

Blue Note Records Doc 'Beyond the Notes': 7 Things We Learned <https://www.rollingstone.com/>

Film tells the story of the most legendary label in jazz
— and illustrates how it's still thriving in the present

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Musicians young and old drop a lot of heavy-duty **jazz** wisdom throughout *Beyond the Notes*, a new documentary about Blue Note Records that features commentary from the label's Sixties stars such as Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter and new-school trailblazers like Robert Glasper and Ambrose Akinmusire. But the film's single most eloquent statement might come from A Tribe Called Quest's Ali Shaheed Muhammad who, reflecting on how Blue Note's output fueled his own art through sampling, says that improvisation is akin to “finding a portal that you can transcend your entire self through.”

The film, directed by Sophie Huber, contains a lot of this kind of deeply reverent, even awestruck commentary — at one point, current Blue Note president Don Was explains how putting on Wayne Shorter's 1964 Blue Note classic *Speak No Evil* is basically his own form of meditation. Thankfully, the doc has more than enough historical clout to back up its many paeans. Blending a straightforward chronology of the label from its 1939 origins up to the present day with footage of a recent recording session featuring an intergenerational cast of Blue Note all-stars, *Beyond the Notes* lays out exactly what made Blue Note stand apart from other jazz labels — and why its catalog has taken on an almost sacred quality among musicians and fans.

Ahead of the film's **New York** and **L.A.** premieres on June 14th and 28th, respectively, and national screenings and a DVD release later this year, here are seven things we learned from the film.

1. The label's co-founders, German immigrants who fled the Nazis, were more fans than businessmen.

In an archival audio interview early in the film, we hear the label's two co-founders, Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff, discussing their respective jazz epiphanies, which happened in Berlin around the mid-Twenties. "My recollection is that I liked the music tremendously, but I didn't understand it," Wolff says. "I couldn't follow it, but I just liked it."

Lion recalls a similar sensation. "I felt the music," he says. "And not knowing actually what made me feel it... It must have been the beat and the way the music came about, it came across to me. And I was so impressed, that I felt I would like to go out and make some records myself with them ... for my own enjoyment. That's how it started."

Both Jewish, the two left Germany in the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution and founded Blue Note in New York in 1939. In the early days, their passion far outweighed their knowledge of the business. "They were fans," current Blue Note president Don Was says of the duo. "They were rabid fans. I think there were just records that they wanted to hear, so they decided they were gonna make 'em."

Trailer Beyond the Notes Video
<https://youtu.be/6D0uVDnCOR4>

2. Artists quickly recognized that music was Blue Note's first priority. Saxophonist Lou Donaldson, whose bluesy, hard-grooving style helped to define one aspect of the label's golden era-era sound, points out in the film that Lion and Wolff stood apart from many of their "cheap" record-company peers at the time. "They was a bunch of

scoundrels,” Donaldson says of others in the business that he worked with at the time. “But not Alfred; Alfred was not like that. He just let us do what we wanted to do and if he had a suggestion he might come around and say one or two things. He didn’t know that much about music and he didn’t bother musicians. He respected everybody.”

Herbie Hancock, who made classic, boundary-pushing albums such as *Maiden Voyage* for the label in the early-to mid-Sixties, felt similarly. “Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff and [Blue Note house engineer] Rudy Van Gelder, they were trying to support the goal that we were always seeking which is to allow the music to emerge without being shackled,” the pianist says in the film.

A statement by Lion clarifies the label’s art-before-commerce ethos. “Any record we ever made, we were never really figuring on a hit,” he says. “If later on the thing became successful, it just happened to become successful, but we didn’t make the record with that intent to make a hit.”

Thelonius Monk

https://youtu.be/1VhLQ0_SHM0

3. Blue Note gave Thelonious Monk a shot when no other label would. After a period focused on Dixieland and swing, Lion and Wolff turned their attention to bebop. One of their first signings in that area was Thelonious Monk, now revered as one of the most brilliant minds in all of 20th-century music. But at the time they brought him on, in 1947, to make his first recordings, the pianist was still a cult figure, beloved mainly by fellow musicians.

“The reaction was mixed,” Lion says in the film of the first Monk recordings Blue Note put out. “Some liked him very much, and some thought he was terrible.”

Michael Cuscuna, a producer and historian who would play a key role in the later era of Blue Note, explains how Lion

recorded four lengthy sessions with Monk before Blue Note even released its first 78 of the pianist's music.

“As luck would have it, Monk didn't sell at all,” Cuscuna says. “Most people didn't understand the music, so it got a lot of resistance. And Alfred stayed with Monk for about five years; then he just had to let it go, because he had sunk so much money into it and it was jeopardizing the label. But Alfred was that way; he'd stand behind what he believed in, even if it wasn't selling.”

According to Donaldson, “Without Blue Note, you probably would have never heard of Monk. Because the other companies, like Columbia [Monk's later label] and Capitol, they wouldn't record him... But Alfred did.”

4. When label co-founder Francis Wolff started dancing in the studio, musicians knew that take was a keeper. Some of the film's most charming scenes show musical soulmates Shorter and Hancock reflecting and swapping Blue Note lore. At one point, during a break in the recording of the all-star session, we see Hancock start to shimmy toward Shorter, laughing as he does a funny little dance. “Hey Wayne,” the pianist asks his friend, “who's this?” “That's Frank Wolff,” Shorter answers, and the two crack up. Hancock goes on to explain that the inept but heartfelt moves of the Blue Note co-founder — whose gorgeous in-studio photos of musicians during the label's sessions are seen throughout the film — were a key barometer of how a given Blue Note session was going. “If you played, and Frank was dancing, that was the take,” Hancock explains. “If he wasn't dancing, that was not the take.”

The Sidewinder Lee Morgan

<https://youtu.be/NHN6-yWFKPc>

5. Two fluke hits caused growing pains, and eventually led to the end of Blue Note's first golden age. Cuscuna explains how in the mid-Sixties, Blue Note “accidentally” scored big hits with “The Sidewinder” and “Song for My Father,” hard-bop classics by trumpeter Lee Morgan and pianist Horace Silver, respectively. This was good news in the short term, but created issues for a label that had always put music first.

“Once they had two very big, successful records, a problematic economics came into play,” Cuscuna explain. “Distributors were pressing them to deliver more hits, and Alfred just wanted to keep producing Blue Note records as usual and not worry about a hit. So the distributors started to slow down paying the label. ... And so, there was a major cash-flow problem.”

This eventually led to the sale of the label, in 1966, to Liberty Records. “The new people that bought the company, all they wanted was to sell records,” Lou Donaldson notes in the film.

6. New president Bruce Lundvall helped to restore Blue Note's original mission statement. Blue Note went dormant by the end of the Seventies, but fortunately, the label's saga has a happy ending. New president Bruce Lundvall oversaw a relaunch of Blue Note in the 1984, with crucial help from Cuscuna, and would eventually find great success both by making the label's catalog available for sampling, and by signing new artists from Norah Jones to Robert Glasper.

In the Lundvall era, the label returned to the Lion/Wolff model of putting the artists first. “Once he signed me, I went into his office with a plan of my album, what I wanted to do,” Glasper recalls,” and Bruce stopped me and said, ‘Don't

worry about that — you're the artist; make the art. It's our job to sell it.”

“The reason I love being on this label is because I've always felt like I had that freedom to make my own music and do whatever I want,” Jones adds. “And I don't feel confined by the restrictions of the jazz genre.”

7. Blue Note's partnership with Us3 foreshadowed the current jazz/hip-hop crossover. In 1993, the label made the crucial decision to allow the U.K. hip-hop group Us3 (named after a Blue Note session by pianist Horace Parlan) to sample Herbie Hancock's “Cantaloupe Island,” a piece from his 1964 Blue Note album *Empyrean Isles*. “They said, ‘You're gonna stop us from putting this out, right?’” Lundvall recalls. “I said, ‘No, you can sample the entire Blue Note catalog. Let's make an album.’”

“Cantaloop (Flip Fantasia),” Us3's single based on Hancock's tune — and also featuring dialogue from a live Art Blakey release on Blue Note — ended up cracking the Top 10, and the label's catalog would go on to fuel countless other hip-hop records. “I fell in love with jazz through hip-hop,” says producer and multi-instrumentalist Terrace Martin in the film.

Twenty years after “Cantaloop,” Glasper — who along with current Blue Note labelmate Ambrose Akinmusire later appeared on Kendrick Lamar's game-changing 2015 LP, *To Pimp a Butterfly* — would take home a Best R&B Album Grammy for his 2012 LP *Black Radio*, which unified jazz with hip-hop and R&B.

Akinmusire is one of several artists interviewed in the film who draw direct parallels between the bold, unfettered expression found within the Blue Note catalog, and the core ethos of hip-hop. “To me, hip-hop is definitely connected to

jazz in terms of what it does, its purpose,” the trumpeter says. “Just because someone is now rapping or doing poetry over a beat doesn’t mean that it’s different from jazz. So for me, I think hip-hop and jazz are the exact same thing.”