was a lessening of harmonic complexity. If melodies consisted of straightforward—often repeated—figures, the underlying chords needed to be pared down to match the accessibility of the tune. Hard bop saw a marked

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195-96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 257.

¹³ Shipton, 489.

shift from the bebop trend of changing chords every two beats to a new pattern of maintaining a single chord over the course of one, two, or four measures. In this setting, the goal was no longer to challenge soloists with complex harmonies; instead, improvisers had the opportunity to develop lyrical lines that listeners would not struggle to comprehend. Hard bop players abandoned their previous emphasis on mere virtuosity in exchange for creating more accessible material with each solo.

Miles Davis in the Hard Bop Era

In 1952, Davis was back home in St. Louis, where he found himself searching for work in the midst of a growing heroin addiction that had hindered his productivity for the previous three years. He managed to book recording sessions with Blue Note and Prestige for the first half of the following year, and although Davis's drug habit would prevent him from creating any landmark material at this time, the early 1953 sessions heralded important developments in his move away from bebop. Most notably, Davis's solos were uncluttered, as though he was more interested in drawing emotion from each note than unleashing as many licks as would fit into a single take. Many of the tunes were set in a minor mode; this was an overt contrast to the lighthearted, major modality of bop tunes. Melodies were simpler, employing fewer chord changes than the conventionally quick harmonic progressions of bebop, and the overall mood adopted a more pensive nature. Leonard Feather provides a clear description of Davis's solos when he states that "the soaring spurts of lyrical exultancy are outnumbered by the somber moments of pensive gloom."¹⁴

For Davis, hard bop was immediately appealing for its tendency toward accessible melodies and fewer harmonic changes. While his lyrical solos had frequently sounded out-of-

¹⁴ Rosenthal, 29.

place alongside the complex tunes and rapid chord changes of bebop, the jazz style of the 1950s was more appropriately adapted to his improvisational approach. The simple melodies of hard bop eliminated the expectation of purely virtuosic solos, allowing Davis to subtly expand upon melodies with spontaneous material of his own. Furthermore, the reduced complexity of chord changes meant that soloists no longer had to play rapid lines to keep up with shifting harmonies; instead, they could develop slower, more tuneful material on top of just a few simple chords. These two factors—accessible melodies and fewer harmonic changes—were the most ideal match yet for Davis’s playing style. It is little wonder, then, that Davis recorded some of hard bop’s most quintessential albums in the 1950s while moving inexorably toward his own innovative style: modal jazz, which he would develop at the end of the decade.

The First Intimations of Modal Jazz

Miles Davis pioneered modal jazz with the 1959 release of *Kind of Blue*, and yet Davis’s improvisational style more than a decade earlier suggested that he was already searching for a jazz setting that abandoned the complexity of bebop and permitted musicians to create more melodic solos. Modal jazz has previously been described by its two most prominent traits: unchanging harmonies and improvisation based on entire scales. Although *Kind of Blue* was the first album to fully embody this musical style, intimations of modal jazz can be found in several of Davis’s recordings from the hard bop era. Such early examples of modality paved the way for his work on *Kind of Blue*.

On March 6, 1954, Davis played a session for Blue Note with pianist Horace Silver, bassist Percy Heath, and drummer Art Blakey. Included in the day’s recordings were two tracks, “Take-Off” and “The Leap,” that each exhibit subtle tendencies toward modal jazz. In the six-measure “A” section of “Take-Off,” Davis utilizes a pedal point, in which the bass plays the

same repeated note regardless of changing harmonies in the piano. “The Leap” features a more overt pedal point, lasting sixteen full measures. The effect of this technique is to create a sense of static harmony.¹⁵ While both of these tunes ultimately give way to traditional-sounding chord progressions, their brief moments of unchanging harmony hint at the unique harmonic approach that would eventually characterize modal jazz.

L’Ascenseur pour L’Échafaud

In November 1957, Davis was invited to play a series of gigs in Paris with a traveling pick-up group. While in the city, Davis received an offer to record background music for a new film, *L’Ascenseur pour L’Échafaud* (*Lift to the Scaffold*). He took the job, excited at the prospect of exploring a new musical foray. The setting for the soundtrack would be different from anything he had recorded previously, for it was completely improvised by a small group. While the result may sound like a series of incomplete musical “sketches,”¹⁶ this was the most significant turning point in Davis’s journey toward modal jazz so far.

Coming on the heels of his most recent hard bop albums, the *Scaffold* recordings sounded entirely new. The music was improvised as Davis watched film clips, and, as a composer of background music, Davis recognized that his goal was to create an atmosphere rather than produce a series of catchy melodies. Such attention to ambience, combined with the experimental nature of the entire project, prompted Davis to take a very different approach in the studio. Most notably, he discovered that pieces could be recorded without “formally written themes nor any real harmonic movement.”¹⁷ For many of the tracks, the only predetermined factors were tempo and tonal center—a single note that the music would consistently emphasize.

¹⁵ Carr, 53-54.

¹⁶ Carr, 84-85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

This approach resulted in the kinds of static harmonies that would characterize modal jazz two years later. There are obvious modal tendencies here, including tracks “hovering ambiguously around [the keys of] D minor and F.”¹⁸ While he had previously used pedal points in his recordings from 1954, this was Davis’s first experimentation with static harmonies throughout an entire piece.

“Milestones”

Upon his return from Paris, Davis hired saxophonist Cannonball Adderley to join his quintet, and the band quickly began working on its newest album.¹⁹ Coltrane immediately noticed the effect the *Scaffold* recordings had had on the bandleader:

On returning . . . I found Miles in the midst of another stage of his musical development. There was one time in his past that he devoted to multi-chorded structures. He was interested in chords for their own sake. But now it seemed that he was moving in the opposite direction to the use of fewer and fewer chord changes in songs.²⁰

This new direction found its place on the sextet’s first album, *Milestones*, recorded in April 1958. Comprised entirely of tunes composed by Davis or his close friends, the most noteworthy track from the session is “Milestones”—the first fully-fledged modal jazz tune that would set the stage for *Kind of Blue* the following year. Abandoning the tradition of complex chord progressions, “Milestones” is based on just two harmonies. In this setting, Davis calls for players to think, not in terms of three- or four-note chords, but rather of entire seven-note scales.²¹ With this approach, soloists are free to develop melodic material without having to worry about harmonic progression. Davis’s philosophy behind the two-chord structure of “Milestones” is best characterized by a statement he made to Nat Hentoff: “You can go on

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 91, 93.

forever. You don't have to worry about changes and you can do more with the line. It becomes a challenge to see how melodically inventive you are."²²

Porgy and Bess

The summer of 1958 found Davis collaborating with long-time friend Gil Evans, a jazz composer and arranger who had worked with Davis on the *Birth of the Cool* album in 1949.²³ This time around, Davis and Evans planned to record an orchestral album consisting of excerpts from Gershwin's opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Recording sessions took place in July and August, with Davis playing muted trumpet and flugelhorn in front of a large orchestral ensemble.²⁴

Elements of modality are immediately present on several tracks. In "Prayer," there are no modulations or forward-moving harmonies; the piece is simply set in one key, Bb minor. The tune also begins without a clearly defined sense of tempo, allowing Davis to play freely throughout the introduction and improvise a melodic line before the ensemble joins at the peak of his solo.²⁵

There are other tendencies toward modal jazz on the album, as well. Davis explained Evans' approach to "I Loves You Porgy":

We only used two chords for all of that. . . . [W]hen Gil wrote the arrangement for "I Loves You Porgy," he wrote only a scale for me to play. No chords. And that other passage with two chords gives you a lot more freedom and space to hear things.²⁶

Similarly, on "Summertime," Evans penned an extended section of static harmony. Davis explained that "there is a long space where we don't change the chord at all."²⁷ At this stage in his career, it was evident that Davis was consistently searching for ways to employ the static

²² Shipton, 484.

²³ Carr, 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

²⁶ Shipton, 483.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

harmonies that would come to characterize modal jazz. By the time he arrived at the *Kind of Blue* sessions in 1959, he would have the modal concept fully formulated for his new album.

Kind of Blue and Modal Jazz

Miles Davis entered the studio on March 2, 1959 for one of two recording sessions that would culminate in the first “true” modal jazz album. Completed just over a month later,²⁸ *Kind of Blue* consists of five tracks, each of which adheres to the modal concept through its use of static harmonies and scale-based improvisation. More importantly, Davis’s underlying goal of melodic freedom is made evident by the diverse improvisational approach taken by each member of the band. Davis’s solos throughout the album are both simple and accessible, utilizing basic rhythmic ideas to generate memorable, tuneful material; Coltrane’s improvisation, meanwhile, is more complex, contrasting Davis’s style with rapid runs and unpredictable flurries of notes. Cannonball Adderley offers yet another approach, incorporating time-tested bebop licks that hint at the music of the 1940s. While each of these improvisational concepts contrasts the others, they are all valid approaches in modal jazz setting, where melodic freedom is both permitted and encouraged.

For Davis, this was the culmination of the path he had been following since the bebop era. Although Charlie Parker had recruited him as a foil to the saxophonist’s own virtuosic style, bebop ultimately held no place for Davis’s thoughtful, melodic solos. He needed new ground to explore his idea of melodic improvisation—an approach entirely at odds with the conventional method of playing over complex, rapid chord changes. Modal jazz, with its emphasis on static harmonies and scale-based improvisation, offered a chance to escape the confines of traditional harmonic progression that had characterized jazz for nearly four decades. *Kind of Blue* was the

²⁸ Nisenson, 156.

ultimate realization of Davis's desire for melodic freedom. It was the first album to fully embody modal jazz, and it provided an ideal setting for the style of improvisation that Davis had exhibited since he began his musical journey.

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