Butler Maintains Fast-Pace In Keeping CBS Label On Top

Butler has been with CBS Records nearly three years now. He has maintained a fast-paced objective of ensuring that CBS remains on top as the No. 1 jazz and progressive name in music. "I'm doing what I can to make the label unprecedented," he says, adding that jazz and progressive music lovers can expect "a great deal from CBS" in the future regarding innovative music. "We're experimenting with some things that will prove to be successful," declares Butler.

His confidence is understandable. At CBS he is involved with a preeminent list of jazz greats: Miles Davis, Dexter Gordon, Ramsey Lewis, Weather Report, Woody Shaw, Hubert Laws, The Heath Brothers, George Duke and Rodney Franklin; along with Bobby Hutchinson, another artist Butler signed to the label. With such a roster -- that also includes Maynard Ferguson, Billy Cobham, Herbie Hancock, Eric Gale, Stan Getz and Freddie Hubbard -- Butler foresees CBS remaining an industry leader.

Although most of his time is spent with jazz and progressive music, he occasionally produces in other areas as well: from classical to comedy. Last year he was music director for a successful three-night concert in Cuba called "CBS in Havana." Using over 40 acts, with music from a variety of idioms, he brought together top recording artists ranging from Billy Joel and Rita Coolidge, to Dexter Gordon and Hubert Laws. Using the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London and former congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Butler produced a narration album, released earlier this year, called "Symphonic Spirituals," a collection of Afro-American spirituals, past and present, with guest tenor and soloist William Brown. "It's an album that's going to be around for a long time," he comments. "It's one that I'm very proud of."

He was producer for the classical musician-conductor Andre Kostelanetz, known to millions as the "maestro." Butler produced what was to be Kostelanetz's last album, "just two weeks before the maestro's death" this year, he recalls. Kostelanetz enjoyed broad popularity on the CBS label; selling over 53 million records.

Looking at Butler's calendar for a month, it is clear that he is out of the studio more than in these days. Overseeing the development of jazz and progressive music means that he must devote time to a variety of matters: making sure an album cover is compatible with the music, assigning a producer to work with an artist, and making decisions about the music going into a new release. Providing support to the numerous artists of his division of the CBS label, keeps him in touch with the company's legal and business affairs people, on matters ranging from contracts to budgets. Recording sessions on the west coast are frequent, and take him from the company's headquarters in New York, especially "if it's a new artist I've signed, going into the studio for the first time."

Then there are appointments and more meetings, daily telephone calls, and a number of other executive matters; more travel. In Tokyo, Paris, London and Munich, where jazz is quite popular, he has lectured on the subject. Butler's job is demanding and creates a bus schedule, but he has learned to take it all in stride. He learned early, while at UA-Blue Note, that the demands of working in a dual creative-executive capacity require diehard energy; energy he has had for the 12 years he has been in the business.

He remembers days when he has had to act as mediator and diplomat. When a "conflict of egos" in the studio has disrupted a recording session, "I've been able to work them out," he says. "I think I'm very good at it." The reason, he says, is because he keeps a "cool head." Because of his finesse, some "refer to me as the Henry Kissinger of the recording industry," smiles Butler. He got the name from a studio engineer and a musician he produces, Maynard Ferguson.

Despite the pressures and demands. He enjoys his work. He describes it with such adjectives as "challenging" and "unpredictable." For him, there is nothing more exciting than developing a concept, a new direction, and having it appreciated by a large audience.

The record business is an entertainment industry where success and enjoyment are not limited solely to the performer out front. Butler has achieved success and enjoyment working in the background as a decision maker; responsible for the success of a number of artists.

Maintaining a busy schedule and a family life is taxing, but he manages to juggle the two successfully. Considering the demands of the business, he says, "You have got to have an understanding wife." He feels he is lucky. "I don't think there is anyone more understanding than Kay."

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