

University of North Texas

Who Is *Blue*: Interpreting the Changes of the Blue Note Record Label

Jazz History

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By

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Blue Note – a richly complex and on-going history behind the record label’s simple name. Begun as an independent label in 1939 by German immigrants Alfred Lion and his childhood friend Francis Wolff, Blue Note gained a reputation for its output of albums – from helping to revive interest in Sidney Bechet’s career to recording the eccentric Thelonious Monk, and from highlighting the possibilities of the Hammond B3 organ via Jimmy Smith to showcasing the gospel tinges of Horace Silver’s “hard bop” piano playing.¹ Yet when Lion decided to sell Blue Note to Liberty Records in 1965, then retiring from the label altogether two years later, many believed the new corporate situation dictated a new direction. It appeared to signal a move away from the “straight-ahead” jazz styles in which it had previously specialized. As the label name later changed ownership several times (today part of the conglomerate EMI) and the commercially-popular musical styles adjusted, so too did Blue Note’s roster and its musical direction. For example, the current roster combines “straight-ahead” jazz instrumentalists, such as Joe Lovano and Jason Moran, with commercially-successful vocalists, such as Norah Jones and Al Green. Some interesting questions emerge: What changes, both inside and outside of the Blue Note label, have altered the reputation and popular view of itself? What components make it a *jazz* label, or is it even a jazz label? With respect to its on-going history, how did Blue Note’s character change with its creation and destruction of its online bulletin board service?

Blue Note began as a predominantly-instrumental improvisation recordings outfit, due to its initial roster.² Lion had heard what was then termed “hot jazz” in his native Berlin.³ Years

¹ Richard Cook, *Blue Note Records: The Biography*, (Boston: Justin, Charles and Company, 2003): 8-12, 23-34, 36-37, 114-15, 118-21, 156-57.

² I use the term “predominantly” because some of the early artists who recorded for Lion were more of the “traditional” jazz, or collective improvisation, vein; boogie-woogie pianists also recorded for Lion, contributions which might be considered “ragtime,” but are often considered part of the “jazz tradition.”

³ Cook, 7. Lion saw Sam Wooding's "Chocolate Kiddies Revue" during their European tour of 1925.

later via his export job, he traveled to the United States and sought to fulfill his curiosity about this musical style. Eventually settling permanently in New York, Lion rented a studio to record Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis, two boogie-woogie style pianists. Soon Wolff worked for Lion's old boss Milton Gabler, who allowed them to use his Commodore network to distribute Blue Note records, and they found themselves selling recordings to the U.S. Army.⁴ The roster grew over time to include Sidney Bechet, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell. Piano players and collectively-improvised music formed much of the early output. What attributes make these recordings be considered *jazz*? For the most part they were improvising over repeating chord changes as a rhythm section performed "swinging" eighth-note-derived beat patterns. This type of underlying rhythmic implication related to ragtime and swing dance band music. Bechet was exceptional, not only through his use of the soprano saxophone – rarely used even until Coltrane's use – but also the timing of these recordings and his Creole heritage; the public waxed nostalgic for their music of yesteryear, and collectively-improvised music again gained popularity, albeit somewhat underground.

Many of the late 1940s and early 1950s sessions had been recorded in the WOR studios, but Gil Melle's insistence to Lion that he should meet Rudy Van Gelder resulted in another vital part of the Blue Note roster: the recording engineer. Although Van Gelder recorded for other labels, Blue Note's procedure differed in that scheduled rehearsals took place and Lion was particular about the resultant sound; subsequently, Van Gelder's engineering work for Blue Note became integral to the success of the music through its consistent quality.⁵ What makes him different from other engineers? For starters, Gelder, an optometrist by day (later closing his

⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁵ Dan Skea, "Rudy Van Gelder in Hackensack: Defining the Jazz Sound in the 1950s," *Current Musicology* 71-73 (Spring 2001-Spring 2002): 54. Van Gelder was present for many famous recording sessions and understood how to capture improvisations despite the often rapidly-changing dynamics and locations.

practice to record solely), built most of the electronic equipment he used, something most professional studios at the time did as well. For instance one could not simply buy a mixing board with certain standard features. Gelder recorded in settings such as his parents house or on location, doing his best to allow the musicians to simply perform – not be made uncomfortable by the whole process. Moreover, he became adept at procuring quality albums from live recordings in clubs, despite the laborious three-day procedure each entailed. In the 1950s, the roster included Art Blakey and Horace Silver, who recorded a live date at the club Birdland, creating this new challenge for Van Gelder, and the engineer met it. It is *his* sound – a particular equalization of the piano, organ (direct pedal wiring), bass, drums, and horns – that is part of Blue Note’s past reputation.

Blakey, Silver, Hank Mobley, Herbie Nichols, Jimmy Smith, Kenny Burrell, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, and Julian “Cannonball” Adderley all began to acquire a place in Blue Note’s stylistic history. These musicians were continuing the swing implications of the 1940s yet adding tinges of rhythm-and-blues, gospel, and soul – popular styles with their demographic. But when the 1960s arrived and the public’s musical tastes shifted, so too did transformations come about for the label. The commercial choice was changing: the British rock craze and rhythm-and-blues fad continued to gain momentum. Public interest in the type of instrumental genre Blue Note specialized began to wane.

With respect to its 1960s-changing reputation, Richard Cook believes the impetus arose just before Lion sold the label, following Blue Note’s hit single of Lee Morgan’s title track from *The Sidewinder* album. Featured in a television commercial for Chrysler, the song rose to number 25 on the Billboard LP chart.⁶ And “advertising, never a priority for the company, soon

⁶ Ibid., 183.

became more visible....”⁷ Lion and Wolff had not anticipated the popularity Morgan’s first hit had come to acquire, and they became anxious to continue building on the model product. They did this through promoting Morgan’s “The Rumproller,” which had the same type of long, blues groove as “The Sidewinder.”⁸ It did not succeed, mirroring the disappointing marketing results two years prior when hyping Herbie Hancock’s sophomore album, following the hit “Watermelon Man” from his freshman effort.⁹ Despite Lion’s sale of the label to Liberty Records helping in financial realms, the ordeals associated with large-label overseers proved too much for him.

Despite the successes of Wayne Shorter and Freddie Hubbard, Blue Note struggled to hold its soul- and hard bop- jazz identity into the 1970s. Although the musicians attempted to expand upon Miles Davis’s fusion concept of rock-like grooves, uncommon instrumentation, and free improvisational elements, vocal rock outsold instrumentals. Many of the old roster were gone or had left, and by 1979 the name was all but non-existent. However in the mid-1980s Michael Cuscuna, a Blue Note enthusiast, was hired by Bruce Lundvall, EMI’s choice for heading up Manhattan (a Blue Note rebirth label), and the two began to plan a revival. Lundvall found himself signing Bobby McFerrin, Dianne Reeves, and Cassandra Wilson – singers were beginning to take a greater place on the label than they ever had before. Previously, only Dodo Greene and Sheila Jordan held such clout on the label. The successes of these new singers helped support the reissue and remastering costs of the old recordings in the Blue Note catalog,

⁷ Ibid., 184.

⁸ Lee Morgan, *The Rumproller*, RVG Edition, Blue Note 7243 5 21229, 1999, compact disc. In Bob Blumenthal’s liner notes, he mentions, “Much of the charm of a surprise jazz hit...lies in its honest, unplotted feeling. Once a conscious effort is made to create the same effect, the results are usually a cut below.” “Commercially, both ‘The Rumproller’ and *The Rumproller* placed a distant second....”

⁹ Herbie Hancock, *My Point of View*, RVG Edition, Blue Note 7243 5 21226 2, 1999, compact disc. The attempt was even integrated into the Reid Miles-designed cover, the text reading, “Includes his new composition, ‘Blind Man, Blind Man.’”

preserving the history of the past instrumentalists along with the promotion of newer artists. However, such a business plan can have a price.

Using internet-presence research of Blue Note Records, snippets regarding a now-defunct entity known as the “Blue Note Bulletin Board” (BNBB) surface. As to what happened with Blue Note’s forum, further investigation revealed that several of the bulletin board’s former members relocated to the Allaboutjazz and Organissimo forums; their input reveals a glimpse into the demise of the BNBB. Apparently some believe that due to the BNBB’s lack of moderator intervention (a common practice on other popular online forums), spiteful and derogatory comments were becoming too frequent. Certain comments indicate that censoring software was integrated but made message-reading near impossible, asterisks occasionally appearing mid-word. Some also believe that Norah Jones popularity, predominantly among females, on the Blue Note label – considered by these fans to be a historically masculine, instrumental jazz outfit – made for great clashes in musical knowledge and taste. Many also purport that the BNBB contained a wealth of information regarding the recorded history of Blue Note – from speculations about Rudy Van Gelder’s microphone choices to the minutiae of who was to take Lee Morgan’s place on Grachan Moncur’s *Evolution*. This was all lost when the board was suddenly shut down.¹⁰ Despite a temporary internet page place-marker claiming that the new forum would be arriving May 1, 2003, nothing ever resurfaced. The BNBB was dead, and all of its informative posts had disappeared with it.

The webarchive.org does house some remnants of the old BNBB, but the posts do not reach into the time of its 2003 disappearance. Furthermore, some of the links to previous posts

¹⁰ “From The BNBB Treasure Trove,” *Organissimo Jazz Forums*. <<http://www.organissimo.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=1217&hl=>> (15 May 2003) accessed April 12, 2005. The date for demise of the boards appears to have begun on March 3, 2003.

do not work with regularity.¹¹ Yet there did appear to be a substantial enough BNBB community when an article regarding the BNBB's demise appeared even a year after the removal. The author of the article, purporting to have spoken with Blue Note representatives about the reasons for the site's closure, says, "...they seemed oblivious to the uproar they had caused their fan base, because quite honestly, these weren't their fan base anymore. Their fan base were the people buying Norah Jones records."¹² So with respect to Blue Note's mishandling of the closure of its online community, which coincidentally or otherwise occurred directly following Jones's multiple-Grammy winning night, some continue to place the blame on the new fans who seem ignorant of Blue Note's history and past roster.

Blue Note's future appears rather financially secure, following the successes of acts such as Jones. What makes its overall viability as a label both in the U.S. and overseas less certain is its copy-control protected CD medium, as complaints regarding its usage have shown up on Blue Note's current website album feedback areas.¹³ As technology and public trends change, so too will Blue Note's fan base and target market. When the EMI conglomerate took hold of the reins of the label, the agenda changed and so did the music. The dichotomy of jazz as art versus jazz as commercialized entertainment has always existed and continues to this day, but the music of the recorded past lives on through the independent few who have invested their passion into its viability in reissues, like Cuscuna and Lundvall. They are the new guard of the old jazz behind the label.

¹¹ "Blue Note Bulletin Boards," *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20020214225952/http://www.bluenote.com/bulletinboard/ubb-cgi/ultimatebb.cgi>>, accessed April 12, 2005.

¹² Bill McClosky, "Norah Jonestown," *MediaPost Advertising & Media Directory*, <http://www.mediapost.com/dtls_dsp_EmailInsider.cfm?fnl=040930> (30 September 2004), accessed April 7, 2005.

¹³ "Wayne Shorter – Night Dreamer," *Blue Note Records*, <<http://www.bluenote.com/detail.asp?SelectionID=10400>>, accessed April 7, 2005. This link is directly to Wayne Shorter's *Night Dreamer* reissue. Several visitors comments are of copy-protection "ruining" the sound of the reissues.

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