

Jazz Recordings as Social Texts

Catherine Parsonage

‘Records not only disseminated jazz, but inseminated it ... in some ways they created what we now call jazz’.¹

Recording technology developed in parallel with jazz and continues to influence the ways in which the music evolves and changes.² Recordings have been so pervasive in jazz due to their ability to capture improvisatory musical performances so that they can be distributed widely and listened to repeatedly. Crucially for jazz, recordings allow for the dissemination of elements of performance practice that are not often notated or that conventional notation cannot easily represent. As such, recorded jazz performances are often considered to be analogous with the notion of the ‘work’.³ Recordings provide audible illustration of a coherent history within which great performers and complex masterworks can be identified through the application of conventional musicological analytical and historical methodologies. The resulting canon has enabled jazz to be validated as a serious academic discipline. It is therefore not surprising that seminal works of jazz scholarship have made the record their subject of study, and masterly volumes such as Gunther Schuller’s *Early Jazz* (1968) and *The Swing Era* (1989) demonstrate what can be achieved within the limits of such an approach.⁴

Conversely, the development of jazz scholarship in recent times has led to the reappraisal of the role of recordings in this genre. Such writing has tended to focus self-critically on the ways in which jazz recordings have contributed to the construction of a linear history and the jazz canon, which are the subjects of deconstruction by the ‘new jazz studies’.⁵ As a result, negativity and frustration towards the perceived inadequacies of jazz recordings can now be observed, a

response diametrically opposed to the positivism of more traditional jazz scholarship. This attitude is epitomised by the scholar Jed Rasula, who has written of the ‘seductive menace of records in jazz history’, exemplified by historians’ non-critical and anti-theoretical approach to recordings as primary source material.⁶ He also seems to regret that ‘the material constraints of recording have interceded in numerous ways in the development of jazz’.⁷ In Rasula’s view, recordings actually seem to hinder the writing of jazz history, as historians find that the history that they are trying to write ‘is already composed, and made audible, in recordings’.⁸ However, he does concede that jazz recordings are ‘a prominent factor in the lives of jazz musicians’, although this creates problems for historians who are attempting to trace origins and influences, and also that ‘despite an avowed reluctance, all jazz historians rely heavily on recordings’.⁹

A fundamental problem with recordings in jazz history is that they cannot be understood as representative of live (unrecorded) performances, which represent the ‘authentic’ performances of jazz: ‘[recordings are] regrettably ... a secondary substitute for the “living presence” of actual performance’ although they are often used in this way in jazz studies.¹⁰ Similarly, jazz musicologist Matthew Butterfield privileges live jazz performances over recorded ones as they represent ‘social interaction *par excellence*’ and he suggests that jazz scholars should be concentrating their efforts on developing a methodology for studying the live event (a ‘situational paradigm for analysis’) as a priority.¹¹ He argues that the solitary listening to recordings which forms the basis for analytical teaching and research results in ‘the loss of the integrative social function of jazz performance practice’ as it supports and affirms a musical economy dominated by recordings and thereby diminishes live music scenes.¹²

Rasula and Butterfield write about recordings within a fairly narrow perspective of academia (specifically, within the fields of jazz history and jazz analysis), enlarging this only slightly to encompass the jazz community.¹³ Whilst academics may object to the construction of a history of jazz through recordings, and identify the inadequacy of recordings as representative of jazz performance, it is very unlikely that they will stop teaching jazz history without reference to recordings (especially as a greater range is becoming available through reissues and reconstructions), or that significantly greater numbers of people will experience jazz primarily through live events rather than recordings. As Rasula points out, ‘historians have tended to avoid theorizing the actual status and function of these artifacts’.¹⁴ Hence, jazz recordings have been shown to represent everything (the masterworks of the jazz canon) and nothing (poor simulations of live performance). These extreme perspectives highlight the inwardly focussed academic preoccupation with the status of the discipline of jazz studies, which has contributed to the pursuance of the type of scholarship that is valued by the academic community which suggests that jazz recordings should be treated as autonomous art works.¹⁵ The attendant conventional analytical methodology largely excludes consideration of how these recordings function in society.

An alternative perspective on recordings is provided by philosopher and critic Evan Eisenberg, who argues that ‘what is most important about art is not how it is done, but what it does’, foregrounding consideration of recipients rather than producers.¹⁶ In relation to jazz, he suggests that records not only disseminate (pre-existent) performances, but can also influence the very nature of the genre through a process of insemination. Extrapolating from this, we can observe the repeated insemination of jazz by members of society as a reciprocal response to its

dissemination through recordings. Whereas Adorno was unable to recognise the jazz listener as anything more than a 'regressive', passive and dependent consumer of the products of the dominant culture industry, it might be argued that the development of the culture industry has given listeners the possibility of greater active choice and power, particularly with respect to recordings. Eisenberg outlines a progression from piano, to pianola, to phonograph, as the 'instrument' for providing domestic music, where increasing mechanization requires correspondingly decreasing levels of skill from the 'player', to the extent that anyone can play a record.¹⁷ However, this is not to devalue the artistic potential of this activity, as an advanced record listener can express him- or herself through the performances of others similarly to a conductor: 'the conductor must content himself with a limited repertoire but can make each piece his own, while the record listener has a practically infinite repertoire in which nothing is his own'.¹⁸

Listeners tend to understand jazz recordings as representations of performances, and it is only with hindsight or knowledge that any phonographic illusions are exposed.¹⁹ However, jazz recordings are most often evaluated by academics from a retrospective position, with full benefit of hindsight and knowledge, and as such isolated from the positionality of other listeners in history and within their own society. Rasula poses a series of questions: 'Are they [recordings] truth or fiction? What is the epistemological status of a technologically primitive artifact like a 1923 acoustic recording of King Oliver's Jazz Band? Is it a conduit, an acoustic window giving access to how the music really sounded, or is it an obstacle?'²⁰ Surely the point here is that recordings represent the truth about *one particular performance* from which some hypotheses might be made regarding other performances, including the live event, in conjunction with additional source materials. But more importantly,

such recordings do give access to ‘how the music really sounded’, not necessarily in contemporary live performances, or even to the musicians and engineers in the studio, but to people who bought and heard the recording in 1923. We can play the same recording in the early twenty-first century and know that we are hearing the same performance as our ancestors, although it might now mean something very different to us.

There is a need to embrace the ability of recording to transcend and blur past, present and future and to be heard anew in multiple historical and geographical contexts. The recent move towards writing the multiple histories of jazz in various parts of the world has focussed discussions of reception, including consideration of the meanings that recorded artefacts communicate to various audiences.²¹

Commensurately, it is interesting to note the ability of particular recordings to influence perceptions of jazz when evaluated in different ways: firstly, retrospectively, for example when writing jazz history; secondly, historically, within their original context (that is at the time at which they were first disseminated); and thirdly, in their present context, when they are encountered by new audiences. In this chapter, these three particular temporal perspectives of listeners will be explored in relation to recordings chosen deliberately for their quantifiable status in the jazz canon: ‘Livery Stable Blues’ (1917) recorded by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) from New Orleans is widely cited as the first jazz recording; Miles Davis’s album *Kind of Blue* (1959) is understood as the best selling and most popular jazz recording of all time.²²

In Retrospect

Rasula is critical of jazz history that is based on such ‘legendary’ moments that are dominant as a result of their recorded status and Butterfield argues that it is through discourse that recordings are theorized into a position of dominance, rather than qualities inherent in the artefacts themselves. Indeed, legendary status can only be created retrospectively. Where specific recordings can be understood as ‘representative’ of the particular era in which they were produced, they can seem to express the past, present and future of jazz in a snapshot. The ODJB’s recordings summed up the largely un-recorded prior history of jazz, but also anticipated the ‘jazz age’ of the 1920s with lively dance music, novelty and comedy. *Kind of Blue* represented an evolutionary train within Davis’s own output stemming from *Birth of the Cool* (1950) and ‘forms a bridge from the immediate post-bop era of Davis’s later experiments, leading in due course to fusion’.²³ This has ensured the permanency of these artefacts in the jazz canon.

The recordings of the ODJB have an iconic yet problematic status within the conventional history of jazz. The ability to delineate the musical and cultural origins of jazz is certainly important in ensuring its artistic validity, as Rasula notes:

It is interesting that historians are virtually incapable of getting a history of jazz under way without using records to provide traction. For convenience some historians have favored 1917 as a starting block, because the Original Dixieland Jazz Band cut its first record then. Recordings are a methodological convenience for marking the origin of the music.²⁴

However, according to the jazz writer John Chilton, the fact that the band recorded at all ensured that the musicians achieved ‘a degree of eminence that was out of proportion to their musical skills’.²⁵ The ODJB’s recordings have often been treated

with scepticism by authors (such as Schuller) conducting retrospective analysis based on recordings, as they appear to conflict with the fundamental criteria of value and authenticity in relation to jazz, which are considered here under the broad headings of race, motivation, performance practice and influence.

In retrospect, that the members of the ODJB were white and are perceived to have recorded traditional New Orleans music for commercial gain at the expense of black musicians provides a distasteful racial subtext to these early recordings. Schuller has remarked that the ODJB ‘took a new idea, an innovation, and reduced it to the kind of compressed, rigid format that could appeal to a mass audience ... with none of the flexibility and occasional subtlety shown by the best Negro bands of the period’.²⁶ This perception of exploitation has been enhanced by statements made by Nick LaRocca, the vociferous leader of the band, who openly rejected the black origins of jazz and insisted that the ODJB were ‘creators of jazz’.²⁷ Furthermore, band members have been criticized not only for recording but also for copyrighting and publishing numbers from the New Orleans marching band repertoire as their own compositions in the 1920s.

Deliberate appeals to the public to ensure commercial success rather than maintaining artistic autonomy continue to receive criticism in the jazz community today.²⁸ The ODJB was clearly aware of its commercial potential, and it was financial motivation that lay behind the ODJB’s recording activities and migration to the North (Chicago and New York) and then to Europe.²⁹ The band was clearly not averse to artistic compromise to secure commercial success. From January 1920 its recorded repertoire included more popular songs and even waltzes in response to the demands of its British audience. Schuller is critical of these recordings that were ‘hardly more than commercial fox-trot renditions’.³⁰ Writers who have attempted a more positive

evaluation of the ODJB have tended to focus on their recordings of New Orleans jazz standards, which can be accorded greater value than popular songs.³¹

LaRocca believed that it was important for the band's performances to appear to be spontaneous and improvised, particularly stressing the band's illiteracy, stating 'None of us can read a note of music and we do not intend to learn'.³² However, for Schuller, analysis of recordings, particularly comparison of different recordings of the same number, suggests otherwise:

It is typical of the kind of nonsense perpetrated in the name of jazz in those early days that La Rocca and the other members of the ODJB could claim that they could not read music and that therefore their playing was *ipso facto* improvised and inspired during each performance, when in truth their recordings show without exception exact repetitions of choruses and a great deal of memorization ... Contrary to being improvised, these choruses were set and rehearsed, and they were unchanged for years ... The ODJB thus did not actually improvise.³³

Schuller suggests that the lack of spontaneity in the band's performances was due to a lack of technical skill: 'LaRocca's range was only about an octave and his rhythmic ideas were also limited'.³⁴ With reference to 'Livery Stable Blues', he states that 'the players' instrumental techniques were too limited to work out more than two or three of these [barnyard] effects, which they were content to repeat exactly within a performance or indeed from performance to performance'.³⁵

The concept of influence is a lynchpin of traditional jazz history, providing a basis for evaluating the importance of a particular artist or group within the history of jazz who may then be elevated to the jazz canon. Schuller argues that as the ODJB was itself performing nothing more than crude representations of the existent New Orleans style, their potential for influence was limited: 'The ODJB rose quickly, and

fell almost as fast; by 1924 the group had passed into history'.³⁶ He suggests that the ODJB had the undesirable effect of spawning numerous imitators who were unable to do much more than make 'a fetish out of these corny effects and thereby stigmatized the new "jazz" in a particularly unfortunate manner', and were responsible for 'seduc[ing] all similar groups away from jazz towards commercial dance or slapstick music'.³⁷ At best, Schuller suggests that the ODJB provided little more than a basis for later groups such as the New Orleans Rhythm Kings to improve upon, rather than to revere.³⁸

Kind of Blue undoubtedly fits more comfortably within the criteria valued in jazz from a retrospective viewpoint. The album is generally understood to be iconic and represents an important pivotal point in the history of jazz, a view that is illustrated by Ashley Kahn in his book, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece*, written at roughly the same distance in time away from the date of the recording as Schuller's work was from the recordings of the ODJB.³⁹ As the title indicates, Kahn's book serves to reinforce the reputation of the album as a 'defining masterwork' within the development of Davis's oeuvre, the jazz genre, and more universally within the history of recorded music. This is accomplished through an appropriately reverential publication, in terms of both its lavish production on good quality paper with many illustrations, and the tone of the text itself, in which the album is characterised as a 'holy relic' in the 'church of jazz'.⁴⁰

From a racial dimension, clearly the fact that the majority of the group that performed on *Kind of Blue* were black provides a basic sense of jazz authenticity. Miles Davis himself occupies a central position in the jazz canon, fitting into a recorded lineage of jazz trumpeters, having 'paid his dues' with big bands and lived a stereotypical jazz life.⁴¹ Davis was a role model for young African Americans,

particularly as he achieved considerable artistic and material success within an industry dominated by whites. Kahn characterises *Kind of Blue* as reclaiming the 'cool' aesthetic for a black group from the success that it had achieved for white musicians on the West Coast in the wake of Davis's own *Birth of the Cool*.⁴²

Kind of Blue achieved commercial success and continues to command high sales of CD reissues. Within jazz literature it is the intrinsic artistic qualities of the album that tend to be emphasised as the inadvertent, as opposed to deliberately commercial, causes of this success. At the beginning of his chapter on 'The Legacy of Blue' Kahn quotes Davis's apparent disinterest with the continued commercial success of *Kind of Blue*: 'I don't want you to like me because of *Kind of Blue*. Like me for what we're doing now, you know'.⁴³ Davis is represented in Kahn's book as an *auteur* figure with responsibility for composition, arrangement, band-leading and performing that validates *Kind of Blue* as a unified artistic expression. Davis is even shown to have been responsible for the album title and the design of the album's packaging.⁴⁴

Kahn's detailed analysis of the master tapes of the *Kind of Blue* sessions provides additional weight to the idea of the album as a coherent, spontaneous artwork. He points out that the sessions 'produced exactly what was needed for the album, no more, no less' and the master tapes confirm the album's 'one take' reputation as they contain only one complete version of each number (with the exception of 'Flamenco Sketches').⁴⁵ Kahn's writing emphasises the spontaneity of the recording sessions; in particular, the modal basis of *Kind of Blue* is shown to encourage expressive improvisation: 'In theory, with no chords to define a melody, the solo became the song and the improviser became the composer. The modal jazz soloist was indeed the master of the creative moment'.⁴⁶

Kahn shows that the influence of *Kind of Blue* is able to transcend historical, stylistic and geographical boundaries: ‘Classical buffs and rage rockers alike praise its subtlety, simplicity and emotional depth ...’.⁴⁷ However, the chapter on ‘The Legacy of Blue’ particularly emphasises the continuing influence of the album on generations of jazz musicians, including Gary Burton and Herbie Hancock, young musicians at the time of the album’s release who have since achieved international profiles.⁴⁸ Kahn’s reliance on nostalgic, retrospective reminiscences rather than judgements contemporary with the album’s release allows him to assure its influential status and its legacy is shown to permeate contemporary jazz practice.

Retrospect is a dangerous position as it mediates between past and present, leading to inevitable confusion. Certainly this retrospective critical writing demonstrates the potency of the ‘seductive menace’ of jazz recordings, as they have been used as the basis for writing subjective accounts of jazz history through the application of more modern criteria of authenticity and value. Alternative approaches to assessing historical recordings involve anchoring them more securely in specific contexts, limiting need for subjective judgement and encouraging more balanced assessments of value and influence. These recordings can usefully be examined, firstly in the context in which they were originally made, and secondly according to their function within our own time.

In History

As we have seen, race provides the fundamental basis for the retrospective judgement of these recordings, but contextual analysis of the origins of the musicians and repertoire exposes greater complexity and the need for a more relativistic view. Jazz archivist Bruce Boyd Raeburn has explained that in New Orleans the

‘demographic patterns which created a “crazy quilt” of mixed neighbourhoods also yielded an extremely eclectic musical amalgam’.⁴⁹ In essence, New Orleans jazz was demonstrably influenced as much by white march music as black blues. The white musicians of the ODJB were brought up within the same musical tradition as black musicians in New Orleans, which provided them with the basic repertoire and performance style that can be heard on their recordings. Although it is obvious that the band benefited from the dissemination of this music at the expense of other musicians of all races from the community, even Schuller is forced to acknowledge that ‘the color lines were undoubtedly still drawn so clearly as to make a similar success for a comparable Negro group impossible’.⁵⁰ There has been greater recognition of black musicians in recent times, including those who were under-represented on early recordings, who have formed the basis of a predominantly black jazz canon. This has led to the neglect of the contributions of ‘not just a handful of white musicians, but many, [that] now appear to have been decisive in the making of jazz’ which would include Bill Evans’s work on *Kind of Blue*.⁵¹ Miles Davis’s contradictory views on white jazz musicians are well known, and despite choosing to include Evans on *Kind of Blue*, subjected him to racial digs. The pianist also attracted Crow Jim racism from nightclub audiences.⁵² This tension is manifest in the continuing dispute about Evans’s compositional role on *Kind of Blue*, particularly in relation to ‘Blue in Green’. Such questions of authorship arise as a result of the equation of recordings with ‘works’, which requires artificial delineation of the roles of author-composer and performer-improviser. The conventional hierarchy of Western art music is implicit in this, but there may also be commercial advantages in being identified as a composer. In the case of *Kind of Blue*, such disputes reference the collaborative processes of creation in the studio but provide few useful insights.

Material such as out-takes of studio sessions may be invaluable in understanding the processes involved in jazz recordings. However, Kahn disregards the implications of additional material heard on the *Kind of Blue* master tapes which for him serve mainly to confirm the ‘one take’ status of the album. The additional fragments captured on the tapes indicate that there was unrecorded rehearsal in the studio, and incomplete takes indicate that it was mostly the musicians’ unfamiliarity with the music that caused particular performances to break down. This serves to highlight the importance of the role of each musician in defining for himself what he should play on each track in the absence of written charts or precise directions from Davis, exposing *Kind of Blue* as a collaborative rather than *auteur* work. The master tapes enable the recording to be more clearly understood when spontaneity is not upheld retrospectively as an essentialist criterion of value.

Whilst modern technology enabled unsuccessful performances, including improvisations by Davis or his sidemen, to be rejected, LaRocca commented that improvisation was restricted in the studio as ‘there was no way of me throwing in an extra lick here or there, because if I did and I missed out, that matrix was ruined and the whole thing was ruined’.⁵³ Schuller concludes that ‘the ODJB thus did not actually improvise’ without considering the specific circumstances that surrounded the making of recordings at this time.⁵⁴ The limited time span available on the disc coupled with no possibilities of editing mistakes would seem to suggest that a ‘set and rehearsed’ approach from the musicians was appropriate. In addition, sources other than recordings suggest that improvisation was part of the ODJB’s rehearsal process, where arrangements and ‘contrapuntal interest’ developed as a number was played more often.⁵⁵ There is a need for caution when assessing the ODJB’s performance practice on the basis of their recordings.

Whilst, in retrospect, the recordings of the ODJB and *Kind of Blue* may be classified respectively as ‘commercial’ and ‘artistic’, both nevertheless mediate between these two extremes. Although it is possible to argue that *Kind of Blue* is a great artwork, this should not be at the expense of commercial aspects that may be seen to influence its production. Kahn notes that jazz and pop records were not segregated at Columbia Records and that the success of the popular catalogue enabled jazz producers to take more risks.⁵⁶ Miles Davis did not record *Kind of Blue* until he had received an advance, and for the musicians involved in the recording, it was another day’s work and most were paid the standard union rates. Jimmy Cobb commented: ‘The call I got from Miles for that record was just like any other record. He’d say we’ve got a date, where it is and what time it is – I didn’t know if it was *Kind of Blue* or *Kind of Green* at the time, you know?’⁵⁷

Ironically, the demonstrable roots of the ODJB in the New Orleans musical tradition, which are the subject of allegations of exploitation for commercial success, can also serve as markers of authenticity. New Orleans musicians comment that numbers such as ‘Livery Stable Blues’ were performed frequently and known by a variety of different names, which confirms the extent to which these numbers were ingrained into the popular culture of the city. Even the farmyard noises in ‘Livery Stable Blues’, which might appear to indicate a crowd-pleasing antic on the part of the ODJB, had precedents.⁵⁸ This confirms the basic authenticity of the ODJB’s recordings as representations of early jazz in New Orleans but, more importantly, it is not surprising that for those audiences with little or no experience of jazz that the ‘originality’ of the band was believed. For example, British audiences had not *heard* anything like the ODJB before and it was impossible for them to be aware of the wider context that informs retrospective analysis. The influence that the ODJB’s

recordings had upon public perceptions of jazz, especially as their records were the first to be labelled as such, ought not to be underestimated.⁵⁹

Kahn acknowledges that *Kind of Blue* did not have a revolutionary impact as avant-garde art in the same way as more radical contemporaneous developments from saxophonists John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, which provoked critical debate. The influence of *Kind of Blue* at the time of its release may be regarded as primarily societal, acting within communities of musicians for which the album provided accessible concepts that could be replicated in performances. Kahn chooses to circumvent consideration of the album's widespread popularity outside the jazz community as this conflicts with its status as an artwork. However, the anecdote that concludes his study of *Kind of Blue* raises interesting questions that demand consideration with regard to the influence of the album in popular culture and society:

Not long ago, as I stood in [Tower Records's downtown Manhattan flagship store], I watched as a young woman – no older than twenty-five, as I recall – walked briskly past me, honed in on the *Kind of Blue* rack, and picked up a copy. Long after she disappeared toward the cashier, I began to wonder how she had come to make her selection that day. Did she already know the album? How had she first come to hear about it? Was the purchase for herself or someone else? But I was not interested in conducting a marketing survey – all that leads to a different kind of research and study. I prefer just to imagine that copy of *Kind of Blue* finding its way into the hands of some first-time listener, working its magic.⁶⁰

In the Present

The recordings of both 'Livery Stable Blues' and *Kind of Blue* continue to be important for musicians and musicologists in providing access to earlier styles of performance and creative inspiration for new developments. Since the recordings were released, other musicians have covered the material extensively. Entire albums recorded in tribute to *Kind of Blue* include Donald Harrison's *Kind of New* (2002), where some interesting alterations signify the impact of the passage of time upon the original versions, such as a dissonant version of the piano prelude to 'So What', and 'All Blues' in five-time. The number which comes closest to the original renderings is 'Blue in Green', which preserves the lines of Evans's piano introduction and repeats Davis's initial trumpet statement *verbatim* as if to reinforce its integrity as a textual property of the work, perhaps commenting on the confusion over its authorship.

The repertoire of the ODJB's earliest recordings has also been extensively covered in the decades since their release and continues to be performed by traditional jazz groups and others. The existence of multiple recorded versions of New Orleans standards helped to fuel the start of record collecting as a serious hobby in Britain. *Melody Maker* magazine, a principal source of information for aspiring jazz musicians and record collectors, reported extensive collections of versions of 'Tiger Rag' by artists ranging from the Southern Rag-A-Jazz Band to Art Tatum.⁶¹ It was no coincidence that it was at exactly this time that the first Rhythm Club was formed, to allow for these impressive collections and rare records obtained by individuals to be shared and discussed in regular meetings.

Eisenberg characterises such activity as heroic: 'In capitalism there are first heroes of production and then ... heroes of consumption', the latter identified by their willingness to share their spoils with others. He also notes that 'the true hero of

consumption is a rebel against consumption' as 'by taking acquisition to an ascetic extreme he repudiates it'.⁶² Record collectors demonstrate the ability to circumvent the cycles of mass production and perfection that drive the record industry. For the early British collectors, this meant striving to obtain rare imported records of American jazz musicians from specialist shops. These versions provided a comparative focus for these early jazz fans to begin to identify improvisatory processes and individual styles of musicians. Similarly, collectors revel in early versions of *Kind of Blue* on vinyl, which have several imperfections. For example, titles of two of the tracks on side B were inadvertently swapped on the cover and versions produced from the master tapes were out of tune.⁶³ Ironically, it these products that differ from the mass-produced norm that are highly valued and prized by collectors although they are fundamentally flawed. The activities of record collectors testify to the value of recordings as artefacts in themselves quite apart from their musical content.

Eisenberg notes that collecting cultural objects can satisfy our need to belong: 'considered as a feeling, this need might be called nostalgia'.⁶⁴ Nostalgia exists both within our own lives (the time of our acquisition of the record) and for periods of history that we may not have experienced (the date of the creation of the record). This nostalgia is evidenced in that today, even though it is possible to buy high quality CD transfers of the ODJB's recordings, 78rpm records still change hands in auctions, conceivably sold to people who do not actually intend to listen to them regularly. *Kind of Blue* can also be collected in multiple formats, including a blue vinyl limited edition and most recently as a dual disc. One Amazon reviewer reported: 'I have 5 copies [of *Kind of Blue*] on vinyl ... plus 4 cd's of it', indicating that multiple copies are retained for their sentimental or financial value.⁶⁵ Eisenberg argues that the

serious record collector has a claim to be considered as a musical amateur alongside those who play or sing in their spare time, as they demonstrate the same love, ultimately proven by a 'willingness to be bored', for example whilst searching for rare records.⁶⁶

The iconic status of *Kind of Blue* is undoubtedly maintained in the present through the activities of musicians, critics and record collectors from within the jazz community. However, those who only buy the mainstream commercial product also contribute to this. As one Amazon reviewer commented: 'When I first purchased this album it was because a friend had recommended it to me as one of the 10 Jazz albums that any avid Jazz fan must have in their collection'. The status of the album exerts a wider influence on the public to purchase it, an act that serves to perpetuate its reputation. The continued response to the music of *Kind of Blue* from a massive and varied audience is therefore significant.

Butterfield argues that potential for 'erotic' social interaction through music is diminished in recorded jazz, particularly as the performer is absent.⁶⁷ However, recordings can *provoke* erotic interaction between listeners, through dancing or sexual activity, without being inhibited by the presence of musicians: 'people seem more comfortable dancing and courting to mechanical music'.⁶⁸ Eisenberg suggests that the phonograph provides a voice for seduction for those who cannot sing, but that the deliberate mechanics involved in the selection and playing of a recording limits the romantic potential of the music: 'seduction cana [*sic*] be romantic ... but suggests calculation. ... In the true romantic situation, music spontaneously kindles or fans a mutual passion. It tends to be live music, or maybe a radio or a jukebox; the private phonograph is too human to be spontaneous'.⁶⁹ Therefore, the very act of playing an appropriate record may constitute a profoundly explicit erotic gesture.

The recordings that might be considered appropriate for seduction will vary, but *Kind of Blue* seems to have a particular ability to engender erotic social interaction between listeners, and Kahn cites several reminiscences of the ‘aphrodisiac properties’ of the music.⁷⁰ It might be argued that the sound of *Kind of Blue* can act referentially as a cultural signifier of eroticism and thus intensifies seduction as a calculated act by illuminating the intentions of the person who chooses to play the record. Gabbard suggests that at the moment in the film *Runaway Bride* where Julia Roberts gives Richard Gere an ‘old but well-preserved LP copy of *Kind of Blue*’ ‘we know they are made for each other’.⁷¹ This indicates that the album has become understood within popular culture to the extent that it can function romantically even as a silent artefact. The familiarity of the album as a token of romantic love may temper the potent erotic possibilities of the music of *Kind of Blue*.

Gabbard identifies the widespread appropriation of black music by filmmakers to provide romance in Hollywood films where black people are largely invisible. Equally, recordings render the musicians ‘invisible’ but not profoundly absent, in the sense that we are aware of their presence but are unable to see them, thus records permit audiences to utilise the erotic or romantic properties of music within their own private environments. Recordings also allow white listeners to experience black culture without feeling threatened by the physical presence of black musicians. *Kind of Blue* functions as the ideal musical representation of sufficiently controlled, yet quantifiably authentic black culture, denoted respectively by its familiar middle-of-the-road properties and the designation ‘jazz’.

The expression ‘middle-of-the-road’ tends to be used in a derogatory fashion in scholarly and social contexts.⁷² However, the term, meaning ‘moderate, avoiding extremes’ and ‘of general appeal’, may be employed to understand the popularity of

music from a variety of genres.⁷³ The suitability of *Kind of Blue* as a gift – in reality as well as in Hollywood film (sales increase dramatically near Christmas) – is indicative of its relevance to a wide cross-section of listeners who may identify with the album's 'middle-of-the-road' properties.⁷⁴ Several aspects of the album demonstrate the avoidance of extremes – even the title '*Kind of Blue*' might signify a compromise that the music is not going to be as disturbing or direct as the blues. Holistically, the album has a reasonably consistent sound, which renders it suitable for domestic listening. The timbres of the album are generally inoffensive and there is a relatively restricted pitch range. There are consistent grooves but no particularly fast tempi or rapid harmonic changes.

The 'general appeal' of music relies primarily on its communication through a widely available commercial product, and *Kind of Blue* is authentic to a typical perception of listeners who 'experience the recording as though the musicians were all co-present during the recorded performance'.⁷⁵ Eisenberg identifies three modes of recorded performance that are used by musicians in response to the absent audience: projective, inward and cool.⁷⁶ The ODJB's recordings can seem threatening to our modern ears, as they are almost exclusively projective. These recordings appeal mainly to enthusiasts who revel in performances that appear to represent the sound of a bygone age, but the projective nature of these performances was itself encouraged by the phonographic medium. In time, technology permitted a musician to 'make himself the object of the microphone'.⁷⁷ Miles Davis's trumpet can be projective on recordings but also, particularly through his use of the harmon mute, can give the impression that he is playing for himself. But above all, Davis typifies Eisenberg's idea of 'cool', 'neither appealing to the listener nor ignoring him, the cool performer speaks to him from somewhere inside the listener's head'.⁷⁸ *Kind of Blue* has

remained successful as ‘cool’ phonographic art, which circumvents the limitations of the medium through its embrace of its paradoxes:

To the abstraction of the audience it [the cool] responds by speaking as if to a single, utterly unknown individual, in the manner of a disembodied voice. To the reification of music it responds by creating a curious object. To the hardening of musical language it responds by juxtaposing phrases rather than using them, in place of rhetoric there is irony. ... To the deconstruction of time, the cool mode responds with cyclical rather than linear or dramatic forms.⁷⁹

Furthermore, *Kind of Blue* has become representative of jazz within society and popular culture: ‘when I had never really sat down and heard any jazz properly this is what i thought it sounded like only not as good’ (Amazon reviewer). Reviewers encourage the purchase of the album to represent jazz within an eclectic record collection: ‘Even in a music collection without any other jazz, this is the one album to have’. Jazz has undoubtedly gained significant cultural capital in recent times and ‘can now signify refinement and upper-class status, once the exclusive province of classical music’.⁸⁰ Eisenberg identifies ‘the need to impress others’ as a reason for the collection of cultural objects, and *Kind of Blue* would be the obvious choice for people who wished to buy into the image of jazz in a way that would be understood by society.⁸¹

Conversely, it is interesting to note the influence of negative perceptions of the jazz genre upon the generally positive reception that *Kind of Blue* is accorded on the Amazon pages. Whilst people might want to buy into the values associated with jazz, it is the ‘middle-of-the-road’ properties that are often at the root of their appreciation of *Kind of Blue*:

‘It isn’t the ‘difficult’ jazz that most people think of when someone mentions the word – it is a laid back, grooving collection of melodic jazz that both relaxes and lifts.’

‘it effortlessly rises above cynicism towards and intellectualism within jazz’

‘Nothing outrageously wild, no distortive solos and no freak rhythms. Easy and accessible to listen to ...’

Kind of Blue successfully mediates between the desirable values of high cultural capital and ‘middle-of-the-road’ accessibility, which has resulted in some negativity towards the album from self-professed jazz fans: ‘Jazz for people who don’t like jazz ... for real jazz interest you need to look elsewhere’. But outside the jazz community these characteristics have contributed to the album’s widespread popularity and has allowed it to function diversely, for example as background music, where it may signify refinement or eroticism, and as material for jazz education, in both formal and informal contexts. Some functions require only for the album to be *heard* within a particular context in order to be effective, but it also offers something beyond ‘middle-of-the-road’ to those who *listen*:

‘I do not find one album more relaxing, yet interesting than this one.’

‘This is how music should be, understated but immediately challenging’

‘It’s mellow but not cheesy ...’

Conclusion

The recognition of the versatility of jazz recordings is incompatible with jazz scholarship that is intent on proving the worth of jazz as a subject for serious academic study by using conventional analytical methodologies. Certainly, as we have seen, if a recording is only ever assessed from a retrospective position without sufficient regard for the context in which it is produced or heard, evaluation of its significance is fundamentally limited. Furthermore, whilst it is important that methods are developed for analysing live performances, jazz scholarship that deliberately ‘resists the domination of recordings, the social structures they produce, and the modes of listener behaviour they entail’ would seem to be inadequate and largely irrelevant to the reality of the modern world.⁸² A focus on live performances serves to restrict consideration of reception to particular audiences, usually of the ‘jazz community’, that attend such events, which conveniently narrows the scope of the enquiry. Conversely, jazz recordings are received within the individual perspectives of diverse listeners, whose reception of the music may be influenced by particular historical, geographical, and social circumstances as well as the more specific contexts of personal listening environments and situations. Recordings are dominant in the dissemination of jazz into the wider community and as such demand our critical attention to understand the social potential of jazz in the twenty-first century.

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¹ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987/R2005), p. 118.

² A version of this chapter was presented in the Research Seminar series at Leeds College of Music, and I am grateful to my colleagues for their comments and suggestions.

³ Peter Elsdon explores the implications of this in his chapter in this volume.

⁴ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945*, (New York: Oxford University, 1989); Jed Rasula, 'The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History' in Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.140.

⁵ Typified in anthologies such as Gabbard (ed.), *Jazz Among the Discourses*; Robert O'Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Robert O'Meally, Brent H. Edwards, and Farah J. Griffin, (eds.), *Uptown Conversation: the New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and more recently, the journal *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* (Leeds College of Music).

⁶ Rasula, 'Media of Memory', p. 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 143, 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135. For further exploration of the tension between recording and live performance, see Peter Elsdon's chapter in this volume, which focuses on live recordings.

¹¹ Matthew Butterfield, 'Music Analysis and the Social Life of Jazz Recordings', *Current Musicology* 71-73 (2002), pp. 325, 347.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 326, 328.

¹³ Butterfield states: 'I am less concerned with the 'jazz community' as a largely anonymous, global assemblage of jazz musicians and jazz fans defined by their love of and concern for this music than with more local communities comprised of individuals who develop social relationships through the socially productive forces of jazz music-making activities.' In adhering to a traditional notion of community, Butterfield neglects the potential for technology (including recording) to create and perpetuate *virtual* social interaction in which the participants become well known to each other although they may never meet. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁴ Rasula, 'Media of Memory', p. 134.

¹⁵ Butterfield, 'Music Analysis', p. 324.

¹⁶ Eisenberg, *Recording Angel*, p. 130.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁹ Butterfield, 'Music Analysis', p. 332.

²⁰ Rasula, 'Media of Memory', p. 135.

²¹ See for example E. Taylor Atkins's anthology *Jazz Planet* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

²² Original Dixieland Jazz Band, *The Creators of Jazz*, Avid Records, AMSC 702, 2001. Miles Davis *Kind of Blue*, Columbia/Legacy, CK64935, 1959. The process of recording *Kind of Blue* and other albums by Davis is discussed by James Barrett in this volume.

- ²³ Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 486.
- ²⁴ Rasula, 'Media of Memory', p. 136.
- ²⁵ Barry Kernfeld, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 274.
- ²⁶ Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. 180.
- ²⁷ See, for example, an article entitled 'Jazz Stems from Whites not Blacks' in *Metronome*, October 1936, p. 20.
- ²⁸ The saxophonist Kenny G has little credibility in the jazz community despite and because of his phenomenally successful career.
- ²⁹ Parsonage, *Evolution of Jazz*, p. 124.
- ³⁰ Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. 182.
- ³¹ See Humphrey Lyttleton, *The Best of Jazz: Basin Street to Harlem* (London: Penguin, 1980) who bases his assessment of the ODJB solely on an analysis of 'Tiger Rag'.
- ³² Donegall, 'The Marquis of Donegall Reminisces on the ODJB' in *Jazz Tempo*, 17 (1944), p. 21.
- ³³ Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. 180.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182, 185.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ³⁹ Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* (London: Granta Books, 2000). Eric Nisenson's *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and his Masterpiece* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000) is a similar publication.
- ⁴⁰ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 17.
- ⁴¹ Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 143. Kahn notes that 'Drug addiction exacerbated Miles's problems, but strangely also cemented his relationship to the jazz community'. Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 33.
- ⁴² Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 33.
- ⁴³ Miles Davis, 1986. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 152.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- ⁴⁹ Bruce Boyd Raeburn, 'Jazz and the Italian Connection', *The Jazz Archivist* 6 (1991), p. 3.
- ⁵⁰ Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. 179.
- ⁵¹ Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz 1915-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xvi.
- ⁵² Crow Jim racism in this context meant prejudice against white jazz musicians. See Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 85.
- ⁵³ LaRocca interview, 26 May 1958, Hogan Jazz Archive; transcript p. 64.
- ⁵⁴ Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. 180. Schuller is particularly critical of the ODJB's recordings of 'Tiger Rag', where 'in both the New York and London recordings, the format is exactly the same'. *Ibid.* However, 'Tiger Rag' was taken straight from the

marching band repertoire and the band probably used a structure with which the players were already familiar, and saw no need to alter it.

⁵⁵ Harry O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (London: Jazz Book Club, 1963), p. 31. Drummer Tony Sbarbaro and trombonist Emile Christian stated that ‘the tunes were written as a group while you were playing together’ (Sbarbaro and Christian interview, 11 February 1959, Hogan Jazz Archive; transcript p. 45).

⁵⁶ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁸ Preston Jackson, a trombonist, remembered Joe Oliver playing ‘Eccentric’, a number that appears to be very similar to the ODJB’s ‘Livery Stable Blues’: ‘He took all the breaks, imitating a rooster and a baby The LaRocca boys of the Dixieland Jazz Band used to hang around and got a lot of ideas from his gang’. See Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya: The Story of Jazz Told By the Men Who Made It* (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 42.

⁵⁹ Parsonage, *Evolution of Jazz*, pp. 160-2.

⁶⁰ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 198.

⁶¹ *Melody Maker*, 10 June 1933, p.10.

⁶² Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 15.

⁶³ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 125. It is estimated that the first fifty thousand copies of the first pressing (Columbia CL1355, CS8163) exhibit the mislabelling of tracks. *Ibid.* p. 150. The album continued to be produced at the incorrect pitch until 1992. A 1986 CD reissue used a photograph of Miles Davis printed in reverse, giving the impression that he was playing the instrument left-handed. (Columbia Jazz Masterpieces CK40579). *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶⁴ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Comments from listeners included in this section have been taken from customer reviews of *Kind of Blue* posted on the retail website <http://www.amazon.co.uk> and are replicated here uncorrected.

⁶⁶ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 147.

⁶⁷ Butterfield, *Music Analysis*, p. 333. Butterfield defines ‘erotic’ social practice as ‘an expression of *eros*, the principle of attraction, union and involvement which binds together’. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁶⁸ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 81.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 76-77.

⁷⁰ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 20.

⁷¹ Krin Gabbard, ‘Miles from Home: Miles Davis and the Movies’, *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* 1 (2004), 29.

⁷² The concept, ‘middle-of-the-road’, has been explored more fully in an article on Robbie Williams’s album *Swing When You’re Winning*: Catherine Parsonage, ‘The popularity of jazz – an unpopular problem: the significance of *Swing When You’re Winning*’, in *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* 1 (2004), pp. 55-74.

⁷³ *Collins Dictionary & Thesaurus*, 3rd edition (2004), p. 748.

⁷⁴ Kahn, *Kind of Blue*, p. 194.

⁷⁵ Butterfield, *Music Analysis*, p. 332.

⁷⁶ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 129.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129. The idea of ‘cool’ in African American culture has influenced the popularity of jazz amongst those who aspire to and identify with this aesthetic, from the beat poets to Hollywood film-makers.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

⁸⁰ Gabbard, *Jazz Among the Discourses*, p. 2. A cool Milesian trumpet has backed recent radio commercials for the clothing and home furnishings chain Laura Ashley.

⁸¹ Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, p. 16.

⁸² Butterfield, *Music Analysis*, p. 347.