

Kind of new: Orbert Davis tribute to Miles Davis

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Though every jazz trumpeter must come to terms with the vast musical legacy of Miles Davis, one Chicagoan has been particularly rigorous in doing so.

In the 1990s, Chicagoan Orbert Davis (no relation) performed the Miles Davis-Gil Evans "Sketches of Spain" repeatedly in Chicago and around the world with William Russo and the Chicago Jazz Ensemble.

And last April, Orbert Davis unveiled "Sketches of Blue," an ambitious, evening-length homage to Miles Davis featuring an orchestral transformation of "Sketches of Spain" — retitled "Sketches of Spain (Revisited)." The program also included a [performance](#) of Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue," by some measures the most popular jazz recording of all time.

The Auditorium Theatre had commissioned the "Sketches of Blue" [concert](#) as part of its citywide Miles Davis Festival, celebrating the 85th anniversary of the composer's birth. This weekend, Orbert Davis will revive that concert at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, meaning listeners will get to hear Davis' Chicago Jazz Philharmonic take another shot at some of the most intricate orchestral writing of Orbert Davis' career.

Why devote so much time and energy to so much historic repertoire?

"These are two signature, life-changing Miles Davis recordings," says Davis, referring to one specific life that this [music](#) changed: his own.

"Interestingly, when I first heard 'Kind of Blue,'" as a young trumpeter, "I wasn't impressed, because I was from the tradition of trumpet as sport: faster, higher, louder. But as I matured, I was just captivated by Miles' haunting sound."

As for the orchestral "Sketches of Spain," "I have spent literally hundreds of hours just taking that piece apart," says Davis. "At our first performance at the Park West, even during the standing ovation of a standing-room-only crowd, I was on stage feeling like a failure. I had practiced an approach to the piece, and I played every note perfectly, but I felt I didn't capture the spirit of the piece."

Davis may be a bit hard on himself, but certainly subsequent performances indicated that the trumpeter

had gotten inside one of the most elusive works in the orchestral jazz repertory.

In his "Sketches of Spain (Revisited)" suite, Davis has taken considerable artistic liberties with the original. In essence, he has re-scored the work, merged the second and third movements, emphasized the Moorish undercurrents of the original, allowed the orchestra to improvise en masse in some passages and added a new ending (drawn from the first movement).

This may not sit well with "Sketches of Spain" purists, but one has to think that Miles Davis would have been intrigued, given his own history of ignoring rules and continuously reinventing his music.

For Orbert Davis, though, the biggest struggle in all this has been standing stage center, bringing the trumpet to his lips and trying not to sound like his namesake.

"That's the challenge, on both 'Kind of Blue' and 'Sketches of Spain,'" says Davis. "I've been studying Miles Davis transcriptions, and the notes on paper don't come close to what he played. It's just that he played from all the resources of the heart.

"When I'm practicing on trumpet and working, I have to remind myself a thousand times to be myself.

"It causes me to dig deep emotionally, and in my imagination, as well.

"You've got to get past the technical aspects from the trumpet and play from the soul."

Davis' Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, meanwhile, appears to be on a roll, playing multiple, high-profile performances this year, including one at the Chicago Jazz Festival (which, alas, was slightly marred by the festival's poor production values and technical malfunctions). For next year, Davis and his longtime colleague — Mark Ingram — are starting to plan a major tribute to Ella Fitzgerald, possibly featuring several vocalists backed by the CJP.

The organization's [educational](#) wing, meanwhile, continues to train young musicians through various programs, including an immensely popular summer camp.

"We're building this idea of taking students who are beginners in jazz and tracking them, all the way from elementary school through college," says Davis.

"I would say: Stay tuned for the next 10 years or more. We hope to have the same kind of impact that Walter Dyett had on Chicago," adds Davis, referring to the revered educator who nurtured generations of jazz giants at DuSable High School.

Surely few Chicago musicians are is better positioned to extend that legacy than Davis.