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Tensions in the Marketplace: Reflections on the Major Recording Companies Documentation of Jazz in the late 1990s and New Millennium Years

Jazz in the new millennium found itself in a very different world to that which was so lovingly portrayed in the Ken Burns television retrospective *Jazz*. The reason was simple. It was competing for the leisure dollar in a highly competitive marketplace that offered a bewildering array of consumer choices unheard of in jazz's Golden Era-DVDs, video games, computers, iPods, cable television, digital cameras, multi-task cell phones and a whole lot else. Pop music, promoted with ruthless efficiency by the major corporations, dominated the cultural spaces. Jazz's voice was struggling to be heard. So what was new? Hadn't jazz always jostled with consumer and popular culture for the public's attention throughout its history? Of course it had, but the early millennium years presented a very different music marketplace to the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s or even the 1990s.

The United States is the world's largest single market for goods, services, technology and capital where business competition is more intense than anywhere else in the world. US companies look for higher returns over shorter periods than their competitors, and to increase shareholder value spend more shoring up market share or by taking over other companies to achieve market leadership. A tidal wave of mergers since 1994 saw \$5 trillion change hands. A once chaotic music industry, with an ever changing array of music labels with names like Chess, Motown, Island and Creation that were once as anarchic as the music itself, hardened into an immovable oligarchy of EMI, Time-Warner, Universal and Sony/BMG.

As the number of majors shrank to four players, the number of international superstars were also downsized, enabling the corporations to focus their efforts on promoting a smaller number of music acts more effectively. Their success can be measured by ubiquity of these stars in the record charts, media, television, radio and the internet that is a triumph of the corporate marketing machine with the likes of Beyoncé, 50 Cent, Justin Timberlake, Eminem, Norah Jones, and Coldplay aimed at a world-wide audience for their music.

The effect in the US of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which effectively deregulated the airwaves, meant companies like Cumulus Media and the San Antonio based behemoth Clear Channel Communications, with more than 1,200 radio stations, offering an increasingly homogenized product that relied on consultant designed play-lists and rotation clocks devised by marketing services like Broadcast Architecture. Equally, MTV once marketed with the empowering slogan, "I want my MTV," was later changed for the global marketplace to a more sinister, "One planet, one music." The millions of dollars poured in to the Pepsi advertisements by the likes of Michael Jackson and Pink, Beyoncé and Britney Spears and the Eurovision Song Contest, watched by more than 500 million viewers, was intended to produce a 'streamlining' of music across national borders,

a lowest common denominator product that could be consumed in as many countries as possible. But while the output of MTV, VH1 and Clear Channel Communications have been dressed up in pop's customary language of diversity and individualism, the music they offered, an increasingly standardized and homogenized 'product,' raised the specter of a global pop village with youth audiences around the world watching the same television programs, adopting the same dress codes, and listening to the same music.

So where does an art form like jazz figure in a corporate jungle like this? Unprotected from market forces by public subsidy in the US it is in an unequal battle for survival which it is ill served to fight. Jazz in the US is at the mercy of a market that exerts its own disciplines, and can often result in the music being shaped by commercial imperatives rather than aesthetic logic. This is perhaps best illustrated by the major recording companies commitment to jazz during the 1990s and early millennium years. Instead of searching out jazz that was unique or innovative, as happened in the past, the majors opted to promote a well established hegemonic style from fifty years ago which they considered had the broadest appeal - jazz within the hard bop continuum - that artificially re-centred jazz around virtuosic recapitulation. Columbia's success in marketing the young trumpet player Wynton Marsalis encouraged record companies to sign similar *wunderkinder*, who had the effect of partly demystifying the aura jazz had acquired among a potential audience of their peers. "I thought if I went after young artists at least that would pique the interest of kids," George Butler, the Columbia executive who signed Marsalis, told Newsweek.

These young musicians-products of a jazz-education system that was producing graduates fluent in bebop and post-bebop styles in such numbers it was regarded by some critics as a 'phenomenon' - represented a major area of recording activity in jazz during the late 1980s and well into the 1990s. As a result, jazz underwent something of a renaissance, but as historian Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, 'There was something strange about this revival ...jazz of the early '90s looked back.' This conservative approach was largely dictated by financial considerations. With costs running at \$20,000 to \$30,000 to record a small jazz group for a major label, mastering costing another \$3,000 plus a modest promotional budget of around \$5,000, an instrumental jazz record would have to sell in excess of 5,000 copies just to break even and make a small profit. Typically, the average sales for a name jazz instrumentalist was running at 3,000; sales of 10,000 was considered good, and sales of 25,000 or more made it, in jazz terms at least, a hit record.

As the profitability of jazz came under increasing scrutiny by the majors, accountants asked hard questions about sales potential of a potential artist before signing them. Who was the music aimed at? How big was the potential audience? What the anticipated sales were territory by territory? What development did the artist offer over a three to five year period? Decisions were made in committee and reaching a consensus about the musical direction and commercial viability of a potential signing frequently resulted in adopting the lowest common denominator position of eliminating risk.

The result was that some major's back catalogues were more adventurous than their current batch of signings, exemplified by a Blue Note double page spread in the major jazz magazines in 2003 that on the left offered its current crop of signings, albums by singers Van Morrison and Al Green, and on the right a previously unreleased album from the late 1960s by Andrew Hill and reissues by Sam Rivers, Hank Mobley, Lee Morgan, and Larry Young. As the late David Baker, a well known recording engineer, told *The Boston Globe* in 2003, "You've got an ultra conservative industry right now and that's unfortunate. Safe bets have never been the world in which jazz has flourished in."

The practical application of promoting a style of jazz from an earlier epoch meant that while consumers were perfectly happy to attend a concert or go to a club and enjoy the high level of technical accomplishment of these young musicians, there seemed little appetite to actually buy their albums (unless as a souvenir at a live performance) as this style had already been earlier defined on the classic recordings of the past by jazz's great posthumous masters. It prompted a gradual realization among the major recording companies during the 1990s that there was little point in signing artists to compete with their own back catalogues. Clearly it made more financial sense to repackage albums from their vaults paid for decades earlier than promote new artists playing in those self same styles. For the price of signing and recording one new retro jazz artist, who may or may not break even, the majors realized they could reissue three jazz classics, often with unissued material, and be certain to make a profit. "In paying homage to the greats," said former record company executive Jeff Levenson in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2003, "Wynton [Marsalis] and his peers have gotten supplanted by them in the minds of the populace. They've gotten supplanted by dead people."

Amid ruthlessly efficient corporate consolidation, the general atmosphere of the major record companies today involves little goodwill toward the arts unless it generates attractive returns. As the major's 'traditional jazz' signings gradually gravitated to independent labels towards the end of the 1990s, there was a widespread belief being voiced among the majors that instrumental jazz did not sell, or when it did, it did not generate the kind of profitability that was attractive to them. "As an industry we continually try to promote instrumental jazz artists," Glen Barros, president of Concord records, told *Jazz Times* in 2003. "But I have to say that it's pretty alarming there have been so few successes - particularly with traditional jazz records - despite there being some pretty aggressive campaigns behind them."

By 2003, the major recording companies had largely withdrawn from the instrumental jazz market (unless it was a legacy artist or, in the case of Blue Note, younger players performing in a tradition based synthesis of earlier styles). However, they had not withdrawn from actively promoting their back catalogue of classics paid for decades earlier. Jazz had always been in competition with its past - after all, reissues began here in Britain in the 1930s - but never like today when at the point of retail sale the past threatened to overwhelm the present, often in attractively priced reissues that include additional tracks not on the original releases. Indeed, twelve years after his death, in October 2003, Miles Davis was again figuring prominently on The *Billboard* Jazz Chart - at number four with *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*. In another example of re-cycling the past, some classic

albums were even given to contemporary DJs to re-mix in the hope of generating interest among younger audiences.

It never seemed to occur to the major recording companies A&R departments that while one particular style of jazz did not sell, others might do so. Yes, there was experimental jazz at the margins, but the majors were reluctant to become involved because this was a hard sell and in any event, they believed such music could not be commodified for mainstream consumption. In effect, the major recording companies were guilty of underestimating the record-buying public. As Dave King of the trio The Bad Plus pointed out in 2003, "I look out at an audience I'm playing at, half the number of people are in my eyes under 18 - what you would think of as people 'not getting it.' The music can get really complicated and atonal at times. The idea that 'the public' in some way is 'not able to understand jazz' is ridiculous!"

Although the Bad Plus were signed by a major, they were a stark exception to the safety first policy of Columbia Records whose presence in the jazz marketplace by the end of the 1990s was a shadow of its former glory days when it once had on its books the likes of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Don Ellis, the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Weather Report. Like all the majors, they had simply lost their way with their jazz signings in the 1990s. By 2002, the music trade magazine Billboard concluded in their end-of-year survey, "This time last year, it was looking like a challenge to sell jazz records at all, whether contemporary or traditional. That was before releases by Norah Jones, Diana Krall, Jane Monheit, Natalie Cole and Karrin Allyson exploded into the top 10 of the jazz charts, selling better than respectable numbers and infusing the jazz world with hope."

The huge success of singer Norah Jones's *Come Away With Me* in 2002-3 concentrated record companies minds in a way that only sales of over 17 million units worldwide sales can. The potential for crossover sales by 'jazzy' young singers was quickly identified in the marketing plans of the then five major record corporations — Universal-Vivendi, EMI, Sony, Warner AOL and BMG—as well as several independents. As *The Boston Globe* noted, "Every jazz label is scouting and signing young, attractive talent." The Maxjazz label in St. Louis, an important player in the jazz independent market, even launched a specialist vocal imprint, the "Maxjazz Vocal Series." The jazzy vocal boom was - as Norah Jones told *Jazz Times* - "all about money." After Ron Goldstein was promoted to president and CEO of Verve in January 2003, singers became a significant presence on the label. "The emphasis has to be on things that can have some commercial success," he told *Jazz Times*.

The mood created by the success of Norah Jones and her contemporaries escapes easy definition, but the Norah effect was one of melting barriers between generations and genres, and of pop, easy listening and jazz conflating at their respective margins. Having taken the concept of the 'jazzy' singers from the margins to the mainstream, the record business was setting itself up to squeeze as much nectar out of the trend it could. Blue Note records (whose proud boast is "The Best In Jazz Since 1939") signed Van Morrison and Al Green, and included Country and Western singer Dolly Parton as a guest artist on Norah Jones's 2004 follow-up

album *Feels Like Home*. As label boss Bruce Lundvall explained to *Downbeat*: "Norah has changed our direction to a degree. Our story now is that we've dropped the boundaries and opened the borders." Blue Note was not alone; Verve signed Linda Ronstadt, Aaron Neville, Me'shell Ndegeocello, and Jonatha Brooke, while Concord Jazz signed Barry Manilow and issued Ray Charles's posthumous album *Genius Loves Company*, on which he duets with a range of pop and country singers. As the jazzy singers blossomed into a key area of record company activity, Glen Barros, president of Concord records told *Jazz Times* that, "Naturally the industry is going to devote more resources to that which is working." As a result many artists turned to working outside the traditional label-artist relationship, such as composer/bandleader Maria Schneider, who marketed her album *Concert in the Garden* over the internet through Artistshare, selling thousands of copies of the album and receiving four Grammy nominations for an album that did not sell one copy through a retail record shop. Other musicians on Artistshare included guitarist Jim Hall, keyboardist Rachel Z, bassist Dave Holland, trumpeter Dave Douglas and pianist Danilo Perez while others have launched their own artist owned labels, such as Branford Marsalis, Ravi Coltrane and Kevin Mahogany.

This represented a radical transformation of the established chains of distribution and sale of jazz recordings within the jazz marketplace of the new millennium. It did not mean, however, that instrumental jazz recordings were not selling, they were. But they tended to be by artists who did not play in jazz's overarching hegemonic styles, "I think when you do hear a great new instrumental artist, someone that stands out and really has something to say, the most obvious one [in 2004] is the Esbjorn Svensson Trio, people buy into it because there's a very good reason to- because it's good! *It's not just down to marketing*," said Adam Sieff, Sony's Head of Jazz for UK and Europe in 2004. "The Bad Plus are another group that are not only original, but they play with great sincerity. It's fundamental, it's exciting, and instrumental jazz over the last decade or so frankly hasn't been that."

Both Esbjorn Svensson with *Seven Days of Falling* (ACT) and the Bad Plus with *These Are The Vistas* (Columbia) had achieved sales of more than 60,000 worldwide by the end of 2004. But they were far from alone. Nils Petter Molvaer had earlier achieved sales of 150,000 for *Khmer* (ECM), for example, while Tord Gustavsen's 2003 album debut, *Changing Places* (ECM), approached 60,000 sales worldwide with the minimum of promotion in the first year of release and received laudatory reviews across Europe and the United States where it was voted among *Stereophile* magazine's "80 Records To Die For" - and this from a musician whom hardly anyone had heard of outside his native Norway before the album was released. It suggests instrumental jazz can sell in significant numbers, but when it does, it is usually by artists and producers with an awareness of art, which involves uniqueness.

It is perhaps here where the challenge for the future lies. The survival of jazz has to be seen in the context of today's increasingly complex infrastructure of profit-maximizing multinationals whose homogenizing tendencies are at odds with the music's inherent complexity. Jazz no longer has the kind of mass market appeal that is attractive to the majors so in order for the music to survive in a niche market where audiences appreciate instrumental creativity, it has to evolve beyond the jazz

tradition and embrace the kind of radical processes of evolution which musical forms undergo. Unless contemporary musicians move beyond the paradigm of traditional orthodoxies they could well, by most definitions at least, be participating in something that is closer to a folk form rather than an art form - interesting to witness live, but, as the 1990s return to the certainties of hard bop demonstrated, when the music is in competition with the past, the past will always win because the original artists are seen to be the source of 'authenticity.' When music - or any art form - becomes a refuge from the present, from facing up to the world today, then its force is diminished; it becomes an embalmed corpse, beautiful to behold but ultimately inert.