

Jazz Goes Independent

by Leonard Maltin

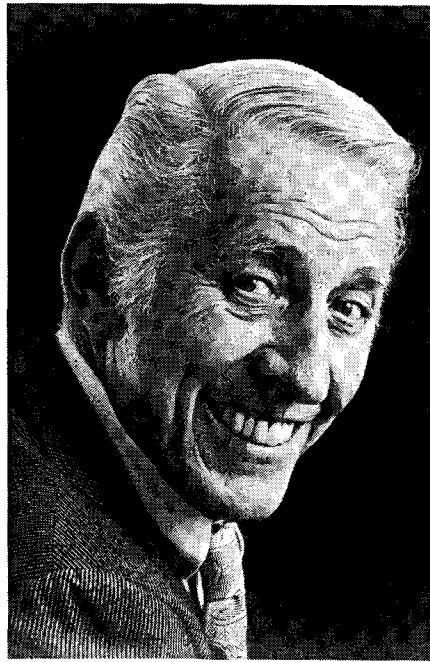
Stan Kenton, Marian McPartland, George Shearing, and the World's Greatest Jazz Band are among the growing number of jazz artists who have gone independent by manufacturing and marketing their own records. The idea is hardly new—there have been private labels for years—but the development of mail-order businesses by major jazz names is a recent trend.

While creative freedom is a factor in the move toward independent recordings, economic survival is certainly the major reason. Bandleader Kenton, whose company is now the largest in this field, started thinking about dissolving his long-time association with Capitol Records about five years ago.

He explains, "The problem was that when they started mass merchandising records, putting them into supermarkets and drugstores and so forth, they only wanted to put on those racks the records that would sell to most of the people most of the time, which of course was kids' music and country and western. There was no jazz to be found. I felt that all of us in jazz were going down a one-way, dead-end street, and if I didn't do something, I was going to be out of business eventually. So that's what put the Creative World record company in business: the need to be represented."

To get started, Kenton arranged to lease the master pressings of his Capitol records and re-issue them on his new label; in the four ensuing years he has added eight new releases, ranging from a solo-piano endeavor to several live big-band concerts. The Creative World catalog now offers more than fifty different Kenton albums and several more by new young musicians endorsed by the bandleader.

Being on the road most of the year gives Kenton a unique opportunity to promote his mail-order business, to sign up new recruits for his mailing list at every concert here and abroad, and to sell the albums themselves in the lobbies of



Willard Alexander Agency
Stan Kenton—Jazz records by mail.

high school and college auditoriums where the band appears. The process has become self-generating: The concerts spark interest in the albums, which promote interest in future concerts, etc. Creative World now has a mailing list of approximately 110,000 in the United States and an additional 20,000 abroad.

At the other end of the spectrum is Blossom Dearie, the delightful singer-pianist whose home base is New York. Like many other gifted performers, Blossom

has a coterie of followers in Manhattan but little opportunity to promote her new record album anyplace west of the city. In the pre-rock era, people like Blossom Dearie recorded regularly for major companies, but in recent years she and a great many other fine musicians have been lost in the shuffle. Her last American record was made for Capitol, ten years ago.

Yet word of mouth and the published praise of such influential admirers as Rex Reed, John S. Wilson, and Whitney Balliett have generated encouraging sales for Blossom's first homegrown recording, *Blossom Dearie Sings*. "It's going along slowly," she says, "but it's all right. I'm writing songs for my second album now, and I'm hoping to advertise a little more, but advertising is expensive. So far I've just been depending on the reviews as a form of free advertising." She is more satisfied with her own disk than with her previous outings for Capitol and Verve, which "had no promotion at all and just got lost." Obviously, with only one record to care about, there is no chance of this one being ignored in the machinery of Blossom Enterprises.

As tough as it is for established professionals to make their message known, their problems are minimal when compared with those of young jazz musicians who don't have reputation or renown working for them. Recognizing this fact, the New York-based Jazz Composers' Orchestra set up the New Music Distribution Service two years ago in an attempt to cut through the red tape and break through the brick walls faced by jazz artists who deal in free-form and avant-garde music.

This non-profit, non-commercial service, employing three full-time workers, offers some 130 titles from fifty independent labels to mail-order customers, as well as an informal network of 400 stores across the country that have been receptive to the NMDS "product." The sales figures are generally small, but there is no way to arbitrarily judge success or failure. "We have records by people who don't have any kind of name in the commercial market," staffer Bill Ewell explains. "In cases like that, we have sold perhaps a hundred records in four months, which is nothing compared with a commercial hit, but on the other hand, these people would not have the chance to record with a big company. In a sense, it's an accomplishment to sell enough records within a year to pay for the first pressing." Thus the NMDS makes it pos-



Teddy Wilson—High artistic level.

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sible for an unknown performer to acquire an audience, however small by commercial standards. At the same time, the service does quite well with records from the Strata-East catalog, which includes the work of such musicians as Stanley Cowell and Charles Tolliver, who have already established themselves as important figures in the new-music movement.

The service is seeking funding and contributions in order to increase its manpower and to put salesmen on the road, covering the country, dealing with radio stations, and creating interest in these recordings.

Following is a list of addresses for some of the major jazz artists now distributing their work by mail. A thorough listing of every private jazz label is not possible at this time, and we apologize to those whose names are not included:

Creative World Inc. (Stan Kenton), P.O. Box 35216, Los Angeles, California 90035

Blossom Enterprises Ltd. (Blossom Dearie), P.O. Box 522, Radio City Station, New York, New York 10019
Sheba Records (George Shearing), P.O. Box 2120, North Hollywood, California 91602

Eubie Blake Music, 284-A Stuyvesant Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11221
Anita O'Day Records, Box 442, Hesperia, California 92345

Mary Records (Mary Lou Williams), P.O. Box 32, Hamilton Grange, New York 10031

The Four Freshmen, 8720 Woodley Avenue, Sepulveda, California 91343

Halcyon Records (Marian McPartland), 302 Clinton Street, Bellmore, New York 11710

World Jazz Records (World's Greatest Jazz Band), c/o J.B. Hickox, 4350 E. Camelback Road, Phoenix, Arizona 85018

Other sources:

New Music Distribution Service, 6 West Ninety-fifth Street, New York, New York 10025

Seeds Records (Musicians Recording Co-op), RFD, Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts 02568

Chiaroscuro Records, 173 Christopher Street, New York, New York 10014

Master Jazz Recordings, Box 579, Lenox Hill Station, New York, New York 10021

Choice Records, 245 Tilley Place, Sea Cliff, New York 11579

Pianist Mary Lou Williams reaffirms the importance of radio exposure. "People buy what they hear on the radio," she contends. She is finishing work on her third album, *Zoning*, and hopes just to make back her investment if possible.

Another pianist, Marian McPartland, feels that "even if I lost lots of money out of my own pocket, always having a new record is a form of publicity. And it's very satisfying." Her Halcyon Records was "born out of frustration, because I wasn't getting recorded, at least not the way I wanted to." With the help of a wealthy friend, the late Sherman Fairchild, she got to record the things she really wanted to and was able to engage in "fun" projects like a twin-piano album with Teddy Wilson. Now, she says, "it's getting to be a way of life," with her Long Island home filled to the rafters with records, and neighborhood people helping out with the mailings when she's on the road.

Halcyon also gave birth to another label, as its part-time recording engineer, jazz buff Hank O'Neal, established Chiaroscuro Records, a one-man labor-of-love outfit that has presented such impressive names as Teddy Wilson, Gene Krupa, and Earl "Fatha" Hines. Says O'Neal, "My aim has been to record just what I like, to try and keep the artistic level as high as I possibly can, and to be totally unconcerned with the commercial value of what I'm doing. I think that's the best way to get good music down on disk."

O'Neal discovered that many major jazz talents were being ignored by record companies and were more than happy to work with him, knowing that the monetary reward might be small but the finished product would be a worthwhile record that would stay in print for years to come. The enthusiasm spread to include the artists, photographers, and writers who have been featured on the record jackets. An upcoming album with traditionalist jazzmen Dick Wellstood and Kenny Daverne will have liner notes by William F. Buckley, a longtime Wellstood admirer.

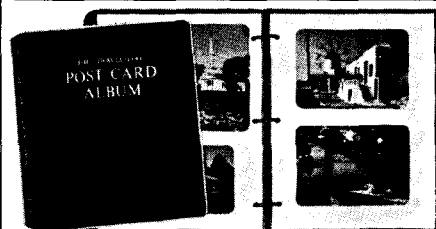
Chiaroscuro is still a part-time, non-profit operation, but O'Neal hopes to turn the financial corner within the next year. He has just acquired a national distributor, Audio Fidelity, which has also picked up the World's Greatest Jazz Band's private label.

Other ambitious producers and jazzophiles have established their own labels, both recording new material and re-issu-

ing older rarities; the list is endless. What these people have proven is that there is a demand for good jazz of all kinds, and if the major record companies can't be bothered with anything but big-selling rock groups, there are people who will make the effort to put this music on disk and somehow find their audience. □

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Sherrill Milnes in title role of Don Giovanni—An authentic baritone.

First Pinza, Then Siepi, Now Milnes

by Irving Kolodin

Don Giovanni may not be the male opera singer's Hamlet, but good new ones come along just about as infrequently—every other decade or so. Sherrill Milnes is such a good new one, and his easy assumption of the Don's responsibilities at the Metropolitan this spring promises good things to come on stages elsewhere in America and around the world.

At the risk of defaming whatever esteem lingers for the good old days, it must be said that Milnes is better, at this beginning point of his career, in the great role than were either Ezio Pinza or Cesare Siepi. This doesn't guarantee that he will go on to challenge the high distinction they eventually achieved. But if he doesn't, it will be for lack of follow-

through—a most un-Donish attribute—not of aptitude.

Milnes is tall enough to dominate the stage, though perhaps he would have to give an inch or two to Pinza. He lacks the Latin ardor to which Pinza and Siepi were heirs by birth, also the spark of electric vigor that sent a nervous shudder through every motion of George London's characterization. But he has one asset, in addition to his fine physique, for giving his effort the old college (Drake University) try that is not possessed by the others: His voice is the authentic baritone for which Mozart wrote, not the bass-baritone to which recent custom has been partial.

As a result, Milnes is comfortably in the middle of his range throughout, undeterred by the necessities either of the "champagne" air or the Serenade. The casting, which brought on, as Leporello, the solidly substantial bottom sound of Walter Berry (celebrated as performer of such basic roles as Wotan, Baron Ochs, and Dyer in Strauss's *Frau ohne Schatten*), provided the proper sonorous spread for ravishing tonal blends in the ensembles with Donna Anna (Leontyne

Price), Donna Elvira (Teresa Zylis-Gara), Zerlina (Teresa Stratas), and Don Ottavio (Stuart Burrows). As disciplined by the lightly flexible hand of James Levine, the totality of timbres can stand for years as a new Mozartian standard.

By an accident of economics, which forbade the planned investment in a new production, Eugene Berman's classic designs were reinstated. This was in every way welcome, for they have attained, through years of careful usage, a patina that provides a lustrous background for the vocal sparkle of Price, Zylis-Gara, and Burrows in the Mask Trio. When such a relatively brief but dazzling episode arouses the audience response it deserves, the star of Mozart is high in the evening sky.

This is not to say that the Met's general manager, Schuyler Chapin, can sit back on a cushion of self-esteem, under the illusion that another masterpiece has been wholly accounted for. Act 1, which may be the longest sustained flight of musical fantasy in operatic history, was dead on target from the propulsive overture to the ball in the Don's castle an hour later. But Act 2, which is not so consistently director-proof, stumbled from time to time for lack of positive intent in the action supervised by Patrick Tavernia.

Librettist Lorenzo da Ponte left a series of hazards and obstacles along the way to the Don's confrontation with the statue that provides an unexpected answer to the question, Guess who's coming to dinner? Tavernia did not sidestep any of them: Indeed, whether the problem was the impersonation of Don Giovanni by Leporello or the masquerade of the servant by the master, each was stumbled over, kicked around for laughs, and left for deadweight in this staging. Given the option between fake comedy and dramatic truth, platitudinous sentiment and affecting emotion, Tavernia's instinct led him unfailingly to the wrong choice. The conclusion would have to be that he didn't believe that the Mozart who wrote Act 1 also wrote Act 2.

FORTUNATELY, this was not an attitude shared either by the singers or conductor Levine. Miss Price doesn't command the flexibility to make her performance of *Non mi dir*, late in Act 2, as memorable a moment as her vengeful "Honor" aria in Act 1, but the effort expended on one emanated from the same sense of serious purpose as the other. In the ensembles, the shining sound she produced was a