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Blue Note. A Story of Modern Jazz (BBC)

By Julian Benedikt

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Well, you know, I was a young boy
and I used to go skating and...
roller-skating in a place called
the Admiralspalast, I think it was,
and, one day, I went there
with my skates
and they told me there was no skating
today.

They had a dance there
and I saw a poster on the wall
and it said Sam Wooding
and his Chocolate Dandies
and I didn't know anything about it
but it looked strange to me,
different, you know?

TRAIN RUMBLES:

MUSIC:

and his Chocolate Dandies
And I went in, checked out my skates
and sat down
and there was Sam Wooding.
It was the first time I saw
coloured musicians, you know,
and all the music
and I was flabbergasted.
I couldn't, you know...
It was something brand-new,
but it registered with me
right away, you know?
I couldn't really put my fingers
on it, but it was the beat.
You know, it was the beat.
That beat, you know,
I got it in my bones!
For those of you who come in late,
we are now having a little
cooking session for Blue Note
right here on the scene.
Putting the pot on in here
and we'd like for you to join in
with us and have a ball.

APPLAUSE:

This is the story of Alfred Lion
and Francis Wolff,
two German immigrants who founded
a jazz record company in 1939
that became very famous
in its genre.

Unlike any other jazz label,
Blue Note Records influenced
the revolution of music and sound,
style and technical standards.

Each of the Blue Note
recording sessions
was documented by the photographs
of Francis Wolff.

Alfred Lion's vision of music
and Francis Wolff's clear view
of the recording sessions
are a legacy of the unique
creative achievement
that continues to this very day.

Hello, there. This is
Freddie Hubbard,
trumpet man.

Blue Note.

Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff.

My men.

He realised that he was a catalyst,
a walking, living human catalyst.

You get him hearing artists like
Thelonious Monk or Bud Powell
and he instinctively knew
that they had it down deep
and he could draw that ability out
of them and get it on a record
and he did it by not talking about
record sales and commercialism
and who the big names on the date,
he never got into that.

He was interested in you
and your thoughts
and getting you to have an
unrestricted flow of your ideas

in his recordings.
Not many people have that and he
never made a mistake.
Out of over 1,000 records
that Alfred produced
in the years that he had Blue Note,
easily 900-950 of them are classics.

MUSIC:

by Herbie Hancock
'Ladies and gentlemen...'
I'm Herbie Hancock
and I'm a musician.
Oh, boy.
A jazz musician.
When I was a child and I first came
to San Francisco,
Lee Morgan, Sidewinder, and
Horace Silver, Song for My Father...
We call it Song for my father.
And, so, the music was like a diary
of what was going on.
My name is Horace Silver
and I've recorded for the Blue Note
record label for about 28 years
for Alfred Lions and Frank Wolff.
And on and on, you know,
Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock
and all the people who recorded
in Blue Note.
They would play on the radio along
with Willie Nelson or Chuck Berry.
Empyrean Isles, Herbie Hancock.
The Un Poco Loco.
Lee-Way, Lee Morgan.
Oh, Un Poco Loco. Bum-bum-ba!
Inventions & Dimensions.
..Sonny Rollins to you.
One Step Beyond, Jackie McLean.
..et Johnny Griffin aussi.
I am authentic.
John Arnold Griffin III.
Otherwise known as Volcano,
Vesuvius

or the Little Giant.
You know what they recognised?
They could recognise when something
was grooving and when it wasn't.
The band must shring.
They couldn't dance.
They both had two left feet.
We must have shring-ing.
If something was grooving, you know,
Frank would go like...
He would start doing
his little two-step thing.
You know, and if he wasn't doing
his dance, it wasn't grooving.
Yeah, I knew it from the beginning.
When I first saw Alfred,
I was a disc-jockey on WLW
in New York
and I walked into this place
where I worked
and he was sitting there eating
a hot sausage sandwich
and I said, "There's my life,"
and he wouldn't look at me, hardly,
for 11 years.
11 years. That was what he was doing,
was that Blue Note
and it hurt, because I knew,
you know,
but I spoke with a lot of musicians
about it.
Women will not be, ever,
as important as the music
and, if a woman thinks she can,
she's kidding herself
because a guy who really
loves the music,
that's where he's going to be.

MUSIC:

APPLAUSE:

When Hitler arrived on the scene,
Alfred disappeared

because he was smart
and he knew
there was trouble, abroad,
and so he left.
He came to this country,
barely spoke English,
he was alone and he was
self-sufficient
and he struggled,
but he was terrific.
He brought Frank over later,
after he had arrived here.

MUSIC:

by Joe Henderson

The negro
with the trumpet at his lips
has a head of vibrant hair,
tamed down, down,
patent-leathered now,
until it gleams like jet,
were jet a crown.
The music from the trumpet
at his lips
is honey mixed with liquid fire.
The rhythm through the trumpet
at his lips
is ecstasy
distilled from old desire.
Desire that is longing for the moon
where the moonlight's but
a spotlight in his eyes,
desire that is longing for the sea
where the sea's a bar-glass
sucker size.
The negro with the trumpet
at his lips
whose jacket has a fine
one-button roll
does not know upon what riff
the music slips
its hypodermic needle to his soul,
but, softly, as the tune
comes from his throat,

trouble mellows in a golden note.

Dee-bee di-bi

Bi-dee-dee-doo-dee.

Yes.

Baby, huh, what can happen?

I think Alfred started right when

he recorded Ammons and Lewis.

He was just sort of like going

with the trends

and he happened to discover two

really quintessential musicians

in the process and that led him into

a thing of capturing musicians

whose prime had been passed

but yet were still vibrant

and moving forward.

Bechet, George Lewis,

The Port of Harlem Jazzmen,

were sort of his first groups

that represented a kind of

modernist approach,

and the Meade Lux Lewis

Celeste Quartet.

It wasn't until he really, you know,

was able to develop a following

with the label that he could take

a chance on modern music.

This is the original recording,

original pressing,

Sidney Bechet, Summertime,

from 1940.

This was their first hit.

This is what created the cash flow

that allowed Blue Note to continue.

It was like blood, like water,

like air, you know? I mean...

'We'd like to do a brand-new thing

for you, at this time,

'from our most recent

Blue Note album.'

That's got it.

There was a whole thing...

That whole thing,

that funky piano thing

that went down there for a minute,
you know?

Freddie Hubbard. Clifford Brown.

Oh, Un Poco Loco. Bum-bum-ba!

I don't know that Alfred was an
everyday, garden-variety German.

Unadulterated. Undiluted. Pure.

The real deal is all Alfred Lion and
Frank Wolff were interested in.

Bu-dum-bu-dum-bu-dum da-da

Bu-dum-bu-dum-bu-dum da-da.

What? I mean,

every piano player I know,

sat down and tried to play that.

I know I did!

MUSIC:

by Us3

No problem. Thank you for calling.

Bye.

Hello, Vanguard. Can I help you?

Yes. Ron Carter will be here,

two shows, 9:

Yes. You may, sir.

Hold on one moment, please.

Wait, wait, 9:

11:

Monaco?

M-O-N-A-C-O? Spell.

That's what I said. Monaco.

Very good, sir.

So come at 11 o'clock.

Thank you.

When you come to the door,

they'll seat you.

They'll give you the best seat

in the house. OK?

Bye. Oh, my goodness.

Luckily, I don't seat people.

Anyway, there we are.

In New York, at our apartment,

which was kind of cute,
right down here in the Village.
Yes, I was young.
I was about 17 or 18
when I met Alfred
but I used to listen to his records
on the radio,
I didn't know who he was,
and Alfred had called me once
and he had an office
and he invited me up and I did go,
I brought a friend with me,
and we had to go to their apartment
where there was nothing to eat,
two eggs in the fridge
and we cooked up the eggs, a little
bread, a little cheese on the side.
They didn't have any money.
They were very poor.
Anyway, the war came, the war,
and Alfred got drafted
and, then, he got shipped to Texas,
El Paso,
and, of course,
Alfred kept writing to me.
Compton, Texas, and I...
My mother thought he was
wonderful, by the way.
She said, "He's a wonderful guy".
Anyway, there we were
in El Paso, Texas,
and Alfred and I got married.
That's a test pressing
of a Blue Note record.
See, we used to get them
from New York,
and we would listen
to them in El Paso.
The record business was still
in his mind and life,
even though he was in the army.
That's...
Oh, and here's Alfred and Frank.
See, they were very good friends.

And here's Alfred and I.
We had this crazy cat.
We called it Victor
because we got him on VE Day
at the end of the war.
That cat was like my kid,
you know? It was...
I really wanted children,
but I had a cat.
It wasn't a terrible split-up,
for that matter,
cos we liked each other
an awful lot,
and Alfred loved me,
and I was terribly fond of him.
But the reasons are obscure,
and as I say,
I don't intend to discuss
my deepest personal life now.

TELEPHONE RINGS:

Yes, Alfred?
Wh... Sorry, Vanguard.
Hello? Oh, same person.
I just talked to you before.
I'll see you later. Bye.
I don't know who it is.
There's some strange people call.

APPLAUSE:

What you doing?

MUSIC:

by Lee Morgan
My name is Louis A Donaldson,
better known to jazz fans
as Lou Donaldson.
Hey, Lou! Look at the hat!
Who do we have here?
Mighty cool today.
Who do we have here?
Grandpa!
Yeah, you... You're the grandchild.
What's happening, Grandpa?

MUSIC DROWNS SPEECH

Yeah, I'm on the games
with the younger players.
Got to get it going.
He's still there. He won't budge!

THEY LAUGH:

Blue Note helped me
through some years.
My kids were young,
I was trying to
establish myself in New York,
just generally,
and so it came at a great time.
It was with a lot of great musicians,
so it was people that I didn't
really work in their groups,
but just to know them.
I mean, I'm sitting back
like people looking,
saying "Well, I played with Tommy."
I mean...that was an honour. Yeah.
You know? Come on. That was...
So it was just an honour to be here,
and I was a young bass player, and...
It fed my kids.
But you wanted to...
You knew you were not going to leave
until that record date was through.
That's right. Yeah. If they had
eight tunes or nine tunes...
You going to make nine tunes!
You'd say, "Come on,
let's get these nine tunes...
Let's get these nine tunes
in and get out of here,
so I can go spend that cheque.
You know? Let me go cash the cheque.
I mean...
Everything'll be closed
if we don't hurry, you know?
And we would all go to a drugstore
on 50th and Broadway...
That's correct!

..that used to cash cheques,
cos he paid us in cheque.
And we used to go and cash
our cheques. Yes, yes. Yes.
And...for a long time...
See you, Bob!
That was really my survival.
Actually, I was about 20
when I met him.
And then we got together,
but Alfred,
he always came around
to the jam sessions, you know?
And then I was...at the time,
I was practising with Coltrane
and I was practising
with Wayne Shorter.
But what was so great about Alfred
was that Alfred...
He would talk to you
about what you wanted to do.
The concept of
what you were writing,
and he gave a lot of young people
an opportunity to...
to experiment and write
something different. You know?
It's not like it is today,
where the record companies
will more or less tell you what is
marketable and what's sellable,
so you end up writing something not
necessarily coming from your heart.
But during those years,
at Blue Note,
that period was a very
creative period for me.
And after listening to
all these albums,
people like Art Blakey
and Sonny Rollins,
and to get an opportunity
to meet these great people,
and not only perform with them,

but hang out and study...
I mean, that was
the thrill of my life.
And Alfred was very responsible
for all that, you know?
And he was funny. He said...
He would come to the sessions,
he'd say...

MIMICS HIM:

"Freddie is not groovy."

HE LAUGHS:

"What do you mean, he's not groovy?"
If you were swinging,
he wouldn't say a word. No. No.
But if you weren't...
But if that stuff
started bogging down...

MIMICS ALBERT:

"Wait! Wait! Wait!"

HE DANCES ABOUT AND WAILS

LAUGHTER:

Sit down! Yes, he would!
He really loved the music, man,
and I'll never forget him.
And when I got my first cheque...
I'll never forget,
I bought two nice new suits,
and I bought a car, and...
But that's just part of it,
you know?
They knew when it wasn't happening.
Yeah. Boom!
I mean, if it didn't feel good...
it HAD to feel good.
I mean, it had to have a direction.
That I understood about him.
I used to laugh, cos,
the beat was 2 and 4
and they would be popping on
1 and 3, but they knew...

But they knew we were going down!
..that it didn't feel good.
You could tell when it was
starting to gel and come together,
because pretty soon, little smiles
was creeping across their faces.
And when it got this wide, it means
things are really popping now, man.
He's going for take number one.

MUSIC:

by Kenny Burrell
All Alfred wanted to do was
go there knowing that the musicians
had rehearsed for the day,
that he had put together what
he thought was the best combination
of players for this band leader,
whoever that was, and that
during the course of the day,
there'd be something
he could relate to like this.
And by and large, all those
sections of music recorded,
somehow on the record, there was
some real swing going on.
Even in the ballad.
There was an Ike Quebec
kind of ballad, you know,
or a Sam Rivers kind of ballad.
There was some swing going on there.
That was Alfred's concern.

VOCALIST:

for a couple of minutes there.
MACHINERY WHIRS AND RINGS
They'd be in the place
a lot of times...
You wouldn't even know
they were there. That's true.
Unless you'd look around.
If you were just
looking around the place,
"Oh, there's Al over there!"

He'd sit back
laughing and listening.
You know? Yeah. Both of them.
Oh, that was some good times
up there. Yes, sir.
Every soul and his brother
came up there.
Yeah, I met a lot of guys
up there. Yeah.
They were in paradise.
Yes, right, uh-huh.
Big Nick. Mm-hm. Big Nick, yes.
Everybody used to come
to those sessions.
You know, uh... Sonny...
Hey, well, man, you just name them,
they were there.
That's correct. Every night.
You knew there would be
something very interesting
that would hold your attention.
True, true. Every night.
Seven nights a week.
The school that I came from,
from Charlie Parker,
Dizzy Gillespie, and...
Of course, I mean, the business
itself was controlled by whites.
If you wanted a gig
or a job or whatever,
it was in the white places
that you worked.
Only places that were
controlled by blacks
were the clubs in Harlem
prior to the...
Just about the end of
the Second World War,
when things became integrated.
Other than that, Small's Paradise
and Murrain's and Minton's,
these were all run by blacks.

MUSIC:

by Lee Morgan

Well, this is the home of bebop.
This is the bebop laboratory,
and all of the great jazz musicians
of the 1940s performed here,
and it was just a home of...
Of the beginning of the music,
where they experimented with
new ideas and talked things out
and worked on new songs,
the ones that became classics.
And this is where it began,
118th at Minton's.

THE place.

Historically speaking...
the music always was held
in high esteem in black communities.
Hence, from Jelly Roll Morton
on up into Louis Armstrong
and on up into Sidney Bechet and
everybody else, the music was...
really, in the black community,
always prevailed.

Al Lion and them came into it
cos it was fertile, it was popular,
and we had all the clubs uptown.

It wasn't...

And we used to... New York
and all the cities were separated.

There was white town
and black town, and...

Black town was where
black music was played.

Monk was a pianist
who worked in Harlem.

The only claim to fame
he had was, I think he wrote

'Round Midnight

for Cootie Williams in 1941
and Cootie Williams paid him
a few bucks and put his name on it.

I've heard that story.

I presume it's true.

But it was Alfred....

He had his monthly budget
to do an album,
and the choice came down to
Bud Powell or Thelonious Monk,
and all of Alfred's friends said,
"Well, Bud Powell.
You gotta record Bud Powell.
"He really has a lot of technique,
and he's really a pianist,
"and Monk, I mean,
nobody knows what he's doing.
"He writes these weird compositions,
"and he doesn't play
technical piano."
So Alfred's probably
the only man in the world
that would have made the decision
to record Thelonious Monk.
When I heard Epistrophy
and Off Minor
and Thelonious and Four In One
and Eronel and all these things
that Monk wrote, I mean,
I realised that a revolution
was happening here.
This was a man who doesn't think
like any other musician
in all of musical history,
let alone jazz,
and Alfred had that good sense -
not after the fact,
but before the fact,
before anyone else
recognised his abilities,
to get in there and record him.
Monk was a sideman
with Coleman Hawkins,
and he was writing
all this wonderful music,
but no-one was really paying that
much attention, excepting Al Lion.
They seemed to be...
..in a way, visionaries.
They saw something in these

musicians of the future,
and so, their vision of
holds hanging in there,
I think, paid off, historically,
musically and creatively.

MUSIC:

by The Howard McGhee
and Fats Navarro Sextet
I'm Kareem Abdul-Jabbar,
and I'm a lifetime Blue Note fan.
Nice to see you.

COMPERE:

as you know,
we have something special
down here at Birdland this evening.
A recording for Blue Note Records.
When you applaud for
the different passages,
your hands go right on
the records there,
so when they play them over
and over throughout the country,
you may be some place and say,
"Well, that's my hands
on one of those records
"that I dug down at Birdland."
We're bringing back to
the bandstand at this time,
ladies and gentlemen, the great
Art Blakey and his wonderful group,
featuring the new trumpet
sensation Clifford Brown.
Horace Silver's on piano,
Lou Donaldson on alto,
Curly Russell is on bass.
Let's get together and bring
Art Blakey to the bandstand
with a great, big round of applause.
How about a big hand now
for Art Blakey?

APPLAUSE:

Thank you!
With the help of Ike Quebec,
they sought out the
most creative artists
and gave them
the Blue Note treatment.
Care, planning
and quality at every level.
1947, they recorded Bud Powell,
whose tortured life
would later affect his work.
MUSIC SUDDENLY STOPS
Would you say that the
basic of jazz is blues?

MUSIC:

by Art Blakey
They set a standard.
It was always a high standard,
whether it was the recording
or the presentation,
the materials
used to press the records...
And this went from
the 78 era to the LP.
And it was always quality.
My name is Max Roach
and I'm a new Blue Note artist.
And...

KNOCK AT DOOR:

..someone has knocked on the door...
Second sticks.
Hi, this is Taj Mahal
and I'm just enjoying myself,
dealing with the opportunity
to reminisce
about music from
the Blue Note years.
Hello once more.
For those of you who aren't familiar
with me, my name is Max Roach.
I'm a percussionist, composer...
father,

friend...
of the Blue Note...
..family...
Ah, what the BLEEP am I saying?
Jesus Christ.
It's... It's very quiet
out in the hallway...

HE LAUGHS:

How you can tell a pressing or not
is a little indentation.
You can tell how close to
the original pressing you are
by an ear which is just
slightly marked on the pressing.
You see our friendly ear, you see
all the information on the record.
See on here, Rudy Van Gelder's
name on the early ones.
He was the guy who did
all the mastering.
So the plant could
look at this and go,
"Oh, Rudy Van Gelder
has the mastering,
"this is a first pressing.
Blue Note LP1515, Side A."
So that's how they used to make them
and manufacture them with identities.
Alfred was very reluctant
to meet Rudy Van Gelder,
and especially when I told him
that Rudy had built a studio
in his house.
His living room became the studio,
and he knocked out the wall between
the bedroom and the living room
and put in a couple of
panes of glass,
and he had the Ampex in there
and a mixing board.
And Alfred went out there,
looked around
and Rudy played some things for him

and showed him how it all worked.
And Alfred came out and he went,
"Yeah, yeah, we do the things here."
Hello. I am Rudy Van Gelder
and I make jazz records.
I think they were totally involved
with the sound of the records
they wanted to make...and the music
they wanted to record and...
..let people hear it.
It was, I think...
One word that would describe it
was they wanted to communicate
that music to other people.
Everything was directed into that.
As I look at it, from the
historical point of view,
their importance is the fact
that they documented something that
perhaps nobody else really wanted
or did at that particular time.
That was their importance.
We wouldn't have had all that
wonderful music of Horace Silver's
and we wouldn't have had that
imagination that Art Blakey
expresses in his music.
It's just something very special.
It's a music that grew
out of the black experience.
Jazz speaks about
the human condition.
It's an expression of the capacity
for human beings to take
adverse circumstances
and turn them into medicine.
We are three things. Animal, human,
divinity, which is light.
The resonance, which is music,
unites the animal
and the human to the light.
We have light in our bodies.
We have eternal energy in
our bodies, beyond the molecule.

We call it inspiration,
we call it vision.
We call it things that we cannot
touch, taste or feel.
It translates to faith.
You know, there's no music
more conducive to healing
and soldering back the molecule
with the light other than
John Coltrane, that I know
of on this planet.
Coltrane made one album
for Blue Note.
And that album was Blue Train.
And what Blue Train really does
is...it's absolutely a perfect
example of what sets Blue Note
off from everything else that was
going on during that time.
As great as John Coltrane's output
was on Prestige, there was
nothing that really
approached Blue Train.
Well, you know,
we have to start somewhere.
I heard Naima on a Cherokee
commercial and it sounded fantastic.
I couldn't care
whether it was selling anything.
Just the song sounded so beautiful
coming out of the television.
Whether it's a hip-hop beat and
Coltrane on top, it don't matter.
They just have to get it.
When I first heard about Blue Note,
it was actually when I was a kid.
I was about ten years old.
My father had a massive collection
of Blue Note records and, you know,
I didn't know what jazz was,
I didn't know what Blue Note was.
Then when I went over
to London in 1990...
..and I saw people dancing to Art

Blakey. I was like, "What is this?"
I mean, it was this total culture
shock for me, even though
it was, you know, my culture.
I mean, I grew up with it,
but I was ignorant of it. And...
You know, I hear people talking
about how they sample
the Blue Note things and so forth.
Cos it was a company that,
on any given album,
there was always something that
just groove you out.
You didn't leave unless...
Something was swinging on it,
and you were not going to
leave this place.
And therefore, it was a different
period. You really felt like...
..you know, the music had
a nice feeling.
It was still dance music
at that time,
which the three of us came through.
At our age,
the music was danceable.
So, a jazz group...
You could go on at the club,
and the people would be dancing.
There were listeners,
but if it didn't feel good,
your butt was out of there.
Yo, check it out,
I got a hype rhyme for ya
That I'll rock from London,
England, to the boondocks of Georgia
Intelligent, benevolent, super
All the qualities of H-I-C,
the alley-ooper
My main man and me,
we've been cool since day one
Scooping all the fly girls,
having all the fun...
My hope is that some of the young

folks out here who hear
some of these samplings will say to
themselves, "Well, what was that?"
Or "Who was that? Oh, that's
Horace Silver.

"Let me check out some of his
recordings and see how well I..."
Maybe they'll say that about
Herbie Hancock
and about Stanley Turrentine,
and Donald Byrd and all the
different tracks that they're using
from these guys. Maybe they'll
go and check out the original.
And, who knows, eventually
we might pull some of them in
as jazz fans, you know?
And it's just so fortunate that
the person who happened
to be on the scene for the recording
sessions of such a major,
major body of work happened to be
a master artist in his own right.
And he was able to document this
photographically,
almost at the level of the music
that was being created.
It's just a phenomenal coming
together of two art forms,
at a level that is rarely achieved.

APPLAUSE:

Whoa! You know, they're all...
All of them, they really give
a very high quality.
It's almost like these
people who have the
cameras are looking at royalty.
You know what I mean?
It's just like a photograph
like that.
This is somebody who saw
the musician for what he was doing.
I mean, that energy! When you look

at that picture,
the horn's blowing at you.
You can hear it. You know, you can
feel the person's energy, you know?
My name is William Claxton.
I'm a photographer and I'm best
known for my jazz images.
CAMERA SHUTTER SNAPS
I wasn't aware of Francis Wolff's
pictures until...
..I guess the mid-'50s, really.
But once I started seeing
Francis Wolff's
pictures on Blue Note, I became
very much aware of them,
because he definitely had
a look going.
And I think the look was
definitely his look.
And what I first noticed
about his look
was the seemingly
simple lighting
he always had of a single flash.
And the pictures were
usually quite sharp,
and the backgrounds were always
black. And he caught great moments.
But that was his look, I think.
And he was consistent all
the way through.
We would walk down 57th Street
and pass the Museum of Modern Art.
And I'd say, "Frank, your photographs
need to be in there." You know?
Well, he didn't think so!
Alfred could not have survived
artistically or business-wise
or as in friendship without Frank.
They were like Siamese twins except
that they were separated. You know?
But somehow joined spiritually.
So the Blue Note story is a very
wonderful story of friendship,

of loyalty, of being
involved in a great endeavour.
And I think every musician
that was lucky enough to
get on Blue Note was really
happy about it.
1961, when I first went to
New York from Chicago with
Donald Byrd Pepper Adams Quintet,
Donald Byrd became my roommate.
One time when he said to me,
"OK, Herbie, it's time for you to
"make your own record." I said,
"What?!" And I said, "No, Donald,
"I'm not ready, Donald. I'm not
ready." And he said, "Yes, you are.
"Here's what you do." He said,
"Call up Alfred," - meaning
Alfred Lion.
"Tell him that, you know,
you're ready to do your own thing."
So I went in there with three tunes
and he really liked them.
And I got ready to play the blues
and two standards and he says,
"No, why don't you write three more
originals?"
I said...
I was stunned.
I said, "Sure, Alfred."
So my first album
under my own name,
six original tunes.
I mean, they never do that.
Actually, one of the tunes
was Watermelon Man.
I think he says that it was a tune
that could really become popular.
Alfred had a very unique situation.
He had complete autonomy,
because it was a small label.
There were no A&R men.
There was no art department,
there was no shipping department.

There was Alfred and Frank.
That was it.
When he needed an engineer,
he went over to Rudy's place.
When he needed his accounting done,
he hired an accountant.
But Alfred made the decisions.
And what you are witnessing in those
1,000-odd records that
Alfred made is one man's
personal taste,
his idea of what
he thought was right and true.
He was so driven by artists
he heard.
And even when he first
recorded Bud Powell,
or later when he recorded
Herbie Hancock, I mean,
these were unknown musicians, but
he heard something that excited him.
And he could not NOT record them.
There was absolutely no financial
consideration in what he did.
He recorded what he felt
and what he loved,
and some of it sold a lot,
and a lot of it sold nothing.
But we owe him a great
debt for the music he documented,
which is some of the music
that is still being
used as a model by young
artists today.
I think that, you know,
Blue Note is going through...
It seems to have gone through some
really interesting changes.
Recently, there's been more of a
concentration on vocalists.
And maybe it's following a certain
trend in the music.
There was a time when the vocalists
imitated the instrumentalists.

And now, perhaps, we're getting to,
once again - in a cycle - you know,
getting to a point in
the music where
the instrumentalists
are listening to the vocalists.
A little warm death
A little warm
death won't hurt you, no
Come on, relax with me
Let me take away your physicality
One little warm death comin' up
One little warm death with me tonight
A little sweet death
Momentary breathlessness
Feels like eternity
There's nobody here but you and me
Oh, one little warm death comin'
'round
A little warm death with me
tonight
In and out of stages
With the phases of the moon
It can shine so brightly
Let the fullness soon
come soon, come soon
Now I feel you near me
See you much more clearly
I can hardly wait to
Feel you movin' through my world,
oh, my world
Isn't deep without you.
All of a sudden,
in 1954 or 1955, erm,
Columbia introduced the 12-inch LP,
which...
In other words, the average playing
time of the side would
go from 12 minutes to 20 minutes.
And...
Suddenly, their whole
catalogue that they had worked
so hard to stay in business to
generate, was obsolete.

Stores were converting to the
12-inch LP.
And at this point,
Alfred almost threw in the towel.
He actually was entertaining offers.
There was
an offer from a company that was
so embarrassingly low that Alfred
decided to fight it out.
And stick with Blue Note
and fortunately he did because,
erm, two very important
things happened.
Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers
and later,
the Horace Silver Quintet.

MUSIC:

by Horace Silver Quintet

APPLAUSE:

A lot of the other guys that grew
up in those days,
great musicians and they made great
records,
but they didn't get
involved in the WHOLE record.
They got involved in the music only.
Which is all right, you know?
They produced some great music.
After that, they said,
"OK, Alfred, you got it.
"You got the liner notes,
you got the photograph on the cover,
"you got the graphics, you got the
rest of it, you know? I did my part.
"So, you got the rest of it."
But I wasn't like that.
I went to them, I said, "Look, I
would like to be involved in the
whole project."
You know, not just after the music,
you know,
I'd like to sit down and talk about

who we're going to get to write
these liner notes,
is it going to be Leonard Feather?
Is it going to be somebody else?
Who's going to do the graphics?
Let me see 'em before you print 'em,
you know?
And let me check out,
make sure everything is right.
And let's pick the photos you're
going to use cos I don't want to
wind up seeing photos
that I don't like of myself on an
album cover, you know?
And so, we worked hand-in-hand
together, with every phase of the
thing.
Everything I know about making a
record today, I learned from Alfred
Lion.
And he allowed me
to learn from him, you know?
MUSIC ENDS ON BASS PIANO NOTE

APPLAUSE:

Thank you! Thank you very much.
What people don't realise today
is that the difference between 78s
and LPs is cover art.
You make a 78, you put it
in a brown envelope and, boom,
you have a record.
Erm, once you come to the LP
era, even the 10-inch LP era,
with three or four songs on a side,
not only do you have more
recording costs,
but even if you're reissuing stuff
that you already own,
suddenly you have art costs.
You have to create a front cover,
write liner notes,
create a back cover.
And it became a far more expensive

business to be in.

WOMAN:

walked in there, Blue Note changed.
Erm, the one thing about working with
Blue Note is that it gave him
the freedom
and the creativity that he was
lacking in the advertising industry,
to be able to go in on the weekend
and to allow
and just play with type
and do all these wonderful creative
things that would be key to
the look of Blue Note records.
I like the fact that,
I know it's not supposed to
matter that much, but the records
always LOOKED so good.
Sometime I just look at the covers,
I pull out my Blue Note stuff
and I just look at the covers
just to get a vibe.
I don't even have to listen to the
records.
This is a classic cover.
It's Time, Jackie McLean.
And the music inside
is really reflective.
I mean when you put it on, you feel
the urgency. You feel the...
The movement of the record itself,
and when you look at the cover, it
just seems to work so well. Great!
He played with the words,
he'd play...
He'd take Frank's pictures
and crop through the head,
which Frank absolutely hated.
Erm, you know, he did some wonderful
things with those pictures.
And they used to have terrible
fights about it. Screaming fights,
where Reid was screaming

and Frank was screaming
and Alfred was screaming.
But they got the cover through.
They got the cover through
that the three of them wanted.
It was always a compromise
because maybe Reid was just
so terribly daring for his time.
Freddie Roach did a record, here's
one called Mo' Greens Please.
Which is an expression you would say
to somebody and say,
"Hey, gimme some mo' greens,"
you know, "Give me some more food."
So, here he is in front of the
place,
I think in New Jersey, where he
enjoys eating food,
asking the woman
to give him some Mo' Greens.
This is Tony Williams, Spring.
It is just a simple orange on white.
But it's a beautiful,
simple concept.
And on the back,
very little information.
But it's sort of like a minimalist,
it's almost haiku.
And he had pretty well developed
this entire look
and changed the way that jazz
albums in particular were viewed.
I mean the graphics
and everything else.
It went way beyond anything that was
happening at the time.
And here's a great one, The Three
Sounds, It Just Got To Be.
Three.
Those early covers, they've been
copied all over the world.
A Caddy For Daddy.
The funny part is that he wasn't
really into jazz!

He'd take all of the album covers
that they would give him and
he'd go down to the music store
and trade 'em for classical records.
'Turn loose them chitlins, baby, cos
daddy want a breeze boogaloo.'

LAUGHTER:

If you walk out
of your house in the morning
and there are diamonds everywhere
in the garden and you've seen them
since you were a child,
you wouldn't even pick one up.
It doesn't mean a thing.
You're surrounded by them.
It's sort of always been there.
Always not important.
But Europe didn't have that. THIS is
where jazz started. In THIS country.
And because they were
outsiders looking in
and they didn't have people
of the calibre of Louis Armstrong
and Dizzy and Bird,
they recognised it immediately.
Because for them to access the
music, it was a lot more difficult.
You had to wait maybe until next
year, when one of these people came
back to Europe again,
or maybe two years or three years.
I mean, you had to be a devotee.
Here, Americans took
so much for granted,
it was just sort of part
of the landscape.
No-one realised that in the days
that Alfred started
and maybe he was in business 20
years before people came to realise
that jazz was not only an art form,
but America's ONLY original art
form.

And it still is.

LONG, DISCORDANT JAZZ NOTES PLAY

You know what?

It's really fascinating

because only in Europe, erm,
people had reverence and respect for
this kind of music.

In America, they wouldn't know
with a baseball bat,
if they hit it with a baseball bat,
what it is, you know?

We are very ignorant to our own art.
I think that Miles and Charlie Parker
and Duke Ellington,

these are our Beethovens, you know,
and someday, America will wake up.

There was a condescending attitude
toward it because the people
who enjoyed it the most were not
part of the dominant culture.

Whether they liked it or not, jazz
became part of the dominant culture
and became an emblem of America,
of...

..what happens when artistic licence
is just allowed, you know,
it's like you just throw the seeds
on the ground and see what happens.

DISCORDANT JAZZ NOTES END

TRANSLATED FROM:

GERMAN:

IMPROVISATION:

BASS AND DRUMS JOIN IN,

APPLAUSE:

The reason than Europeans could see
something in jazz
and Americans couldn't,
is the fact that anything that
blacks in America have created
or tried to offer to the culture

at large
has always been,
erm, minimised and ridiculed.

DRUM SOLO:

For white people in America, erm,
they could only see jazz as
bordello music because that is the
only time they ever encountered it.
And that image stuck.
So, erm, people from Europe,
who did not have the racist
bias of Americans,
could come and see something that
was incredibly creative and artistic
and they saw an opportunity to
exploit it commercially.
And in doing so, helped
a lot of these artists survive.
If it was not for them,
it might have always been
thought of as bordello music.
I'm mad about all this!

CHANTING:

I have a right to be upset about
this!
UPBEAT JAZZ INSTRUMENTAL PLAYS
And that brought
revolution into jazz.
It brought the personal statement,
irregardless of how the press
was going to respond, erm,
what the standards of norm were
supposed to be,
into the music, you know?
Charlie Parker was mad.
Amiri Baraka's play, Dutchman,
has a great monologue where
he talks about, he said that
if Charlie Parker had went out and
killed the
first ten white people he saw,
he wouldn't need to play a note!

It was a way of dealing
with his anger.

It was a way of taking that anger
and releasing it,
so that the world could
understand it.

And that's what Bop brought.

This is the United States of America.

Mr James Moody...

HE PLAYS FLUTE OVER UP-TEMPO JAZZ

You remember when THEY started, the
United States was very prejudiced.

This was before civil rights came
through and for them
to put a black artist on the COVER?
I mean...

Alfred said he didn't care, he
was... "That's, that's what's going
to go there."

They said, "Put a pretty girl on
it," he said,

"No, no we're not going to do that.

"We're going to put Art Blakey, or
Hank Mobley or Blue Mitchell..."

Or anybody that he wanted to
promote.

Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff
created Blue Note in 1939,
with nothing more and nothing less
than their own great imaginations.
After eight years of innovative
mainstream recording
of people like Sidney Bechet,
Edmond Hall, Meade "Lux" Lewis
and many others, they were ready to
deal with the avant-garde of that
day.

Bebop.

The first bebop band, of course,
Billy Eckstine,

which had

Dizzy Gillespie,

Charlie Parker,

Fats Navarro,

Miles,

Sonny Stitt...

Billy Eckstine's band was playing
at the Club Sudan on 125th Street,
which, I didn't know that club.

But I wanted to go.

It was a Sunday afternoon
and I, for some reason or another,
I didn't get there.

And that was the day that
Alfred Lion met Art Blakey,
who was the drummer with
Billy Eckstine's band.

And Alfred has talked about this
because they developed a friendship
and of course Blakey did his most
significant recording on Blue Note.
The Jazz Messengers were really,
were developed on Blue Note.

UP-TEMPO DRUM SOLO

He WAS Blue Note, Art Blakey.

He recorded for other companies.

He did a lot of European recording
too, by the way, I'm sure you're
knowing.

But...Art was like Alfred's brother.

He had a few brothers and sons.

And he was like that. They had such
a rapport, it was just,
you just, I felt glorious when I was
with those two guys.

That particular sound,
which was the black sound,
I guess that was what
he was listening for.

He might have in his soul
been black.

He didn't know what it was
to be a white or black,
or Chinese or Japanese or anything
like that,
he just saw people as people.

MUSIC:

by Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers
Freddie and I were friends. And...
He had this old big tape recorder...
..and Jimmy Smith had given him
this reel-to-reel tape
of something he had done
live in a club in Atlantic City.
And Freddie said, you've got to hear
this organ player. He's incredible.
And the tapes were rather raw
and the sound was crackly.
But you could hear that Jimmy Smith
was the young genius.
And I was with Prestige at the time.
And I said to Bob Weinstock, "You've
GOT to sign this guy. He's...
"You know, he's the next thing."
And I only suggested TWO things
in my life to Bob Weinstock.
Jimmy Smith and Bill Cosby. And
he didn't pick up on either of them.
Jimmy Smith, I think the very next
week was snapped up by Alfred Lion.
Nobody had ever created a modern,
clean sound with bebop and blues
and everything that
Jimmy Smith put into it like he did
and he was a very serious guy,
he had spent a year... He rented
a warehouse, leased an organ
and just spent a year,
every day of his life,
just working out on the organ.
And so when he came to New York,
he was like, fully grown
as an artist and
an astonishingly exciting one.
What happened was Alfred
was in one of those absolutely
exhilarated moods and I thought,
"Gee, he's off his rocker."
He said, "You know,
I'm going to sell Blue Note."
I say, "Yeah?" "I'm going to sell

Blue Note and I'm going to go
"with Jimmy Smith as his road
manager
"so I can hear him every night."
He was absolutely ecstatic.
You know, Jimmy was coming through
with all these sounds that
nobody had ever heard before
and he never lost that...
happy enjoyment and, of course,
the other side of happiness
is the sadness.
Jimmy got so big and the company,
which had been a very
tiny little company,
then became a bigger company
with Jimmy Smith
and it attracted a LOT of attention.
And I won't name names, but some
great big record company came
and took Jimmy away and that
was a sad day at Blue Note.
How are you? Fine, and you today?
Fine, thank you. Mm-hmm.
Alfred, when he first recorded,
he wasn't recording
compositions, he wasn't coming out
of a European classical background,
he was looking for blues,
for very soulful blues.
And, really, what...
happened was that...
his organic feeling for music
that moved him
and his compulsive, intellectual
side met and that, after all,
is the basic ingredients of jazz.
And that's, I think, why
a lot of musicians describe Alfred
and Frank as being different.
"They were one of us,"
is the common phrase that you
hear from musicians,
they really understood what

we were doing
and what they really understood
was that jazz was something
where the mind, the intellect and
the soul and the feet got together.
And that's really what musicians
were projecting.
And that's really what
Alfred was all about
and that's why Blue Note can
record Herbie Nichols
and Blue Note can also record
Song For My Father
and The Sidewinder.
It's all the same thing.
The Blue Note era and Alfred Lion
and Francis Wolff ended in 1966
when Alfred Lion decided to sell
the company to Liberty Records.
With his wife Ruth, Alfred Lion
retired to Mexico
and began a new life.
Francis Wolff died in 1972.
In 1981, jazz producer
Michael Cuscuna started to reissue
the most important
Blue Note recordings.
His partner Charlie Laurie
began to publish
the enormous work of Francis Wolff.
In 1985, the major Blue Note artists
joined for the legendary
Town Hall Concert.
The Blue Note label
was reborn in 1986
under the direction
of Bruce Lundvall.
Alfred Lion died in 1987.

MUSIC DROWNS OUT SPEECH
No, that ain't no '73. '53.
'53, I was going to say.
You'll see I'm playing that...
I haven't played that since '57.
And I'm looking...

This bass that I had here,
somebody walked in...
I paid maybe...
2,000 something for the bass
I bought in Chicago
and they walked in the club,
I was playing at the Blue Angel
and playing shows and somebody
walked in, all the other instruments
onstage, there was two basses,
they grabbed my bass.
It was like a blessing.
You mean they stole it?
Stole it. Oh, boy.
Six people.
Clifford had the same model.
Yeah, Clifford had one like that.
Yeah. Yeah.
Do I look different?
How different is this?
What is that goofy looking...
Not too much.
You almost look the same.
No, you haven't changed.
No, you look about the same.
You haven't changed much.
If you put those glasses
on that picture,
you would be about the same.
Definite.