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Blue Note Records: A Singular Business Model

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Abstract

Founded in the late 1930s by two German immigrants who loved “hot jazz” and swing music, Blue Note grew into an iconic record label that produced some of the most celebrated recordings in jazz history. This paper looks at the history of the label with attention paid to its business model, business practices, and continuing legacy. The author concludes with speculation as to whether the Blue Note business model is relevant in the modern era.

Keywords: Blue Note Records, jazz recording, jazz record label, hard bop, Don Was, Bruce Lundvall, Alfred Lion, Francis Wolff, Art Blakey, Thelonius Monk, Rudy Van Gelder, Norah Jones, Reid Miles

Introduction

Some American brands are so iconic that their corporate marks are known around the world: think golden arches, mouse ears, or the bow tie-bedecked bunnies, for example. Americans are known far and wide for our brands representing business and commerce, popular culture, and popular entertainment.

We don't think of ourselves as exporters of art and culture, yet there is an American art export: jazz. It represents our collective and community spirit, and our rugged individualism, our history of racism, and our history of believing in equal chances for all. There's harmony, a way of thinking about music that we owe to our Western European ancestors, as well as the panoply of instruments developed there. And there's rhythm, man is there ever rhythm, thanks to the descendants of slaves who brought a rhythmic vitality directly from the drums and syncopation of Africa. Borne of trials and tribulations, hate and love, fear and courage: jazz is taking chances and figuring it out as you go along...jazz is America.

But what is the logo of jazz? Well, aficionados from Warsaw to Perth will tell you: it's that black oval and long rectangle, a strangely deconstructed musical note nestled against the iconic words: *BLUE NOTE*. Blue Note is more than just a record label; it is jazz music's Library of Congress, a compendium of music, album art, photography, and liner notes

that document much of the history of jazz. It is also one of the most enduring businesses in the recording industry.

Appropriate to this American story, two of the founding figures of Blue Note were immigrants. Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff had become fast friends in the go-go days of the 1920s Weimar Germany, listening to “hot jazz” in the clubs and cabarets of Berlin, the center of jazz in Europe at the time. According to Lion, quite by accident he had wandered into Berlin’s Admiralspalast and heard Sam Wooding and His Chocolate Kiddies revue. He was hooked. “It was the beat...It got in my bones!” (*Blue Note*, film 2007). From that moment on, he became obsessed with jazz and swing; along with his friend Wolff, Lion sought out recordings and tried to catch as many touring acts as he could.

Both Lion and Wolff were Jewish, and the rise of the Nazis forced them to flee Germany. They both landed permanently in New York City, Lion in 1937 and Wolff in 1939. In 1939, along with the support of American writer and musician Max Margulis, Lion started Blue Note Records. He was joined later that year by Wolff.

Pre-War Years

Jazz and swing music was the popular music of the day in the 1930s in the U.S., and New York was the center. It was also home of the music industry with numerous recording studios, radio stations, and broadcast facilities, not to mention such celebrated venues as the Cotton Club and Carnegie Hall. It was at Carnegie Hall, in a 1938 concert called “From Spirituals to Swing,” that Lion was said to have gotten the idea for a record label. Count Basie was performing, as were Big Joe Turner, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Albert Ammons, and Meade Lux Lewis, among others (Havens 2014, 42). It was only a couple of weeks later that pianists Ammons and Lewis agreed to make the first recording on the label that Lion had only recently imagined. A 1939 flyer for the label includes the following, which serves as its mission statement to this day:

Blue Note Records are designed simply to serve the uncompromising expression of hot jazz and swing, in general. Any particular style of playing which represents an authentic way of musical feeling is genuine expression. By virtue of its significance in place, time and circumstance, it possesses its own tradition, artistic standards and audi-

ence that keeps it alive. Hot jazz, therefore, is expression and communication, a musical and social manifestation, and Blue Note Records are concerned with identifying its impulse, not its sensational and commercial adornments. (Havens 2014, 50)

Clearly, from the beginning, this was a different kind of record label. Artists were paid to record, sure, but they were also paid for rehearsals. Food and drink was provided. Recording sessions were scheduled to meet musicians' schedules, sometimes at odd hours, so they could record after the jazz clubs closed. They were left to do what they do and play their music their own way.

This underlying philosophy, which still informs the label today, was a different kind of business model, more a labor of love and a love of the music than a business. Gil Mellé, artist and film composer who recorded on Blue Note beginning in 1953 and had five releases on the label, put it this way

[Lion] was a catalyst. A walking, living, human catalyst... he instinctively knew [who] had it down deep and he could draw that ability out of them and get it on a record, and he did it by not talking about record sales, and commercialism, and who the big names [were] on the date, he never got into that. He was interested in you and your thoughts and getting you to have an unrestricted flow of your ideas in his recordings. (*Blue Note* 2007)

Current Blue Note president Don Was—who has that original mission statement on his smart phone (Was 2015, interview)—echoed Mellé: “Running a company that trades in eclectic music and offers its artists ‘uncompromising expression’ contradicts most conventional business tenets” (Was 2015, *Billboard*).

Within a couple of years of its founding, Blue Note had its first “hit,” a version of George Gershwin’s *Summertime* by woodwind player Sidney Bechet. This provided needed cash to keep the company in business. More importantly, Lion and Wolff had begun documenting an era, the hot jazz and swing era that was quickly fading away. Within a few years, the catalog had grown, and by 1941 Blue Note had a roster of twenty-seven

recordings, including such artists as Bechet, Ammons, and Lewis, and also including drummer Sidney “Big Sid” Catlett, pianist Earl Hines, and guitarist Charlie Christian.

Unfortunately, World War II caused a major slow-down in the recording industry. Shellac for records was hard to come by, as were musicians to record. On top of that, Lion was drafted into the U.S. Army. Though Blue Note didn’t disappear, the label did go on hiatus.

Post-War Years

The post-war years were also marked by major changes in technology. Shellac was out and vinyl was in. Master recordings were being made on magnetic tape, invented by the Germans to propagate the speeches of Hitler, but reimagined by recording engineers to record music (Schoenherr 2002). The 78 rpm format was giving way to 45s, and 33½ long-playing high fidelity records. Some were experimenting with devices that allowed for recording more than one track at the same time, and others with stereophonic sound.

Blue Note needed to adapt. Consider: in 1945, its entire catalog consisted of ten-inch 78 rpm records and the industry was quickly moving to twelve-inch 33 rpm long-playing records. “Lion almost threw in the towel,” said Michael Cuscuna, recording executive, journalist, and now discographer of Blue Note records (*Blue Note* 2007). Though they were almost broke, Blue Note did change, making the technological upgrades necessary to stay in business, though just barely.

It was the artistic upgrades that really made the most lasting impression. Beginning in the early 1940s, Harlem-based jazz musicians began to push past the traditional dance grooves of swing and hot jazz, writing complicated angular melodies and adding complex harmonies to existing songs. A new kind of jazz was born: bebop. Bebop was less commercial than hot jazz and swing, with a much smaller audience.

Blue Note began recording bebop, and according to long-time Blue Note artist Lou Donaldson, Lion often relied on what he heard in clubs or what the musicians were recommending to decide whom to record. Indeed, Donaldson himself first met Lion at a gig at the epicenter of bebop, Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem (“Cause for Celebration” 2014). Lion continued to haunt jazz clubs and jam sessions for new talent his entire career (*Blue Note* 2007).

One early Lion “discovery” was pianist Thelonius Monk. A true

iconoclast in this already-challenging new style of jazz, Monk began recording with Blue Note in 1947. He was joined on his early sessions by drummer Art Blakey, who also led a group that recorded on Blue Note that same year. Lion was “in love” with Monk’s music (“Cause for Celebration” 2014). He made a number of recordings with the talented pianist/composer, who at the time was barely known outside of the club scene in New York City. Likewise, many of the other musicians that Lion recorded from 1947 to 1949 were known mainly in that same insular scene, artists such as Blakey, Tadd Dameron, Fats Navarro, James Moody, and Bud Powell. Though these early recordings did not sell very well at the time, many of them are now considered classics.

Early on, Max Margulis had withdrawn from the day-to-day business, whereas Lion’s introverted partner and friend Francis Wolff had been concentrating on the business side of things (*Blue Note* 2007). Additionally he began to photograph the recording sessions and the musicians in action. The team of Lion as producer, Wolff as photographer and label executive, and later on Reid Miles designing album covers, became a gold standard in the recording industry.

The Golden Age of Blue Note

Things took off for Blue Note in the 1950s. Miles Davis, Kenny Dorham, Kenny Burrell, Clifford Brown, and John Coltrane made records, some of which are now regarded as masterpieces. Coltrane’s *Blue Train* from 1957 was among those celebrated recordings, as was the 1958 *Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers*.

A common feature of these two classic recordings was the guiding hand of recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder, considered among the most important recording engineers of his generation. He was known for his professional manner in his studio in Hackensack, New Jersey (Monk wrote a tune in his honor, *Hackensack*), and was up-to-date with gear, but never got in the way of the music or the artists. Van Gelder himself said that what he was trying to accomplish was to, “let the musicians be heard the way they want to be heard” (Hovan 2004). Van Gelder was the chief engineer on many of the sessions in the Blue Note catalog from about 1953 until 1967.¹

That 1958 Blakey recording became popularly known as *Moanin’*, the title of the first track on the record and one that became a hit. Its mixture of bluesy licks, gospel chord progression, and propulsive backbeat

from Blakey defined a new style of jazz: “hard bop.” This kind of driving, swinging, soulful music became the staple of the Blue Note label for at least a dozen years and is an important part of the label’s legacy. Hard bop artists such as Donaldson, Horace Silver, Jimmy Smith, Donald Byrd, Stanley Turrentine, and Lee Morgan cut records for Blue Note, and some of their albums enjoyed commercial success. In some big cities, it even wouldn’t be unusual to find a Blue Note artist single or two on a jukebox (Cook 2001, 60). The team of Lion, Van Gelder, and Wolff was guiding this parade of great music. Finally, the label was enjoying a modicum of financial success.

A roster of the Blue Note recordings in the 1960s includes many artists who are now considered jazz greats: Herbie Hancock’s first albums as a leader were on Blue Note, including the influential *Maiden Voyage*. Saxophonists Wayne Shorter and Dexter Gordon, and trumpeter Freddie Hubbard also led landmark sessions during that period, producing a string of creative and important albums. Some of the most important innovators in jazz, performers and composers who stretched the very definition of the music, were captured by the Lion-Wolf-Reid-Van Gelder team. Avant-garde multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy cut several significant albums for Blue Note, as did saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman. Cecil Taylor, whose edgy and difficult music was dubbed “tough jazz,” recorded two albums. Indeed, *The New York Times* noted in Alfred Lion’s 1987 obituary, “Almost every major jazz player through the late 1960’s recorded for Blue Note at one time or another, either as a group leader or a sideman.”

Decline and Rebirth

Though Lion had received many offers to buy Blue Note before, by 1965 he was feeling tired and in declining health. Years of late night sessions and nonstop work, always working with shoestring budgets, likely influenced Lion to sell to Liberty Records that year (Cook 2001, 186). Nothing seemed to change at first, so the team carried on as before. (The aforementioned Taylor albums were from this Liberty period, recorded in 1966.)

But things did change and Lion didn’t like it. He was used to making decisions himself, not going through a cadre of “suits.” Lion and Wolff had always been as invested in the music as the musicians themselves; this new corporate thing just wasn’t working out for him (Cook 2001, 186).

Lion retired from the label in 1967, followed quickly by Van Gelder.

Francis Wolff stayed on, and was joined by trumpeter and composer Duke Pearson, who had been an A&R man for Blue Note since 1963. They struggled along in an environment that became more and more difficult. Sadly, what had been a musician's label was quickly changing, while at the same time, listeners were turning away from jazz and hard bop. To make matters worse, Wolff died suddenly of a heart attack on March 8, 1971.

After the retirement of Lion and Van Gelder, and the death of Wolff, the label twisted in the wind for nearly all of the 1970s. Duke Pearson had moved on to Atlantic Records. Many of the artists' careers were either stagnating, or they too had moved on. Freddie Hubbard had moved to Creed Taylor's label CTI, Wayne Shorter had joined up with keyboardist Joe Zawinul to form jazz-fusion group *Weather Report*, where they joined Herbie Hancock on Columbia Records. Chick Corea and his group *Return to Forever* were recording for a new German label, ECM.

The depth and scope of Blue Note's unissued catalog remained. Lion and Wolff had obsessively recorded, session after session, year after year. Many sessions were "in the vault," including unreleased material by dozens of artists, from Monk and Coltrane to Turrentine and Byrd. Since Liberty had been bought by EMI, the Blue Note catalog went with it. And there it sat, languishing.

In 1984, the EMI brass asked Bruce Lundvall, who had led Elektra records and Elektra Jazz, to rebuild Blue Note and that he did. "It's not out of line to say that there would be no Blue Note Records today without [Lundvall's] herculean efforts to keep the label up and running during his 30 years at the helm," wrote Don Was (Was 2015, *Billboard*). What guided Lundvall was what guided Lion and Wolff: love of the music. Lundvall had been buying Blue Notes records since the early 1950s, and was a fan himself (Havens 2014, 338). Likewise, he understood the legacy of Blue Note and the importance of the "vault."

He wasn't alone in that. Michael Cuscuna had been trying to get access to the catalog for years. When he finally did get a look at what they had, he was astonished (Havens 2014, 339). Cuscuna, "who had become obsessed with the 'undiscovered' Blue Note" (Cook 2001, 205), had begun the process of releasing some of this vault material in the late 1970s. Lundvall, who also understood the depth of the unreleased materials, encouraged Cuscuna and accelerated the process of issuing recordings on the Blue Note label that had either never been released, or were out of print and could be successfully rereleased.

In addition to celebrating the legacy of Blue Note, Lundvall sought out new artists for the label, particularly vocalists, who had been mostly ignored by Lion and Wolff. Lundvall signed Dianne Reeves and Bobby McFerrin, for example, who enjoyed artistic and commercial success at Blue Note, especially McFerrin with his 1988 *Don't Worry, Be Happy*. Vocalists Cassandra Wilson and Kurt Elling were also signed, along with contemporary groups such as the Brian Blade Fellowship and Medeski Martin & Wood. He also signed guitarist Stanley Jordan, who had a breakout “hit” with his debut record. The nostalgia for the hard bop sound—there were hard bop dance clubs cropping up in England with people dancing to early Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers records (for example, DJ Smash) (*Blue Note* 2007)—along with demand for the new compact disc format helped with demand for reissues, and Blue Note answered the call.

Blue Note’s most important new artist during the Lundvall years was vocalist and pianist Norah Jones, whose 2002 *Come Away with Me* marked the label’s most successful album of all time, garnering eight Grammy Awards in 2003, and breaking sales records for a Blue Note release with over 26 million copies sold to date. Still, it was not sales that was driving Lundvall in his decision-making. “One of the things that most impressed me about Bruce was that he loved the art,” said Cuscuna. “Jazz was to him [an] art and he wanted to promote artists” (“Cause for Celebration” 2014).

The Present and Future of Blue Note

Bruce Lundvall stepped down as a full-time executive in 2010. His replacement in 2012 was Don Was, best known for producing Bonnie Raitt and the Rolling Stones. Was won a Grammy for producing Raitt’s *Nick of Time* in 1989, and the Rolling Stones won a Grammy for Best Record in 1995, which Was produced. Since taking the helm, he has energized the roster, and celebrated the legacy artists. He brought back trumpeter and composer Terence Blanchard, who had recorded three albums for Blue Note in the early 2000s (but had moved to the Concord jazz label in 2009), as well as re-signing the venerable Wayne Shorter. Additionally, the label released several new records by Robert Glasper, as well as a project by Elvis Costello and The Roots. Was signed singer Gregory Porter, who in 2014 won a Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album.

He has added a number of emerging jazz artists to the Blue Note roster, too, many of whom aren’t easily categorized, such as Derrick Hodge, Kendrick Scott, Lionel Loueke, Marcus Strickland, and Ambrose Akin-

musire. “Blue Note releases have traditionally challenged the status quo and pushed the envelope,” said Was, when asked about the label’s future. “True fans of the label know this and would expect nothing less!” (Was 2015, interview)

Blue Note, now owned by Universal Music Group, is moving ahead under Was’ leadership. A musician himself, he recalls the moment in 1966 when he first heard a Blue Note track, a tune called *Mode for Joe* by tenor sax man Joe Henderson. According to Was, it was a defining moment: “I immediately wanted more,” he said (Havens 2014, 359). Indeed, he is well aware of the philosophy that has been the driving force at Blue Note since the beginning. “Mr. Lion’s [original mission] statement is sublime and perfect,” said Was. “If we follow that, we can’t go wrong.” (Was 2015, interview)

Was also understood that Lundvall had attempted to continue the legacy of Lion and Wolff:

When I started looking at the deals he’d made [for Blue Note], it was clear that he’d always been the artist’s advocate: He was extremely generous to them and always on their side. The hallmark of his tenure is that he proved that you can do the right thing for the music and the musicians and still run a profitable company. (Chinen 2014)

“It was clear from the beginning that our job was to keep on pushin’,” said Was, who added, “My hope is that Blue Note continues to be a place where artists love to make music, where they know they will be treated with respect and encouraged to aim high, and the fans will continue to feel that the Blue Note name is synonymous with authenticity, excellence, and absolute coolness” (Was 2015, interview).

The Legacy of Blue Note’s Business Model

The legacy of Lion and Wolff, and their business model, seems intact. “This is some of the greatest music this country has produced,” said Larry Appelbaum, jazz historian at the United States Library of Congress. And consider the chances that Lion and Wolff took: paying for rehearsals, signing unknown or underground artists, and even consistently paying royalties to the artists. “[W]hile other labels stiffed artists on royalties, Blue Note paid them what they were owed,” said Appelbaum (“Cause for

Celebration” 2014). Not only that, but Blue Note, unlike many other labels issuing jazz, encouraged original compositions, compositions that became popular in their own right, including in the hip-hop community where the vibrant grooves of hard bop and the Blue Note 1970s sound have been recycled through digital sampling and remixes.

A few of the old guard, including Van Gelder, grumble about the eclectic nature of its artist roster, particularly as Lion brought in the avant-garde artists such as Cecil Taylor (Cook 2001, 188), not to mention the fusion artists in the 1970s and beyond. Lately, the roster has diversified even more, including releases by Willie Nelson, Elvis Costello, and Van Morrison.

Was spoke to that issue of change in a recent interview on National Public Radio:

In this kind of music, change is in the DNA. You’re supposed to play the music differently every night. You’re not supposed to repeat yourself. You’re always supposed to be pushing the threshold, and the history of Blue Note records is one of a kind of revolutionary change in music. (“Cause for Celebration” 2014)

Perhaps as important as anything to the success of Blue Note was the leaders who loved the music. Lion and Wolff knew what made jazz work. “You know what they recognized? They could recognize when something was ‘groovin’ and when it wasn’t,” noted Herbie Hancock in an interview for German filmmaker Julian Benedikt. “He would say: ‘Eets not schwinging!’” joked Lou Donaldson imitating Lion’s accent. “They knew when it was happening and when it didn’t feel good,” added bassist Bob Cranshaw (*Blue Note* 2007). The same can be said of Lundvall: “Bruce fought the law, defied the rules and proved that serving the music and the musicians was beneficial to both art and commerce,” wrote Was in a remembrance of Lundvall, who just passed away May 19, 2015 (Was 2015, *Billboard*).

Whether this model can be sustained is definitely open to question, and the grumblers (Van Gelder again among them) still think that everything went wrong after Lion sold out to Liberty Records in 1965. With the exception of the 1970s, the evidence suggests that this business can survive, and quite possibly thrive. In spite of the corporate takeover, Blue Note has managed to retain its original indie label feel, with the music

and musicians still seeming to have a say in the music that they record. Originality is still celebrated, rather than feared. Just as importantly, it is the legacy of the leaders of Blue Note, from Lion and Wolff, to Lundvall and Was, who have kept the original mission—and its unusual business model—in mind: for the love of the art.

Is the Blue Note business model a viable one for a new record label, or for any kind of music concern in the twenty-first century? That is a much more complicated question. The legacy of Blue Note and the history that the label's name evokes is part of its current success. Even though it is a solid brand now, and seems to be on a steady course, it is not an independent company and Blue Note executives must answer to higher-ups in the Universal Music Group.

Still, running a business for the “love of the art” is not an unusual business plan for musicians today: think of the many musicians who think nothing of “paying to play” in Hollywood or Brooklyn clubs, or bands who give away their music online to build their fan base for live gigs. Perhaps Marsha Sinetar was really on to something when she wrote in her 1989 book, *Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow*: “Burning desire to be or do something gives us staying power—a reason to get up every morning or to pick ourselves up and start in again after a disappointment.” Don't musicians need this “staying power” to survive as musicians? Though no one will deny that making a profit is what keeps a business afloat—for the individual gigging musician as much as the large corporation—Blue Note's notion of business done “for the love of the art” or because of “burning desire” is not a radical one in the current climate in which making money in the music business is harder than ever.

Endnotes

1. Not all jazz musicians were fans of Van Gelder. Some complained that he used too much reverb. Bassist and composer Charles Mingus was a critic: “[Van Gelder] changes people’s sounds,” said Mingus (Priestley).

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