A study of Miles Davis’s solo on ‘So What’ from the 1959 album Kind of Blue
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Introduction
This paper provides an analysis of the lyrical qualities of Miles Davis’s trumpet solo on the composition ‘So What’, from his 1959 album Kind of Blue. In addition, it reviews the importance of Davis as a musical creator and pioneer, and attempts to place ‘So What’ in context, by looking at the similarities and differences in Davis’s previous and subsequent work. The paper also examines the style and manner in which Davis solos, to determine how these factors bring about a ‘lyrical’ feel to his performances, and it speculates as to why Davis finds it comfortable to solo in this way, or indeed if he consciously chose to implement this method at all.

Davis: before and after ‘So What’
Ten years prior to recording Kind of Blue, Davis was working in a very different musical arena. Miles Davis (1926-1991) hit the jazz scene in the mid 1940s (between 1945 and 1948) as part of the bebop wave, most notably alongside jazz great, Charlie Parker (1920-1955) at a time when the young Davis was barely out of his teens. As Charlie Parker rose through the ranks to become jazz’s leading light throughout the 1940s Davis found a place in his working band and gained invaluable experience playing and recording alongside him. André Hodeir, who founded the Jazz Groupe de Paris in 1954, says of the pair: ‘Miles Davis is the only trumpeter who could give to Parker’s music that intimate quality in which lies a considerable part of its charm’ (Berendt 1992, 103).

By the late 1940s and early 50s, Parker was experimenting in different genres. A notable avenue of this period was the playing of beautiful, and often haunting, arrangements performed with a small string section. However, his drug abuse and turbulent lifestyle had taken its toll and during his later years Parker became increasingly difficult to work with. By 1948 Davis had left Parker’s side and, as would be the case throughout his extensive career, was looking for a new direction in which to take his music.

‘Now’s the Time’
Other similarities with the Davis sound from ‘So What’ and his earlier work can be found on the Charlie Parker track ‘Now’s the Time’ (1946). Davis solos for twenty-four bars in ‘Now’s the Time’ from one minute forty-five to two minutes thirty and, as with ‘So What’, he never strays far from a
comfortable aural vocal range, even when taking his turn after Parker’s relaxed, yet often rapid, soloing.

The extent of Davis’s work is less difficult to put into context now that his catalogue of work can be viewed as a whole, easily dissected and examined. Simplistically, one could represent Davis’s musical legacy as 40s bebop, 50s cool, 60s ‘the second great quintet’, 70s fusion, and so on. But this could only serve to underplay his work. To draw a comparison: The Beatles produced thirteen albums over a period of seven years. To Davis, such a time span would simply have been one of the many ‘stages’ in his career. Of course, Davis is a solo artist and The Beatles were a group, affected by internal group politics and disputes. Yet, in terms of Davis’s output, one can easily recognise the sheer volume and variety of his work. Davis did not, however, simply ‘hijack’ a movement; he was often directly involved in shaping it.

During the years after the recording and release of Kind of Blue, Davis was involved with a group that was to become known, at least in terms of Davis’s legacy, as the ‘second great quintet’. The group was together between 1965 and 1968 and consisted of Wayne Shorter (tenor saxophone), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass) and Tony Williams (drums). Albums that this group recorded were: Miles Smiles (1966), Sorcerer (1967), Nefertiti (1967) and Miles in the Sky (1968). As stated on the official Miles Davis website, Miles in the Sky was the first piece to use a Fender Rhodes Electric Piano and also the first to incorporate ‘[...] funk into the band’s rhythmic palate.’ (milesdavis.com, 2010)

Most significantly, a decade after Kind of Blue was made, during three days in August 1969, Davis recorded ‘Bitches Brew’ and it was released as a double record album in 1970. With the title track totaling twenty-six minutes and fifty-nine seconds, it was apparent from the record’s rejection of all that had previously gone before, that this was the next installment in Davis’s musical journey.

‘So What’
‘So What’ is a simple figure based on 16 measures of one scale, 8 of another and 8 more of the first, following a piano and bass introduction in free rhythmic style (Evans in Kahn 2001, 111)

The musicians who joined Davis in recording ‘So What’ were: Paul Chambers (double bass), John Coltrane (tenor saxophone), Julian ‘Cannonball’ Adderley (alto saxophone), Jimmy Cobb (drums) and
Bill Evans (piano). When one considers the musical talent ‘So What’ incorporated, with a line up such as this, it is perhaps easier to understand how it became such a significant piece.

The lyrical qualities of ‘So What’
After the introduction of ‘So What’ by Evans and Chambers, the now-popular melodic line is played by the bass and answered, in unison, by the horns. This effect appears to both herald traditional jazz routes, by using the call-and-response technique, and to introduce the new modal sound. The fact that Davis used the call and response technique suggests that he is well aware of, and grounded in, the medium which, although he is attempting to advance, he is working within. From the start the record is an amalgamation of traditional styles and avant-garde ideas.

‘So What’ begins in the mode of D Dorian, where it remains for sixteen bars until it arrives at the semitone step up, into Eb Dorian, where it continues for eight bars. After the piece resolves to D Dorian for the remaining eight bars of the first cycle, Davis commences his solo, which occurs between one minute thirty-two and three minutes twenty-six of the track.

There are differing opinions as to why Davis became the ‘lyrical’ player that he did. Jimmy Cobb, the only remaining band-member from the Columbia recording days of 1959 recalls: ‘He played nice ballads, like maybe he might [have] wanted to have been a singer, if he hadn’t picked up the trumpet’ (quoted in Kahn 2001, 35). This opinion differs from that of trumpeter Art Farmer. Farmer suggests that Davis’s limitations on his instrument, at least in terms of the company he often found himself in, were not sufficient to impress with virtuosity in the same way as, for example, a trumpeter such as Dizzy Gillespie. ‘When you’re not technically a virtuoso, you have to say something. You have no place to hide’ (Farmer quoted in Kahn 2001, 40). So instead, Davis found himself playing in a more emotional and simplistic manner. Davis thus developed, or had to develop, into what music critic John S. Wison called a ‘clean-lined, soaringly lyrical soloist.’ (Kahn 2001, 63) and a musician who, in the opinion of writer Gary Giddins, plays notes that resemble: ‘cool fat voice-like plums sustained in a siege of meditation’ (Stein Crease 2003, 189)

One of the most prevalent characteristics of Davis’s playing, that one encounters when looking at his performance on ‘So What’, is the lyrical quality of his solo trumpet playing, ‘lyrical’ in this context suggesting that the notes Davis is playing are comfortably within a human vocal range. Indeed, one could argue that, upon repeated listening, Davis’s trumpet becomes almost an expression of his voice, or a voice, rather than an expression of itself. It soon becomes
clear that ‘His influence is clearly vocal’ (Kahn 2001, 116). This is never more apparent in his work than on ‘So What’, where ‘Miles’s solo, over its almost two-minute duration, never strays far from the trumpet’s middle register, notably in the same aural range as a human voice’ (*ibid.*, 116)

To further examine the lyrical quality of Davis’s solo we can first find the vocal range, or ranges, into which the notes that Davis plays fit most comfortably. As we have read, Dizzy Gillespie suggested to Davis that he hears the ‘middle register’. Therefore, the following analysis will look at Davis’s solo with regard to his apparent tendency to play his instrument within this range and examine the notes he chooses to use.

Davis’s principle instrument, the Bb trumpet, has a standard range beginning at its bottom note of F#4, spanning two and a half octaves, to its top note of C6. The trumpet has a range of thirty-one notes, and the Bb trumpet, used by Davis, is the highest brass instrument typically used in the orchestra and jazz ensemble, although others more rarely used, such as the piccolo trumpet, are higher in pitch.

During his solo on ‘So What’, the notes that Davis uses range from Ab3 to Ab5. Regarding the range of the trumpet, Davis’s solo on ‘So What’ utilises the vast majority, reaching a depth of one tone away (Ab4) from the trumpet’s lowest note (F#4) and two tones away (Ab5) from the trumpet’s highest note (C6). Gillespie’s claim that Davis hears within the middle register of his instrument (hearing also suggesting, logically, playing), could (solely upon a cursory examination of Davis’s solo on ‘So What’), appear to be somewhat exaggerated. However, the range of notes from Davis’s solo should also be examined in terms of the frequency in which the notes occur.

During Davis’s solo, which covers the song’s head twice in succession, there are a total of sixty-four bars (demonstrating how Davis used the popular song structure of thirty two bars: itself another example of a traditional element of ‘So What’). When looking at the Dm sections of Davis’s solo, of which there are four, we can see that he never strays above G5 or below a D4. It is within the two Ebm sections that Davis reaches the peak and trough of the solo’s range, executing Ab4 and Ab6. Therefore, for seventy-five percent of the solo Davis stays between D4 and G5: D4 being four whole tones from the trumpet’s bottom note of F#4, and G5 two and a half tones from the trumpet’s highest note (C6).
Of the thirty-one different notes in a trumpet’s range there are eighteen that can be played within the mode of D Dorian (D, E, F, G, A, B and C). Within his solo on the D Dorian sections, between D5 and G6, Davis plays eleven of these notes, not quite two thirds of those he could have used, had he so wished.

So, to further examine Davis’s choice of notes we can split the thirty-one notes of the trumpet’s full standard range into three nearly equal groups: notes one to ten (F#4 to D5), notes eleven to twenty-one (E5 to D6) and notes twenty-two to thirty-one (Eb6 to C6).

Accordingly, with regards to the middle register, we are concerned with the second grouping: the notes that occur between E5 and D6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Total Notes</th>
<th>Notes in Middle Register</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D Dorian</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eb Dorian</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>73</td>
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Such a high percentage of notes falling within this middle range suggests that Davis, at least with regards this text, did indeed tend to not only hear in the middle register of his instrument, but to play in it as well. It is also of interest to discover that the range of notes that Davis uses on his solo fit almost exactly within the standard vocal range of a Mezzo Soprano: A3 to A5.

Upon regular listening to the text in question, it is apparent a further characteristic of the lyrical quality of this text is the manner in which Davis utilises pauses within the solo. For example, during the first twenty seconds of Davis’s solo there are four breaks: two of almost four beats, one of two, and one of five. This occurrence, added to the manner in which Davis remains within a human vocal range throughout, resembles to the author the natural pauses any person may take during the course of a conversation. As any wind instrumentalist requires pauses for breath, these rests are also likely to be providing Davis with this. Yet one would not consider the initial phrases of Davis’s solo lengthy enough to require many pauses for him to replenish the air in his lungs. It is more likely that Davis would be using this time to consider the notes, or the structure of the phrase that he is about to play, than using the space to breathe. Through repeated listening, this appears to be similar to Davis telling a story through speech: the piano accompaniment acting as the ‘voice’ of the other person: answering, encouraging and enquiring during the course of the conversation.
One does not imagine this element of Davis’s playing as being a conscious decision, however. From our earliest years as infants we are, more often than not, told stories by our parents and from the time we are ourselves able to talk we are constantly practising and developing this skill through conversation. Conversation itself is rhythmical and never the same twice. Davis may well have subconsciously included certain aspects of speech and story-telling in his later musical work. This aspect of the lyrical quality of Davis’s playing could possibly be a personal trait in which he regurgitated rhythms from vocal interactions, rather than a contrived decision by him to play in this manner. Furthermore, on more than one occasion Davis plays in bursts and follows these bursts with rests. This occurrence could also be viewed as having similarities with the act of speech. Davis appears to ‘talk’ through his trumpet. He expresses what he wishes to say and stops. In the following space he appears to listen: he catches his breath and then he ‘replies’. A further similarity to a lyrical style is Davis’s slower phrasing, which allows the listener to easily sing or hum along with the solo. More complicated, chromatic or rapid phrasing, such as those commonly used in bebop, would not be so easily sung.

**Davis’s solo on ‘So What’: an analysis of form**

Although the scales provided for this composition step away from the use of traditional chord changes, the solos do not, in the author’s opinion, suffer in any way from this parameter. Instead, this method of modal improvisation evokes strong solos from the members of the group. Although Davis had had experience of playing bebop with people such as Parker and Gillespie, his solo is a cool, melodic and lyrical one. In contrast to this, one can hear the Parker overtones in Adderley’s playing, where his approach is distinctly bluesy, incorporating the rapid playing of Parker. Before Adderley, Coltrane also offers a powerful, melodic and distinctive solo. Evans is the last to play over the changes, where he utters a short, chordal solo in his own relatively soft manner.

**Conclusion**

In *Kind of Blue* Davis created an album that consistently finds itself in the list of the most popular albums, not only jazz but of all time. As a piece in itself, so strong was ‘So What’s’ presence on *Kind of Blue* that it is now regarded as a jazz ‘standard’, and is often referred to as *Kind of Blue*.

We have examined how Davis played within the middle register of his instrument on ‘So What’ and how the middle range of his trumpet is within a directly comparable human vocal range. Indeed, Davis himself said how he prefers a ‘round sound ... like a round voice [...]’ (Kahn 2001, 25).
However, this comment refers to the sound of Davis’s trumpet, rather than the style in which he played on ‘So What’. It is considerably more difficult to ascertain whether Davis intended to play in a lyrical manner on ‘So What’, whether his phrasing, his chosen register and the ‘sing-ability’ of his solo were deliberate or not.

Nonetheless, in addition to Davis’s highly regarded solo on ‘So What’, the album Kind of Blue remains highly relevant today. With Kind of Blue Davis created an album that continues to be popular more than fifty years after it was first recorded: evidence of the timeless quality of the work. ‘So What’ is not only innovative, incorporating a new modal approach, it is an enduring legacy and part of the ‘cool’ sound.

**Bibliography**


**Discography**


