



The Savoy Jazz Shuffle

BY COLMAN ANDREWS

Lester Young

There's a great, spinning whirlpool of good jazz records funneling into the marketplace today — more than there has ever been before in the 50-year recorded history of this most vital native American art form.

Small labels like Muse, Inner City, Concord, Catalyst, the venerable Contemporary, etc., and slightly larger ones like Pablo and ECM, are steadily releasing solid, straightforward jazz by topnotch American and European performers of many styles and ages. Major record companies are having marvelous success with pop-oriented jazz from such as Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Weather Report, and Maynard Ferguson, and are even slowly opening (or reopening) their hearts and their recording studios to purer versions of the music. And — maybe most importantly of all — a few companies are making use of the vast resources of the jazz past and producing generous numbers of newly-packaged and (usually) well-documented reissues. Some of these feature a single artist — Art Pepper, Lester Young, Thelonius Monk, et. al. — while others concentrate on a

time and a place (Savoy's *Black California* or *The Changing Face of Harlem*) or a musical instrument (Verve's *Masters of the Jazz Piano*); many of the reissues contain alternate takes of particular tunes, or material that has never been released in any form; and the vast majority of them are budget-priced two-record sets — "two-fers" to the trade.

"The value of reissues," says Bob Porter, "is to put music into perspective. It takes a great deal of perception to appreciate a lot of this kind of music when it first comes out: hindsight is a great tool in evaluating it."

Porter should know what he's talking about. He is the producer (and all-around boss) of the best and most conscientious of the reissue programs — Arista's Savoy series. (Arista also releases plenty of good new jazz, incidentally — much of it from the fine English label, Freedom.)

Porter is a robust, all-American-looking gentleman, born in Boston and raised in Southern California. Someone gave him a Woody Herman record for his 11th birthday; later, he recalls standing in a record shop trying to decide whether to spend his \$3.50 for a new Elvis album or for a live Benny Goodman recording; he finally chose the latter, and his musical fate was sealed.

When he was 19 or 20, Porter says, he wrote to Bob Weinstock at Prestige Records — one of the most tenacious, prolific, and important of the pioneer jazz labels — suggesting that the company should record some of the West Coast "soul jazz" that was current then in California. Weinstock replied by asking Porter to write some liner notes for an album by tenor-player Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis; Porter has been involved professionally in the record business ever since.

Two years ago, Porter wrote a story about Steve Backer, the man in charge of jazz releases for Clive Davis' newly-formed Arista Records. "Backer mentioned that Arista was thinking of acquiring the Savoy catalogue, which included all kinds of good jazz, R&B, blues, gospel, and rural music. I was very interested, I told him. So when the sale happened, Backer asked me to look at what they had acquired. I found that the amount of material was incredible; the issued masters were just the tip of the iceberg. There were all kinds of tapes and stacks and stacks of acetates representing music that had never been released on albums, or never been released at all, including artists like Lester Young, Howard McGhee, Don Byas, and John Coltrane.

"That's the main thing that separates Savoy from the other reissue series — there's so much that just has never been available

except on 78's. Savoy is really, in all honesty, the pacesetter in the reissue business today. There's nothing schlock about it. We put all the credits on the back of the album so the buyer knows exactly what he's getting, we don't use phony stereo, we get the best liner notes we can, the best research and overall packaging. And it's paying off. Fifteen to 20 percent of our reissues have sold over 10,000 copies — which is considered successful for material like this — and the first Charlie Parker LP has sold 30,000 and is still moving."

Although Arista isn't exactly depending on the Savoy program to support the company, royalties are being paid on all releases. This is particularly unusual (though not quite unique) for a re-release series, as musicians in the old days were often paid a flat fee for their services, with further royalties not legally mandatory. It's simply a good-will gesture to the musicians or their estates.

Other reissue series suffer sometimes, Porter believes, either because they don't own enough good material or because higher-echelon record company executives aren't sufficiently committed to the programs. "Prestige/Milestone just doesn't have that much that hasn't been released or already rereleased. RCA has plenty of material, but they seem to have a corporate purge every three or four years, and their Bluebird series is in an uncertain state right now. On the other hand, Columbia's Contemporary Masters series, which they've just announced, has blockbuster potential. I'm not sure what's happening with United Artists' Blue Note reissues. I don't think they really have the right people over there. That's too bad, because they have probably the most material deserving reissue of anyone — Blue Note itself, which is maybe the single best jazz catalogue there is, Dick Bock's labels, Alladin-Imperial, Sue, Alan Douglas' UA issues, and so on. They have incredible potential."

The recent commercialization of jazz doesn't bother Porter: "The fact that jazz of any kind is getting popular is helpful to all of us. A lot of times, record company executives don't know Pharoah Saunders from Jack Teagarden — but they know how to look at sales figures, and they know jazz is happening. And they don't really know what makes a successful jazz record, so they're willing to try a lot of different things."

Savoy's newest release, out this month, includes single albums by Charles Mingus and Art Blakey, and one called *Kenny Clarke Meets the Detroit Jazzmen* (who are Pepper Adams, Kenny Burrell, Tommy Flanagan, and Paul Chambers). The "two-fers" include a 1947 Dexter Gordon/Wardell Gray jam session with Sonny Criss, Howard McGhee, Hampton Hawes, et al.; a second volume of *The Changing Face of Harlem*, featuring people like Nat "King" Cole, Herbie Fields, Stuff Smith, Pete Brown, and Illinois Jacquet; and a collection of all the records blues shouter Big Joe Turner made for the National label, including seven previously unissued tracks, two of which, with pianist Pete Johnson, are not even listed in discographies. "There are no alternate takes on this one," says Porter, "but there are some examples of the same tune recorded at different sessions — and Joe never sings anything the same way twice."

In December, Savoy will release a double album by the seminal R&B group, The Ravens, and in the spring they plan a second California R&B album, heavily weighted with Little Esther and Johnny Otis. "After that," says Porter, "we may try some blues and rural stuff. Savoy has got a lot of it. In fact, Savoy has got plenty of everything."

Colman Andrews is a gentleman and a scholar with a keen palate for wine, food and all that jazz.