

The Jazz Scene

Frank Kofsky

1967

Probably no sector of American capitalism displays more cutthroat competitiveness than the recording industry. Entry into the field is, unlike the case in basic industries such as auto and steel, still relatively unrestricted. Any adventurer with a couple of thousand dollars can get an LP produced (even less for a 45 rpm single) and—who knows?—if he is lucky can make it supremely big. Such is the story of Barry Gordy of Motown Records and, on a much reduced scale, of Bernard Stollman of ESP, for whose label the surprisingly red-hot Fugs record.

On the other hand, the descent can be just as steep and unexpected as the ascent. The Fugs may be booming today—but tomorrow you may not be able to give their records away. What the public has made the public can unmake: shifts in taste are largely unpredictable, which means that the record company owner—who may in fact own nothing more than a trademark and subcontract for the actual recording and packaging processes—with one hit single or LP and an ulcerated colon is in a frantic and ceaseless search for that miraculous item that will continue to bring in the bread once his current seller starts the dizzying plunge down, down, down the sales sheets.

The major companies like RCA and Columbia are somewhat better off because, with large amounts of liquid capital at their disposal, they can “diversify their catalog” (as they put it) to be ahead of the game no matter how the public taste breaks. Of course many or more of their guesses will be bad ones—money losers—but their greater reserves enable them to ride out their losses until the big hit comes along. Add to that the fact that the majors have the budget to sign up the most promising new performers and to promote the hell out of all their releases, and you can understand why they can afford to take a more relaxed view of the scene.

Even the specialty house, for that matter, is in a comparatively secure position. A firm such as Blue Note in the jazz field, for instance, can depend on a certain minimum sales for its established artists. So long as this type of company keeps abreast of the latest developments (and so long as there are no sudden economic downturns to curtail luxury spending), it will continue to haul in fairly steady returns to investments.

By comparison, the recording capitalist on the make leads a life that would make *The Perils of Pauline* seem sedate. When all of the executives for the majors have long since gone home, he will still be in his office, jabbering excitedly over the phone or screaming at his hapless employees. His ears have grown to abnormal proportions—the result of listening to every crackpot who thinks that *he* is the formula for the next big record. Knowing little or nothing about anything besides “the charts” (best sellers lists) and caring even less, he will record like a madman, provided only that there is at least a thousand-to-one chance of success and he can do it all on his usual schlock house bargain-basement budget. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you—the vanishing American entrepreneur.

One of the places to which our distraught but aspiring record magnate will ultimately turn is the new music. Not that, as Don Heckman maintains in *Down Beat Music '67*, 1966 was “the year of the breakthrough for the jazz avant-garde.” Not yet. But 1966 was the year from which that breakthrough began to become visible lurking around the next corner. *Down Beat* readers, to mention only one bit of evidence, chose records by Ornette Coleman, John Handy, John Coltrane, and Herbie Hancock—all more or less identified with the new music—as their first four favorites and elected Coleman as “Jazzman of the Year.” If spring is here, can summer be far behind?

And so the stampede to record the new music while it is still possible to get a piece of the action at today's ground-floor prices begins. Naturally the majors, with their greater resources, can skim off the cream of the talent. Looked at through the other end of the telescope, the best-known artists will get themselves a contract or at least a recording date with Columbia, Impulse, Blue Note—companies that (usually) pay the musicians fairly well and, equally important, are willing and able to spend money advertising their releases. The unknowns, on the other hand, will be less fortunate: they are more likely to wind up in the clutches of our hero, the aggressive record man on the make.

By now that worthy will somehow or other have discovered the new music. Perhaps he has a Near friend—or maid; or maybe he has picked up a scrap of industry gossip. In any case, he has fixed on the idea that here lies virgin soil, only awaiting the magic of his tenderly exploitative touch to blossom out in lush profits.

fifth Estate

Frank Kofsky
The Jazz Scene
1967

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/26-march-15-31-1967/the-jazz-scene>
Fifth Estate #26, March 15-31, 1967

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net