

The Birth of New Jazz

How Progressive Musical Ideas Influenced Jazz Beyond its Sonic Elements

By Julian Yang

INTRODUCTION

The authenticity of many art forms has been contested in history. African-Americans, in particular, have had their roots lost in the expansion to wider audiences, seen during the height of Jim Crow and segregation. Rock n' Roll, which started as a genre rooted in black musicians, became commercialized by white artists and audiences, stripping its beginnings of African-American musicians. The exploitation of artists reflected a greater theme of segregation and racism, as Rock n' Roll captivated a young and rebellious generation of white Americans. As a result, the era of Rock n' Roll is mostly represented by the works of Elvis Presley instead of Chuck Berry.

Similar to Rock n' Roll, a melting-pot of genres emerged from African American musicians: jazz. Noted by its swing and syncopation, complex harmonies, and improvisation,¹ jazz adapted to maintain its black roots, even when threatened with marginalization within and outside of the community. As jazz developed through the decades of the twentieth century, the

¹ Alan, Stanbridge. "Jazz" In *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*. Vol. VIII. New York: The Continuum International, 2012.

shifts in sonic components revealed differing interpretations of the genre's base elements.² In the mid-1940s, for example, early bebop musicians began to create a more exclusive style of jazz in response to the commercialization of the Swing era. In the 1950s, however, jazz took a turn away from bebop, influenced both by sonic ideas and the greater social context of race. This new era birthed the first use of loose structure and heavily contrasted the fast-paced nature of the previous era. Although the extent of influence is debated, the novel approaches to jazz in the albums *Kind of Blue*, *Time Out*, and *Mingus Ah Um* reflected the Civil Rights Movement within the jazz community and the greater context of the United States through its integrationist symbolism, repopularization with audiences, and political involvement.

JAZZ IN CONTEXT

The United States faced two worlds of culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. First was the Eurocentric traditional form of culture. This idea of culture stemmed from the colonialist product which “craved order, stability, and definition”.³ Jazz, on the other hand, emerged as a representation of new culture, not only by stepping out of America's imperialist past, but also by emphasizing distinctively American values. While traditional classical music focused on the composer, jazz focused on the performer.⁴ This idea of individuality would prevail during the Civil Rights Movement as black musicians expanded their freedoms of expression.

² Stanbridge, “Jazz”

³ Levine, Lawrence W. “Jazz and American Culture.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 403 (1989): 8. <https://doi.org/10.2307/540078>

⁴ Levine, “Jazz and American Culture” 8

While it is impossible to pinpoint a distinguishable “start” to jazz, jazz can be better understood and interpreted by its eras, noted by their distinct sonic differences. In the Swing era of the 1930s, characterized by big bands and the heightening interest of white audiences, jazz was seen as nothing more than dance music.⁵ The increased reliance of written music and melodic structure in performance, as well as having a single bandleader conducting the ensemble, reminisced classical music traditions. However, talented musicians within big bands were constrained by this structure, as impressive solos could lead to them signing bigger, desirable deals. In an effort to appease their musicians and thus prevent their band from suffering, conductors would stretch out more solo opportunities for their skilled musicians to express their virtuosity. Despite this, solo time was minimal on 78-rpm records. Musicians realized the only chance they had of standing out was to develop a following and be discovered by record companies.⁶ More ambitious artists began experimenting with new ways of soloing, using jazz’s natural reliance on self-expression to transform syncopated dance music into individualistic statements.⁷

Bebop, born from experimentation in small groups or combos, took a different form of musical style as compared to its predecessor. While many fundamental traits of bebop such as swing drum rhythms, a walking bassline, and solo improvisation remained consistent with earlier forms of jazz, bebop pushed jazz to new limits with rapid tempos, emphasis

⁵ Messinger, Colin M. “How Bebop Came to Be: The Early History of Modern Jazz,” 2013., 1.

⁶ Myers, Marc. *Why Jazz Happened*. Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2012., 12.

⁷ Myers, Marc. *Why Jazz Happened*. 12

on chord extensions, and complex heads, or melodies.⁸ In addition to contrasting the Swing era's sonic components, bebop also pushed against the commercialization of jazz, recrediting African American musicians for their musical expertise and skill.⁹ Although bebop was favored among the musicians that performed it, its public reception was not as favorable.¹⁰ The use of heroin among musicians made it hard to promote, and racial discrimination meant that many East Coast record companies were not willing to record unless white musicians were involved.¹¹ Furthermore, unlike swing, bebop was not meant to be popular music – its emphasis on technique catered to the musicians who played instead of the audience who listened.

As bebop's popularity grew, the style began to slowly lose the qualities of being sonically revolutionary and exclusive that it once possessed. More jazz musicians became familiar with the style and recorded it, making bebop less exclusive than when it was first developed.¹² Just like the transition out of the swing era, bebop musicians, such as trumpeter Miles Davis, began finding newer and extreme ways to push jazz forward. Not only would this new style contrast bebop sonically, but it would also include the social change happening around it.

KIND OF BLUE

No other album by Miles Davis can be considered as iconic as *Kind of Blue* – the best-selling jazz record of all time. Marked by its calmy mellowness, *Kind of Blue* pushed jazz away

⁸ Robinson, Jason. "Bebop (Bop)." In *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*. Vol. VIII. New York: The Continuum International, 2012.

⁹ Gerard, Charley. *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998. 84

¹⁰ Messinger, "How Bebop Came to Be: The Early History of Modern Jazz". 9

¹¹ Messinger, "How Bebop Came to Be: The Early History of Modern Jazz". 9

¹² Myers, Marc. *Why Jazz Happened*. 43

from the up-tempo and complex styles of bebop and hard bop. Instead of using defined chord changes, Davis experimented with a new form of improvisation based on scales and modes.¹³ This departure is clear right from the opening track, “So What”. Starting with a free-flowing, non-structured interaction between bass and piano, it is not immediately clear where the piece is going. As this uncertainty builds, the bass cuts in with the “call” riff, followed by the “response” amen chords. Instead of being bounded by chord changes, the soloist only needs to follow modal scales, in this case D dorian for the “A” and Eb dorian for the “B”.

Such harmonic simplicity gave the soloist options that had not previously existed in jazz. Soloists could focus on tonality and sound, rather than be locked into a certain chord progression. The broadened range of approach is distinguishable in each of the solos in “So What.” Miles Davis is expressive and melodic, marking simple 4 bar or 8 bar phrases. John Coltrane is more vivid, bringing in some past influences of bebop through scalar and arpeggiated patterns, as well as playing faster consecutive notes familiar to his 1960 recording “Giant Steps.” Cannonball Adderly echoes Coltrane’s influence in his verses, progressing through his own structure of implied chord progressions.¹⁴

Although novel, modal jazz was not necessarily a “revolutionary” idea when compared to bebop. Rather, it was more of a shift in thinking, from vertical to horizontal-oriented. *Kind of Blue* was not an integration of musical styles, but was, as Samuel Barrett describes, a “bricolage of elements drawn from various musical styles”.¹⁵ For example, pianist Bill Evans drew

¹³ Barrett, Samuel. “‘Kind of Blue’ and the Economy of Modal Jazz.” *Popular Music* 25, no. 2 (May 2006). 187

¹⁴ Barrett, “‘Kind of Blue’ and the Economy of Modal Jazz”. 195

¹⁵ Barrett, “‘Kind of Blue’ and the Economy of Modal Jazz”. 196

classical influences in chord voicings, while Davis pulled inspiration from Gospel traditions and Spanish folk music.¹⁶

Kind of Blue, being the only jazz record to go double platinum, contrasted the social ideals from the previous era of bebop. Symbolically, *Kind of Blue's* sonic elements represent a new beginning, filled with hope in the utopian vision of integrating high and low, European and American, black and white. The album transforms the blues to co-exist with the European-American musical languages brought by Bill Evans, but it does not succeed with its goal of integration. Combining the blues, a style born purely from African-Americans, with modal jazz dilutes the album to be presented for America as a whole to align with multiple music styles.¹⁷ The dangers of this approach mimic what happened with rock n' roll: a style enjoyed by European-American audiences, forgetting its black roots. That being said, reviving the blues to a more easily understood form helped ingrain the *idea* of integration and appreciation, ultimately brewing the start of the Civil Rights Movement. Such choices had not been previously tried in jazz. The resulting popularity of the album signals both the successes of Davis' artistic creativity and the movement of utopian-integration to measurable action.

Kind of Blue's legacy extends beyond its musical ideas. Symbolizing the social change that so many jazz musicians previously desired, the album reshuffled jazz's role in everyday America. *Kind of Blue* expanded the outreach of jazz, putting the genre on the map for those who had never listened previously. Miles Davis, however, would not be the only influential figure in the cause. Developing on the West Coast was another jazz musician looking to break sonic boundaries using a similar method of integration and influence.

¹⁶ Barrett, "'Kind of Blue' and the Economy of Modal Jazz". 196

¹⁷ Barrett, "'Kind of Blue' and the Economy of Modal Jazz". 197

TIME OUT

Up to this point in jazz, ragtime, swing, and bebop, jazz had been written in 4/4 time. This dictated phrasing is done in multiples of 4 in both melody and improvisation. Dave Brubeck, a California-based jazz pianist, had just returned from a trip around Soviet Europe under the Jazz Ambassadors program, and was exposed to a vast number of new local folk styles along the way. Much of the traditional music he heard did not conform to the “common time” that existed in jazz and Western classical music. For example, Brubeck’s Turkish-inspired “Blue Rondo a la Turk” redefines the familiar 9/8 signature by changing the emphasis of the downbeat, grouping three paired eighth notes and one group of three eighth notes instead of the classical three groups of three eighth notes.

This new idea of time would become the centerpiece of Brubeck’s album *Time Out*. Each track on the record would feature a different tempo and time signature. *Time Out*’s third track, “Take Five,” featured an unusual 5/4 quintuple time signature, one rarely seen in both jazz and classical music. Joe Morello’s drum groove serves as the backbone of the piece, with Brubeck’s piano vamp subdividing the measure into one part three beats and one part two beats. It took saxophonist Paul Desmond’s writing to transform Brubeck’s idea into a song: “Take Five.” What elevated the song was not Desmond’s playing, but Morello’s rhythmic improvisation on the drums. Morello keeps a steady 5/4 feel with the aid of Brubeck’s piano vamp, while experimenting on top of the groove. He contrasts the smoothness of cymbals with the sharp interjection of the snare before dropping the cymbals entirely and coloring his solo with toms and rolls. Harmony-wise, Brubeck employed the same idea as *Kind of Blue*’s modal jazz, keeping solos over the Eb dorian mode and focusing on rhythm instead of sound.

“Take Five” was one of the most popular songs on *Time Out* and helped the record climb to number two on Billboard in 1961 and become the first jazz record to sell over 1 million copies. While the rhythmic originality caught listeners’ ears, Brubeck’s appeal found new audiences for jazz, as he was the epitome of middle-class America. At the same time, there was growing resentment for Brubeck among black musicians for “diluting black music into mass consumption.”¹⁸ However, the nature of his performances was key in the social spread of jazz. Unlike black musicians, Brubeck was able to perform in venues jazz had not previously touched – most importantly, college campuses.

In January 1960, Brubeck made headlines after twenty-two colleges and universities disallowed his racially integrated group to perform.¹⁹ While some schools asked him to replace black bassist Eugene Wright, Brubeck refused, denying what is worth \$400,000 in revenue today. In a performance at East Carolina College, Brubeck was told they could perform only if he put Wright in the background. This agreement was unbeknownst to Wright, so when Brubeck called Wright to take a solo in the front of the band, he went. Brubeck’s efforts put both Wright and himself in positions as activists, something black musicians could not have done.

Brubeck’s cancellation of concerts represented a new musical and promotional approach – he was able to voice his anger while maintaining a non-threatening image.²⁰ Additionally, his new approaches to jazz appealed directly to the tastes of his listeners and pushed for musical integration. Such actions forced institutions like East Carolina College to

¹⁸ Bernays, Paul. 1959: *The Year That Changed Jazz*. Documentary. BBC, 2009, 16:30

¹⁹ Klotz, Kelsey A. K. “Dave Brubeck’s Southern Strategy.” *Daedalus* 148, no. 2 (April 2019): 52.

²⁰ Klotz, “Dave Brubeck’s Southern Strategy.” 61.

reconsider their discriminatory policies and exposed audiences to civil rights ideas directly. Brubeck was not alone in his method of protest through music and performance. Other jazz musicians would become much more directly involved in the movement.

MINGUS AH UM

Bassist and composer Charles Mingus decided to take jazz forward differently than Brubeck and Davis. Playing in the bands with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker, Mingus viewed jazz as not a history or future of styles, but a present “now”.²¹ Complementing this unorthodox perspective was Mingus’ personality: a hot tempered and highly opinionated “angry man” of jazz,²² unaccepted by both white and black for being born mixed race. The resulting pieces written by Mingus reflected this conflict of identity, heard on the record *Mingus Ah Um*. Unlike *Kind of Blue* and *Time Out*, *Mingus Ah Um* did not fit a particular sonic theme. Rather, it was an amalgamation of past, present and future, representing what jazz music could convey. This approach to jazz enabled both singular and collective improvisation to work within a structure.²³

Emotionally charged, the seventh track of *Mingus Ah Um*, “Fables of Faubus” encompasses every bit of Mingus’ way of thinking. Unlike other black musicians protesting the racial injustices at the time, Mingus chose not to display rage in his music and instead turn to mockery. Mingus attacked Orval Faubus, the Democrat Arkansas governor, who acted against federal orders in desegregating public schools by calling the state’s national guard to block nine black students from

²¹ Bernays, 1959: *The Year That Changed Jazz*. 20:39

²² Bernays, 1959: *The Year That Changed Jazz*. 26:30

²³ John F. Goodman. “Mingus Ah Um.” Library of Congress, 2003, 2.

entering Central High School in Little Rock. U.S. President Eisenhower and Governor Faubus discussed the situation over 18 days,²⁴ but to no avail. Although reluctant to send in federal troops to enforce desegregation, Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division to protect the nine students entering the school. The next year, after being reelected, Faubus closed all of Little Rock's public high schools in an attempt to exploit the loophole in the ruling of the Supreme Court, as it did not apply to private education. In "Fables of Faubus," Mingus directly references the Little Rock Nine in a vocal exchange: "Name me someone who's ridiculous, Dannie / Governor Faubus! / Why is he so sick and ridiculous? / He won't permit integrated schools." Mingus' construction of the melody utilizes sonic power to convey his message. The main horn line is dissonant yet catchy, leaving the listener with a feeling of uneasiness. Moving into the solo section, the structure breaks down with free-flowing grooves of piano, bass, drums, and horns. Both the melody and solo sections have a lack of resolution and clearness in common. Although "Fables of Faubus" was included on *Mingus Ah Um*, Columbia Records refused to allow the words on the song to be included. Only the instrumental was published onto the record, taking away some of the punch written in the words.²⁵ A re-recording of the track would eventually be published in 1960 on the record *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*.

Mingus' breakdown of the hierarchy of instruments combined with the limits of time, groove, and note choice that existed in previous jazz allowed collective improvisation instead of being "confined to a series of solo statements."²⁶ Put into the context of civil rights activism, Mingus' sonic choices

²⁴ Jaynes, Gerlad. "Little Rock Nine." Encyclopedia Britannica, March 11, 2020.

²⁵ Goodman, "Mingus Ah Um," 2.

²⁶ Hersch, Charles. "'Let Freedom Ring!': Free Jazz and African-American Politics." *Cultural Critique*, no. 32 (1995): 105.

reflect the movement of African-Americans to be liberated of social confinements and integrated into America. Mingus was never a big advocate for “free jazz,” nor did he associate himself with the movement. However, Mingus brought elements of free jazz in his protest songs, bringing the idea of individual expression into a greater thought of group solidarity.

While Mingus did not see jazz as having a time reference, “Fables of Faubus” serves as the “future” part of *Mingus Ah Um*. This politically-charged style would shape the evolution of jazz in a time of heavy civil rights activism.

LINKING THE BRIDGE

The extent to which progressive jazz influenced the Civil Rights Movement remains hotly contended. Mark Gridley argues that it is incorrect to assume that “the African Americans striving for political freedoms also transferred those strivings to originate musical approaches,” and that “angry sounding music was a direct result of avant-garde musicians using jazz as a tool of personal protest toward social injustices.”²⁷ There is a difference, as Gridley points out, between correlation and causation: ideas of progressive jazz existed a decade before the Civil Rights Movement, when bebop was still at its peak popularity. The evolution of jazz, like bebop musicians at the end of the swing era, simply happened to line up with the birth of the Civil Rights Movement as Davis, Brubeck, and Mingus represented chord-based improvisers “intentionally abandoning prearrangement in order to provide themselves with fresh formats of approach.”²⁸ Audience

²⁷ Gridley, Mark. “Misconceptions in Linking Free Jazz with the Civil Rights Movement.” *College Music Symposium* 47 (2007): 139

²⁸ Gridley, “Misconceptions in Linking Free Jazz with the Civil Rights Movement,” 144.

subjectivity comes when labeling this musical expression as symbolic of the Civil Rights Movement because of the relative ease of discussing and understanding socio-political forces rather than individual creativity.²⁹

Where Gridley's argument fails is at the literal interpretation of jazz and history. Although novel jazz may not have *directly* caused or influenced the Civil Rights Movement, the subconscious motives of the time point to a reflection of the time period. Brian Harker distinguishes the fact that musicians did not create progressive jazz "consciously and deliberately to protest racial injustice."³⁰ Moreover, just because "free" jazz existed before the Civil Rights Movement does not mean that it was not influenced by the events happening at the time. Most of the early experimenters in free jazz were white musicians and had no impact on black musicians who would later have significant influences on the movement.

Miles Davis may not have intended to directly symbolize political freedom and integration with *Kind of Blue*, but the underlying motives, conscious or not, point to this message. Artists, especially musicians, are hardly unbiased about their own work, do not always reveal their true intentions, and do not care where their ideas come from.³¹ Freedom and self-expression in black musicians was more prevalent in the 1960s than any other time in history. Common sense would suggest the reinforcement of these values in the fight for desegregation bridges the two movements together.

Any form of art can be interpreted to symbolize unease and societal dissonance. Some may be more explicit and

²⁹ Gridley, "Misconceptions in Linking Free Jazz with the Civil Rights Movement," 155.

³⁰ Harker, Brian. "In Defense of Context in Jazz History: A Response to Mark Gridley." *College Music Symposium* 48 (2008): 158

³¹ Harker, "In Defense of Context in Jazz History: A Response to Mark Gridley," 159.

obvious than others; “Fables of Faubus” clearly states how Charles Mingus viewed the Little Rock Nine incident, whereas “So What” focused on integrating new musical elements into jazz. Regardless of the artists’ intentions, these albums and styles gave voice for political concerns in the black community. Even if Davis, Brubeck, and Mingus were not sonically moved by the changing society, their actions and personalities outside of their music would have profound influences on the civil rights movement.

Jazz’s increased appeal at the beginning of the civil rights movement provided a culture where individuality and collectivism were unable to exist on their own. Musicians could focus on showcasing their own technicality while blending and playing with others at the same time. Progressive ideas tapped into not only the existing potential of jazz to become a leading force in the civil rights movement, but also allowed musicians and activists to increase the outreach of their goals.

CONCLUSION

Jazz emphasized individuality, expression, and creativity – values that would come to fruition during the Civil Rights Movement. Originating as a black art form, jazz broke racial borders long before segregation would be legally abolished. Although its role changed with musical evolution, jazz provided black artists with a voice when the law tried to silence them. The records *Kind of Blue*, *Time Out*, and *Mingus Ah Um* presented novel ideas that changed jazz sonically in addition to influencing the Civil Rights movement through its integrationist ideals, expansion in audience, and direct political inspiration. These records would stand the test of time, with their popularity enduring amongst jazz and non-jazz listeners alike. The avenue of musical freedom would go on to inspire other genres.

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