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JAZZ

## THE INDIES: Moving the Cutting Edge Forward in a Crowded Market

By DEVRA HALL

Independent jazz labels have long nurtured the growth and emergence of an artform that continues to push forward the cutting edge. Today, jazz indie executives are perceiving an increasingly crowded market with more and more entries vying for consumer awareness and shelf space. Causes for the crowd can be attributed, at least in part, to the expanded boundaries of the artform and to technological advancements.

Most executives agree that consumer awareness on a superficial level is no longer adequate in a marketplace where jazz can mean bebop or fusion, straight-ahead or contemporary; contemporary jazz itself can contain elements of straight-ahead jazz, fusion, R&B and rock. In order to find their way around today's gridlocked marketplace, executives believe it is vital that the consumer be well educated about the artform, the individual artists and the labels.

GRP co-owners Larry Rosen and Dave Grusin emphasize the importance of marketing surveys and the use of demographic information in identifying and understanding their target market. GRP's growing artist roster currently numbers 21 strong and 11 have made the charts so far this year—it's not unusual for sales to exceed 200,000 units per release.

Of course, having an Oscar-winning artist (Grusin won Best Film Score in 1989) as a label head doesn't hurt business either.

This summer GRP will be directing its efforts to the distribution of several JVC releases including Oscar Castro-Neves' "Maracuja" and "The Guitar Workshop In L.A." Grusin, Lee Ritenour and Tom Scott are all scheduled for new releases by fall. Rosen reports that in addition to the 12 titles

available on DAT, GRP plans to release laserdisk videos this fall and has joined JVC and Warner New Media in a CD+Graphics venture which debuted at Summer CES.

Similar in approach is the attitude at Intima where according to CFO Jim Martone, "we get passionate about our music but run it like a business."

Effective budgeting and target marketing are the key concepts at Intima. For Martone, being effective means no more blanket marketing. "We've learned that not all airplay is meaningful. Many [stations], partly due to a lack of back-announcing, do not move records." Martone's advice and the policy at Intima is "don't spread your radio dollars out the way you used to. Target for those stations that sell records in markets and get your artists to tour there."

Indie approaches to consumer education vary in focus. Some labels feel that promoting artist identification is the most important aspect of their market plan and that if the public perceives a label image, it will be a by-product of the artist roster. In these cases, A&R policies shape the label's image.

The owners of Optimism, Sheryl Kay and David Drozen, call themselves listeners. Leasing masters only, they are looking for new and different sounds such as that of contemporary jazz bassoonist Janet Grice. This often means signing unknowns. One such discovery is pianist/composer Kim Pensyl, an unknown from Ohio whose fall 1988 release has been riding Billboard's chart for the last four months. Both Grice and Pensyl are on the roster for fall releases along with Christopher Mason, Carlos Angeles and Rick Swanson.

David Gimbel, owner of the four-year-old contemporary jazz fusion label Nova is also the owner of Bon Appetit, a Los Angeles nightclub. It was through the club bookings that

Nova signed its first artists, Robert Brown and Brandon Fields. With 20 releases under his belt, Gimbel reports that they are stepping up production and have a goal of 12 releases in 1989. Being conservative with their budget is the main guideline dictating marketing strategies at Nova. Nevertheless, with strong artist promotion, Gimbel says most Nova releases make top 20 on the radio charts and two have charted on Billboard. Though small, Nova goes out internationally by dealing direct with European distributors and bypassing the usual foreign licensing. Summer releases include a new Rob Mullins', "Jazz Jazz," Uzeb's "Noisy Nights," "Music For Your Neighborhood" by Jude Swift, and a sampler CD "Collection '89."

Intuition Records is a German-based label devoted to jazz and world music. Label president Vera Brandes believes artist promotion to be the key to successful sales. "The label itself stands for diversity rather than one distinctive style of music. When promoting the music of artists as diverse as Steps Ahead and Eddie Palmieri, tour support becomes much more important. This is especially true for us in the U.S. where there is a lack of radio outlets for our music." Never Been There will have a self-titled release in July and keyboardist Mike Mainieri from Steps Ahead is working on a solo recording.

Other companies attempt, to some degree, to create and maintain a label identity by creating categories, specific series, collections, or actual sub-labels. They design internal

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niches to fit the labels A&R signings. This is particularly useful to those who want to expand with the times.

A&R VP Steve Vining explains that **ProJazz** releases fall into three specific categories of jazz. Upcoming releases by Al Hirt with John Dankworth in July, and Dizzy Gillespie in September, are examples of their new line of major straight-ahead jazz figures performing with symphony orchestras, in this case the Rochester Symphony. Their second category is jazz fusion by such artists as Joe Taylor with a July release along with Chi and Rick Strauss whose second releases on **ProJazz** are due in August and fall respectively. The third product category is Dixieland. The sales approach, says Vining, "is more like a multinational [company]. Having four regional sales managers gives us direct control over positioning."

**Cheetah Records**, a joint venture between Samuel Aizer's **Three Cherries Records**, which released the Lena Horne recording "The Men In My Life" that saw four months of chart action earlier this year and producer/bassist/composer Teruo Nakamura, has come up with the "Superfriends" concept. These recordings feature world-renowned contemporary instrumental and jazz artists, along with top New York session musicians in various combinations. Releases slated for late summer and fall include Nakamura & Superfriends, John Stubblefield & Superfriends, and "The Silencer" by Mark Grey with Superfriends.

Carl Jefferson's **Concord Records** has become a well-known jazz indie over its 16-year lifespan and boasts more than 400 titles in its

active catalog. Precisely because of its well-known identity, Jefferson had to create sub-labels in order to expand and grow with the jazz market. Concord now has four sub-labels. Crossover is the newest addition, joining **Picante** (Latin), **Concerto** (a classical approach to contemporary music), and the **George Wein Collection**. Upcoming releases for the Concord family include Ernestine Anderson with "Hello Like Before," the Gene Harris Quartet, "Everything's Coming Up Rosie" by Rosemary Clooney, a Dixieland session by George Shearing, and another Scott Hamilton recording.

Yet another way to market label identity is through the use of slogans, artwork or packaging, and samplers. Slogans are powerful tools to sculpt identity through advertising. The Pepsi Generation gave Coke a run for its money and now **ProJazz** claims to be "the new generation of jazz."

According to jazz saxophonist/label president Dave Pell, **Headfirst** (a division of K-tel) has created a visual identity. Each artist's initial release sports original artwork by the same artist. Combined with a heavy emphasis on promotion and advertising, summer releases by Greg Mathieson ("For My Friends") and Don Randi ("Nightingale") along with a second recording from Gary Herbig ("Friends & Lovers") will take them, as their slogan says, "Head First Into The '90s."

Of course label identity can have its downside if you want to broaden your focus. Such was the problem experienced by three new age labels that expanded into the jazz market.

Now in its second year, **Windham Hill Jazz** is the sub-label created when its new age parent, **Windham Hill**, expanded into the jazz idiom. Their retail problem of jazz being racked in new age bins has been solved "by aggressively changing our visual design style," reports VP/MD Sam Sutherland. Conceived to be a small label with no more than eight releases per year, their marketing emphasis is on career building for their artists and creating a roster that is their own. Marketing & sales VP Larry Hayes says that he is gratified by the retail and radio response and is looking forward to summer releases by Kit Walker and Billy Childs. New product by Andy Narell, Denny Zeitland and a **Jazz Sampler** are due out by fall.

**Sonic Atmospheres** is a newcomer to this problem. According to GM Hyman Katz, when label owner Craig Huxley decided to record Robert Kraft's "Quake City," they launched a contemporary jazz-oriented label and dubbed it **Sonic Edge**. The staff at **Edge** are committed to developing their artists. They have refrained from putting together an aggressive release schedule so that they can spend more time promoting each release. "What we're doing is bringing it first to NAC and jazz radio and establishing a base there before moving on to AC markets," explains Katz. Assistance from an outside marketing company rounds out the sales plan by making retail aware of

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the Edge artists. This same approach will be applied to the second Edge recording, Steve Kujala's "Arms Of Love," which was just released.

**Global Pacific** is now suffering from the same lack of product differentiation on the retail level that Windham Hill experienced. Neal B. Sapper, VP, Promotions, reports that while they are discussing the possibility of developing sub-labels for better label identification, no decision has yet been reached. In the meantime, their summer/early fall jazz-oriented schedule includes: a contemporary jazz recording "Other Times, Other Places" by David Friesen with Airtio, Flora Purim and Denny Zeitland as special guests; a new Steven Kindler release with special guest Carlos Reyes; Teja Bell's "Snow Leopard"; and "Zazen" by Waukin Lee Evan.

Of course some of the indies already have established label images in that their primary product is the standard or straight-ahead brand of jazz. While the advent of CD technology is old news, it has played a tremendous role in the re-birth in popularity of straight-ahead jazz. Reissues and archival

releases are on the rise as jazz consumers turn their attention to building (or rebuilding) their audio libraries.

While well-known for its midline straight-ahead reissue product, **Denon** is now gaining recognition for its current recordings as well. "We have really become a fairly eclectic label and our variety is often due to the company's laissez-faire policy of allowing the producer and artist to bring in the product as a team," explains marketing director Ken Furst. Jennifer Phelps, promotions and public relations exec for Denon, citing upcoming releases by Pat Kelly and Uncle Fustus, says that they are slating more contemporary product these days.

Aficionados and jazz historians are well acquainted with Joe Field's 16-year-old **Muse** label, (claimed to be the oldest jazz indie with continuous single ownership and independent distribution), and its sister label **Savoy** which Fields acquired six years ago from Arista/BMG. Muse and Savoy cater to a loyal consumer base that Fields refers to as "specialty customers who shop by catalog and at smaller retail stores that still carry LPs." In addition to an annual release schedule of approximately 20 current recordings such as "I'll Be Seeing You" by Etta Jones (not to be confused with Etta James), older re-

cordings stay alive with releases such as "The Best Of Charlie Parker." Both the Jones and Parker releases rode the charts earlier this year, and upcoming summer releases will include work by Pat Martino, Jimmy Ponder, Michael Carvin and the first of a chronological series of reissues by the late Woody Shaw.

Also suited to this category is the whole **Fantasy** family which includes Orrin Keepnews' **Landmark** (distributed by Fantasy), **Milestone**, **Prestige**, **Riverside**, **Contemporary** and **Pablo**, all seven of which maintain their own individual identities. Fantasy VP Phil Jones feels that marketing jazz has become easier because the popularity of the old tradition is stronger than ever. Summer and fall releases include Bobby Hutcherson with a not-yet-titled Brazilian album (**Landmark**), recordings by Azy-muth (**Milestone**), Frank Morgan and John Campbell (**Contemporary**), more "Original Jazz Classics" recorded at Montreux (**Pablo**), and "The Complete Galaxy Recordings: Art Pepper" (a 16-CD boxed set from Fantasy).

Kent Crawford believes that new technology is playing a big role in **Vanguard's** growth. "Due to digital technology, more diverse tastes are being reflected in what the public is buying in music. As a catalog

company we're benefitting from that. People are, in fact, replenishing their libraries." Vanguard is well known for its historical and comprehensive reissue packages. The big project currently in production is "The John Hammond Sessions." Three 3-CD sets spanning Hammond's career at Vanguard as a producer will be released next year. Jazz-oriented reissues due later this year include early work by Sadao Watanabe, Stomu Yamash'ta, John Fayhe, Silvuca and the group Oregon.

The pop-oriented rock label **Chameleon** distributes two jazz catalogs; **Innovative Communications** carrying jazz-oriented electronic music, and the old **VeeJay** label with product by straight-ahead jazz masters such as Django Reinhardt, Eric Dolphy and Duke Ellington. Marketing plans have expanded with the consumer base. This is the first year that VeeJay product has been available on cassette and CD reissues are in progress.

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The flip side to new technology is the demise of the old, which in this case is the vinyl configuration. This becomes somewhat problematic for TBA's "urban flavored" artists. Label president Don Mupo, in pointing out that many radio stations have not yet adopted the CD configuration, says that "the demise of the LP market makes it difficult for us since urban radio still uses vinyl." As a result, Mupo is pressing LPs only for their urban artists with an occasional custom pressing for an overseas licensee. Current releases include "Rumor Has It" by Natural Progression, a self-titled release by Steve Robbins and an upcoming Alvin Hayes recording.

Chris Allen, director of promotion for alternative radio and marketing coordinator at Soundwings, echoes Mupo's concern. Vinyl is still important at Soundwings, especially for radio promotion, and Allen still finds flats good for marketing. The three-year-old label is looking forward to its 15th release, this one by Mitchell Forman due out in September.

The industry is still in a state of transition, and some industry execs are exercising caution, especially when it comes to new technology. There are, however, always risk-takers and innovators. Those labels which are willing to take the first risks, along with those which work with the development of new technology, are the ones who are truly on the cutting edge. Their label identification is often that of hi-tech, forerunner or audiophile.

With a marketing strategy that relies on media reviews, mailing lists, catalog orders and a toll-free customer phone line, **Mobile Fidelity** is known for its hi-tech remastering and manufacturing of original master tapes. They have also gained new customers with their uniquely designed cassettes duplicated "real time," and their extra-special compact disk series, the 24-carat-gold **Ultradisc**. While they are not a jazz label per se, publicity director Phyllis Schwartz describes three lines of jazz product. The Robert Parker Collection uses digital transfer technology to revitalize the sound from the direct-cut 78 rpm disks made more than half a century ago by artists such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith and Fats Waller. **Mobile Fidelity Jazz**, which licenses titles "worthy of archiving," will be releasing John Klemmer's "The Touch" on **Ultradisc**. The **USSR Jazz Showcase**, which features recordings by Soviet jazz artists, will release "Round Midnight" in July by 19-year-old Aziza Mustafa-Zadeh, second-prize winner of the Monk competition.

With the increasing consumer demand for cassettes, **Mobile Fidelity** is not the only company to focus their technological developments on this configuration. **DMP** president Tom Jung explains that while their customers knew them as a CD-only label, demand for cassettes of **DMP** product led them to seek a cassette of audio quality that was acceptable to their high standards. At first this meant "real time" duplication which sold well despite the expense. Now **DMP** uses the revolutionary new **Digital Audio Analog Duplication (DAAD)** process to produce the **Super-Cassette** on high quality audio tape with a sound comparable to "real time" at a mass-produced price. **DMP DAAD** titles now available include albums by Flim & the BB's, Joe Beck and Dial & Oatts. Upcoming releases available in the **DAAD** format include Warren Bernhardt's "Heat Of The Moment," Bob Mintzer's "Urban Contours" and "A Taste Of **DMP**" sampler.

**Pathfinder Records** was formed initially with the sole intention of releasing the debut album by Thursday Group, a progressive jazz quartet led by label founder Douglas Lichterman. Early in '85 **Pathfinder** released guitarist Bill Connors' "Step It" album. Its success enabled the label to expand to full-service and international in reach.

February releases included the second serving from Thursday Group, "Uncle Mean," as well as the Windmill Saxophone Quartet's "Very Scary," Jennifer Trynin's "Trespassing," and Quest's "Natural Selection," all debuts. Upcoming in '89: Bill Connors' fourth for the label, pianist Joanne Brackeen debut, and another Quest album.