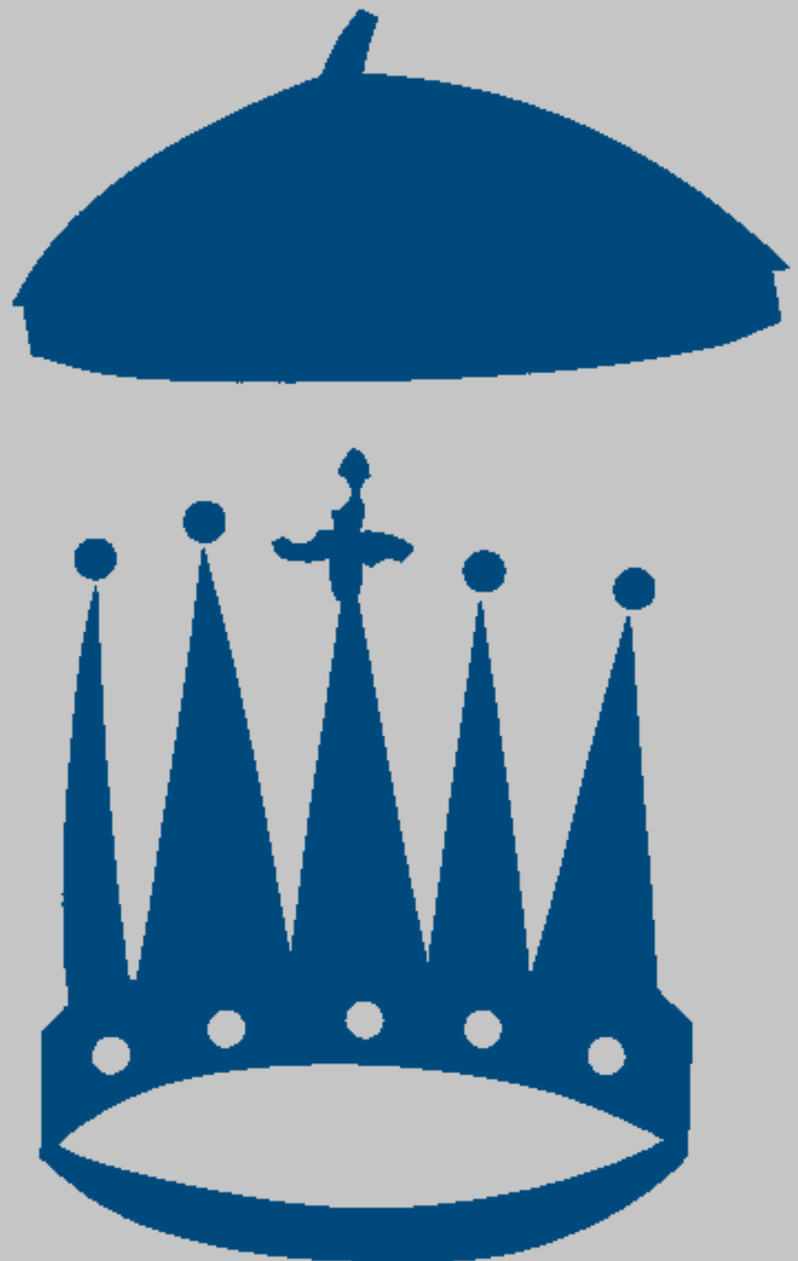

Kind of Blue:

SOME THOUGHTS ON MUSIC, CULTURE, AND CLASS

BY CALVIN WILSON

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Not far from Times Square, in the heart of a Manhattan night, eight men are squeezed into the corner of a neighborhood bar. They're playing jazz.

Two of them—Jack Walrath, a trumpeter, and Tom Varner, a French horn player—are among the music's most respected artists. But respect doesn't translate into dollars. The cover charge in this bar, where many patrons continue with their conversations, as if the music isn't even happening, is a mere five dollars.

On another night, at the Metropolitan Opera, Placido Domingo pretends to dismantle an ancient building with his bare hands. He's playing Samson, and this is opera. He's standing on a stage, facing thousands of people who are dressed in expensive suits and evening gowns. He's well paid.

Domingo's world is one not of discarded beer bottles and baskets of stale popcorn, but of overpriced finger sandwiches. He is an artist. Something Walrath and Varner will never be, at least in the eyes of many of those who have paid to hear *Samson et Dalila.*

To many of the supporters of what passes as high culture in America, jazz is not art. Indeed, in terms of cultural validation, it's a long way from Times Square to Lincoln Center. The distance between center stage and the back wall of the bar is the difference between the vaunted European cultural tradition and the much-lamented American cultural inferiority complex.

Factor in racism and class snobbery, and it's not hard to understand why, as far as cultural matters are concerned, jazz and classical music remain many long streets apart.

It's virtually impossible for any clear-minded jazz fan, such as myself, not to bristle at the injustice of it all. It's not a matter of dismissing classical music, or begrudging its privileged status. What can't be ignored is the disparity in funding afforded to these musical forms.

Across America, symphony orchestras have financial resources at their disposal that most jazz musicians can only dream about. The classical world benefits from far more corporate sponsorship, far more institutional support in both the public and private sectors. Ironically, jazz funding is significantly greater in Europe, where audiences have been educated to appreciate its worth in a way that most Americans aren't.

Being from Kansas City, where the jazz scene consists mostly of local musicians whose musical conservatism is no secret, I perhaps had unreasonable expectations concerning what I'd find in New York. Somehow, I thought jazz artists in the city known as a mecca for the music would be held in much higher esteem.

In Kansas City, it's normal for patrons of jazz clubs and restaurants to ignore the music and get on with their eating, drinking, and talking. Somehow, I'd just known that the average New Yorker would be more familiar with the work of a Walrath or a Varner. And it's true that in the pricier clubs a no-talking policy is observed. But in many of the smaller venues, no such rule applies.

Undoubtedly I was simply caught up in the myth of the New York jazzman, that rambunctious character who knocks back vast quantities of

booze, womanizes like there's no tomorrow, and carouses around the city until all hours. Maybe I hoped to meet and hang out with guys like that, and somehow get farther out of my own head and into the world.

Of course, this never happened.

Sure, I ran into some jazz musicians. But as I might have expected, they turned out to be every bit as conscientious and serious about their work as any real artist must be. The romance of being a New York jazz musician is in having the guts to hang in there. Because it's hard.

If you're not a commercial name, however well respected you are among jazz aficionados, you can't play the clubs that pay well. For all but the extremely fortunate few, jazz simply isn't that lucrative. In New York, the situation isn't much different for the struggling jazz artist than it is in Kansas City: After the take for a quartet date has been split four ways, a player may pocket a cool $25 for a night's work.

Certainly, some jazz artists make decent money. High-profile performers can expect to appear in concert halls, where the take may be as much as $20,000 or more for a performance. But classical artists of comparable fame can earn even more—and not just the really big names, such as Placido Domingo or Jessye Norman or Kathleen Battle.

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Nigel Kennedy, a British violinist, reportedly earns about $7,500 to appear as a soloist with an orchestra. Pianist Maurizio Pollini, who gives solo concerts, asks for a fee of about $20,000. That's as much as an entire jazz quartet would earn for a concert date, with the fee split among the performers.

Yes, hardly a week goes by that some newspaper or magazine is not warning of the demise of classical music. But whatever shape the classical world happens to be in at the moment, jazz is inevitably far worse off.

Of course, we speak here not of the so-called "smooth jazz" of which some commercial radio programmers are so enamored, but of the blues and swing-based music born in New Orleans and now roughly a century old. Jazz married European harmonies to African rhythms, giving America a music uniquely its own. Earlier in its history, jazz was a dance music, and therefore a popular music. But with the birth of bebop in the 1940s, it became an art music—and is generally perceived as such today.

Adding to the confusion of the general American public is the stratification of jazz into various types. Beyond the post-bop and "smooth" styles, there's also avant-garde jazz, fusion jazz (which follows in the tradition of the 1970s work of Miles Davis, Weather Report, and Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band), and other permutations of the music which can borrow from pop, rock, funk, and other contemporary styles.

The musician who perhaps best exemplified the idea of jazzman as artist was Davis, whose career spanned fifty years and numerous changes in artistic direction, from bebop to fusion. Not that Davis called his music "jazz": He considered the word to be part of a strategy employed by the mainstream to marginalize his achievements. To Davis, the sounds he created were simply music, subject neither to categorization nor condescension.

In 1959, Davis released an album which many critics consider his best: *Kind of Blue*. With personnel including saxophonists John Coltrane, Julian "Cannonball" Adderley and pianist Bill Evans, Davis pushed jazz away from the frantic tempos of bebop in favor of a calmer, more reflective, but no less creative mode.

In the last forty years, *Kind of Blue* has come to signify jazz artistry at its most sublime. Not only has it taken its place as a landmark in jazz, but as a milestone in music.

How sad, then, that the status of jazz as a signifier of culture has barely progressed. It has been argued that at least part of the controversy surrounding the Jazz at Lincoln Center series (whose artistic director is Wynton Marsalis) stems from objections to its very existence as a cultural institution sharing the same arts complex as the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera.

Indeed, the cultural standing of *Kind of Blue* is a serendipitous exception to the general American disdain for jazz.

When considering the role of an artistic form in the cultural firmament, we must take three factors into account—scale, investment, and validation. Scale is signified by the grandiosity of the space in which the art is presented. Investment refers to the financial aspects of the presentation. Validation involves the amount of scholarship, critical analysis, or journalistic attention directed at the work.

Jazz is generally presented in the most modest of circumstances—clubs or concert halls. Most newspapers accord only minimal coverage to jazz performances. Jazz albums must often compete with rock, pop, and country albums for review space, when they are considered at all.

In contrast, classical performances, even those by local artists, command substantial coverage in the nation's arts pages, and classical releases still elicit serious criticism.

What jazz and classical music share is marginalization, an estrangement from the mainstream predicated on the supposition that each musical form is just too "difficult" for common folk.

Sometimes a friend will mention that he or she would like to try jazz, but would like to know which book to read on the subject. To which I invariably respond, why read anything? Why not just listen?

Once I calm down a bit, I usually recommend a few albums, such as John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* or Sonny Rollins *Worktime* or Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. Simply immersing oneself in such music is the best, most useful thing a jazz novice can do.

The fear of jazz results from ignorance. Which is not to suggest, as some jazz zealots do, that everyone who gives the music a chance will love it. In our increasingly disposable culture, anything which requires effort risks being left alone.

Indeed, neither jazz nor classical music is easily accessible to the American public. Radio is a big part of the problem. Jazz is heard almost exclusively on public radio, and stations that play classical music have for several years been busy dumbing themselves down.

Like so many Americans, my knowledge of classical music is minimal. Also like them, I tend to dismiss that which I do not understand. In my own

case, this resentment is compounded by my allegiance to jazz and by my belief that the music I love just doesn't get the appropriate respect.

As a result, I own hundreds of jazz CDs but only one classical CD—and it isn't even part of the standard repertory. It's a copy of Steve Reich's *The Desert Music*. It makes sense that I would own that particular disc, inasmuch as Reich is an avant-garde composer, and there's a point at which avant-garde jazz—for which I confess to an affinity—is virtually indistinguishable from avant-garde classical music.

In New York, I must have attended more than 100 jazz performances. But I didn't get to even one classical event, aside from the *Samson* performance, unless a concert by avant-garde composer Scott Johnson qualifies.

Again, I only made time for a classical performer whose music offered me a way in—a bridge from what I already knew to something I might reasonably accept.

In many ways, Americans are, as saxophonist Steve Coleman has noted, a random group of people who have decided to call themselves one thing. Lacking confidence in our own creations, we look to the artistic heritage of Europe as a guide to that which is culturally valid. To an extent, that's fine. There is much to be learned from sonatas and arias, from Debussy and Britten. But there's also much to be gleaned from the blues, and from hip-hop, and from all of the sounds you can't hear behind the closed doors of the academy.

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Where jazz is largely a signifier merely of taste and experience (quite a few fans are college-educated), classical music attaches itself more readily to notions of class and social standing. Simply sitting in a seat at the Metropolitan Opera immediately makes a statement, since ticket prices lie outside the budgets of all but the wealthiest people. And the case can easily be made that that's not an accident.

Indeed, the classical music world is a place of opulence. If the Met's recent production of Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* was, by most accounts, less than an artistic success, even the most dedicated anti-capitalist had to be impressed by the stunning sets and costumes. If only, some jazz fans would argue, jazz could be presented in such fine style.

But that's not necessary. The music needn't be "elevated" to the status of classical music. If there were no Jazz at Lincoln Center, there would still be jazz, as there has been jazz. The music can point to artists of genius, from Louis Armstrong to Duke Ellington to Ornette Coleman. It need not apologize for its achievements or its aesthetics.

When Wynton Marsalis was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for his composition *Blood on the Fields,* much was made of the fact that he was the first jazz musician to be so honored. But it's hard to believe that Marsalis's classical background had nothing to do with that recognition. In 1965, when the Pulitzer board had the opportunity to honor Ellington with a special citation recommended by jurors, they snubbed the composer.

The Pulitzer board simply couldn't accept Ellington as a "serious" composer worthy of their imprimatur. In this context, it must be noted that George Gershwin, a contemporary of Ellington who also created popular music, has been accepted into the canon of serious composers. Certainly, *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris* are important works. And it is true that Ellington's reputation rests largely on his shorter jazz pieces, not his long-form compositions.

Still, any significant discussion of twentieth-century American music must acknowledge Ellington's work as an essential component of our cultural legacy.

The world has never been so small as it is right now, with a millennium approaching, but with so many issues involving culture and the arts as yet unresolved. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether jazz or classical music has the higher cultural profile. Still, it's crucially important that we realize that each art form is in imminent danger of becoming even more peripheral.

Not that jazz will disappear. As long as artists of the magnitude of saxophonist Henry Threadgill, guitarist Bill Frisell, and pianist Geri Allen continue to create—observing the tradition while continuing to expand upon it—jazz will remain not only a vibrant but an indispensible art.

When I listen to "So What," a moody, atmospheric tune on *Kind of Blue,* it's not because I think that doing so makes me a smarter person. Rather, I listen to hear beauty conjured out of the air.

And, after all the debating and debunking, that is what art is all about: Beauty.