

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'Artists versus autocrats', posted online on the Prospero blog, The Economist }

'Rock'n'roll artists are expected to affect a rebellious pose. For classical musicians, the stakes are often a little higher. Their jobs tend to be at state-backed orchestras'



The late American jazz legend Miles Davis in 1960. Right, Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys in the control room in 1966 while recording the mono album *Pet Sounds*. John Bulmer / Getty Images; Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images

Miles in mono

The latest Miles Davis box set will be released as it was originally recorded – in monophonic form – and the result is a revelation, Andy Battaglia writes

Before the rise of stereo sound in the 1960s, recordings were listened to most often on one speaker, in one-channel studio mixes made in the fashion of mono. That might seem like a vestige of history best forgotten – a memory that calls forth the image of an ancient Cyclops sitting lost and confused in front of a 3-D movie. But was it?

The story of technology is supposed to be one of constant progress and improvement, but it isn't all so simple. With gains come certain losses, and change can't help but bring about mistranslations and mistakes. Two speakers are better than one, to be sure, but might mono have been blessed with charms that have become lost in the stereo age?

A new box set devoted to jazz great Miles Davis suggests the answer to that is yes. Reissues of Davis come so fast and furious these days that it's easy to write them off as money grabs by record companies desperate to keep their archives alive as revenue streams. But *Miles Davis: The Original Mono Recordings* is more than that, and there are other examples of meaningful re-examination emerging from the past too.

While there are other worthy nominees, Davis may be the most meaningful and significant musician of the recorded age. Davis's dynamic, decades-long career is the stuff of legend for all the excellence and exploration it entailed, but the period surveyed by the new nine-CD set, from 1957 to 1964, counts as one of his very best, without question.

It's the period of *Kind of Blue*, considered by many to be the greatest jazz album ever, and sleeper classics such as *'Round About Midnight* and *Jazz Tracks*, as well as orchestral collaborations with arranger Gil Evans such as *Sketches of Spain* and *Porgy and Bess*. There's spell-binding music written for the 1958 Louise Malle film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Elevator to the Gallows*) and a live album split between bands led by Davis and Thelonious Monk. John Coltrane plays sax on a lot of it as a member of the first

great Miles Davis Quintet, which includes Paul Chambers on bass, "Philly" Joe Jones on drums and Red Garland on piano. The only jazz band that might have been better was Davis's second great quintet, from the mid-1960s.

So the source material is stellar, but how about the sound? It really is different. Before the two-channel split of stereo (between left and right channels) became standard, the studio mix that commanded the most attention from musicians and producers alike was the one in mono.

It wasn't known that way then, in the same way that the Great World War wasn't known as the First World War until a second one came around and made it part of a sequence. But awareness of mono began as soon as stereo started to proliferate, especially after side-to-side stereo effects played into the

psychedelic splendours of The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967.

Before then, the mixes that Davis managed, with his sense of nuance and his ethereal ear, were in mono, even though most offerings of the same albums since have come out in a stereo form, either mixed after the fact or engineered at the time as something of a novelty. The differences can be very subtle, but they're apparent. In the opening track to 1957's *'Round About Midnight*, as swooning and beautiful an album as Davis ever made, the mono sound casts the music of the band as more of a cohesive formulation than a coagulated mass of individual parts.

Davis starts with his trumpet in a moody register pitched somewhere between the euphoric and the forlorn, and before long Coltrane wanders in to brood through a beautiful spell of tenor saxophone. Each

player is identifiable – for the instruments they play, of course, but even more so for the singular personality of their sounds – yet both blend into a fabric of the whole more seamlessly in mono than in stereo. In the faster-paced *All of You*, drums by "Philly" Joe Jones sound more locked-in and elemental – a measure of the music moving more than merely an accent added on top.

The mono sounds more centred and self-assured. More attention was given to the mono mixes, so more craft and care surrounded them. But there's also something mysterious in the sense of musical space at play and the way different instruments move around within it. In liner notes to the new set, George Avakian, the producer of Davis's work at the time, says, "Mono has always been truer to the studio sound and the original intent. Mono featured less audio trickery and fewer audio distractions, so you can actually hear the musical conversation between Miles and other musicians as it occurred in the studio".

With less whizz-bang spectacle and simulation, he suggests, the music breathes more fundamentally on its own terms. The truth is that the

impeccable music in the Davis set – including, along with the albums already mentioned, *Miles Ahead*, *Milestones* and *Someday My Prince Will Come* – would sound great in any setting. But there's real appeal to the sound of mono, and enough so that it's been staging a bit of a comeback by way of reissues of other records from the past.

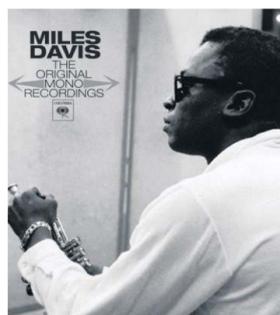
To much fanfare, the big Beatles remastering and reissue extravaganza of 2009 offered the option of a mono box. In The Beatles' case, the difference was more than one of subtle sonic emphasis or inflection: in many cases, different mixes of the same albums enlisted different instrumental takes and different arrangements as a result of time separating the making of the two mixes (sometimes a matter of days or even weeks, with different personnel involved).

Twelve years before The Beatles revived questions over the mono/stereo divide, a reissue of The Beach Boys' classic album *Pet Sounds*, a masterpiece in mono from 1966, was released in a stereo mix made especially for the occasion. It was mixed by an engineer decades after the fact, for reasons that were less than entirely clear – and ironic for the fact that Brian Wilson, the band's fabled composer and mastermind, was and remains deaf in one ear, rendering the very notion of a two-channel mix superfluous and even moot.

The mono/stereo divide occasions all sorts of philosophical questions related to conflicting desires for maintaining the past versus improving the past for the present (and all the ways that either impulse can misfire and misrepresent).

But it's also simple to understand in a straightforward scenario we all increasingly know: on headphones. Certain stereo albums mixed to extremes of left and right channels can be nagging to hear close up, with songs beset by tons of drums in one ear and almost none in the other, and other imbalances of the sort.

The beloved English band Stereolab, virtuosos of such effects when they have space in which to spread out and breathe, can be insufferable to listen to while walking around with an iPod.



Miles Davis
The Original Mono Recordings
Sony Music Classical
Dh247

Another classic mishmash on headphones – but this one with a new corrective on offer – is The Velvet Underground's *White Light/White Heat*. The opening title track of the band's second album, released in 1968, is a raucous, noisy, sonically snarled affair, with thrilling guitar sounds and electric-organ effects shooting this way and that.

In certain ways, it's a sensation in stereo. But then comes *The Gift*, an eight-minute dirge in which all the instruments and the spoken-word vocals of John Cale are split radically and distractingly between left and right channels. It's a mess to hear on headphones and only slightly better on speakers.

A welcome new version available in a "super deluxe" 45th-an-

niversary reissue offers the song, along with the rest of the album, in mono.

The Gift is improved immeasurably, in ways that don't require an engineer's ears to discern. But then so too is the rest – if not necessarily improved, certainly recognisably different in ways worth hearing.

The great rocker *I Heard Her Call My Name* sounds more rickety and toylike in stereo, with proudly primitive playing in evidence, whereas the mono version sounds like an explosion controlled by a conscientious band in intricate balance.

The full musical truth of The Velvet Underground lies somewhere between detail and disarray, but the legend of the band as a rock machine preserved by those who saw and heard them live makes more sense with more and different evidence to consider. The iconic guitar solo in *I Heard Her Call My Name* fired off by Lou Reed is better and more scorching in mono, an incendiary central message rather than just the flashiest uprising in a spray of flames.

It's a matter of old technology sounding hotter and a lot more cool in the present day. Maybe there's a lesson there to impart about what happens when we let improvements distract from the simple blasts of a monolithic past.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

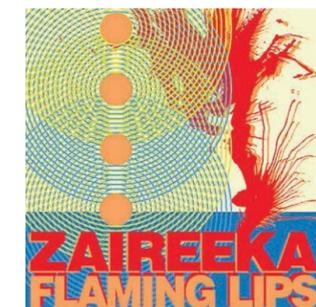
playlist

Four albums that have become well-known for their mono – and anti-mono – influences

The Flaming Lips

Zaireeka
Warner Bros (1997)

This wonderfully weird album from 1997 comes on four CDs meant to be played together on four different sound systems, simultaneously. The effect makes for an all-over sonic sensation and then some.



Richie Hawtin

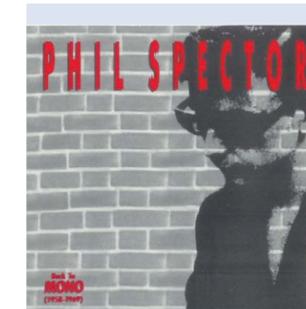
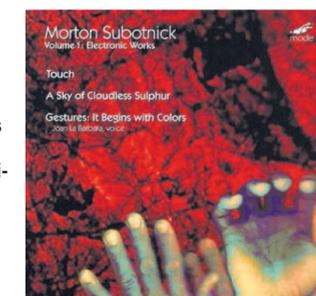
DE9: Closer to the Edit
Mute US (2001)

Lots of albums are made available in retrofitted surround-sound mixes, but few are actually made with multichannel mixes in mind at the creation stage. This antic techno mix was concocted with top-line technology that makes the sound quantum and magical.

Morton Subotnick

Volume 1: Electronic Works
Mode (2001)

An anti-mono philosophy guides certain works by Morton Subotnick, whose pioneering compositions for electronic music make use of surround-sound ideals in which music swirls around a room. A DVD version of this collection includes 5.1 surround-sound mixes to be regaled.



Phil Spector

Back to Mono (1958-1969)
Abkco (1991)

Nobody is more immediately identified with mono than Phil Spector, whose fabled "wall of sound" production style drew some of its power from its focused sense of purpose. This four-CD box set enlists songs by the likes of The Ronettes, The Crystals, The Righteous Brothers and many more.