

Atlantic Records: A Discography. Compiled by Michel Ruppli. Vol. 1, 404 pp.; Vol. 2, 394 pp.; Vol. 3, 383 pp.; Vol. 4, 273 pp. Greenwood Press, Westport and London, 1979.

This monumental undertaking by the Swiss label-discography specialist who brought us Prestige Jazz Records, 1949-1971 is the first in a series from Greenwood, edited by Brian Rust, which will include a new Ruppli work on the Savoy label and a revised and expanded edition of his Prestige opus--welcome proof of the newly acquired stature of discography in the publishing world.

The Atlantic volumes are quite handsomely and sturdily bound and printed on decent quality paper, but the text, apparently offset from typescript, is poorly reproduced in much of the first volume, though things improve from then on.

A label discography is by its very nature quite different from a work focused on a specific musical genre or artist, and the reader-user's response and interest will depend on his or her particular orientation. Atlantic and its affiliate labels (Atco, Cotillion, Vortex, Stax, Volt, etc.) have been particularly active in Black vernacular musics, and Ruppli's work will thus be of special usefulness to researchers and archivists in this significant area of American music. But Atlantic's scope has been broad, and includes also a considerable amount of rock, mainstream pop, and even classical music--the latter mainly on the small but interesting Finnadar label.

Ruppli had his work cut out for himself: each volume includes details on approximately 10,000 master numbers. Since, as he points out, the label uses a simple master numbering system continuously in its files, he has, logically, employed this number sequence for the listing of sessions, though it is not the true chronological order. This creates less of a problem than one might expect, though when it comes to the Atco masters (introduced in 1955, eight years after Atlantic's start), which used a different series, but later were also assigned Atlantic numbers, considerable ruptures in chronology do occur. (Ruppli lists these masters according to their Atlantic numbers, with the Atco number given in parentheses after the titles.) However, the Atco sequence ends after 465 masters, so only Vol. 1 is affected, and Ruppli also provides a cross-index of the Atco master numbers.

Each volume has an index of session leaders, a necessity in a label discography. An index of all performing artists would have been ideal, but is probably more than one could ask for. In any event, while a large number of complete and partial session personnel does appear, there are also many blanks. Ruppli had access to studio files, but apparently not to session sheets, and as he acknowledges, many personnel data were provided by others, Kurt Mohr in particular, and were also derived from Jepsen's Jazz Records, McCarthy's Jazz Director, the useful Jazz Catalogue series, and specialist magazines.

Listed issue numbers are limited to U.S. numbers, except when titles have been issued only outside the U.S. When known, timings are provided in parentheses after the master numbers. Detailed studio locations are provided.

Atlantic began as a small label, recording mainly rhythm & blues, gospel, and jazz. Many early jazz releases were drawn from leased masters, including materials recorded in Europe, and reissues dating from as far back as 1938. Ray Charles, who made his first successful records for Atlantic, signed on in 1952, and his and the label's fortunes grew together. (An indication of this growth: Vol. 1 covers the period from the late summer of 1947 through February 1966, while Vol. 2, only 10 pages shorter, runs from March 1966 through August 1970! (For the record, Vol. 3 covers September 1970 to November 1974, and Vol. 4, December 1974 through July 1978. As will be understood from earlier comments, the chronology is not strict.) Eventually, the label was sold to a conglomerate, and is now part of the Warner Brothers-Elektra-Atlantic (WEA) combine. It is to the credit of its founders, the Ertegun Brothers and Jerry Wexler, that Atlantic has retained some of its special character to this day.

To be sure, the label's jazz activity, which is the primary interest of this reviewer, has steadily declined. The peak of this activity is covered in the first volume, when Atlantic was among the leading jazz labels in the world, with a roster including Ornette Coleman, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Lee Konitz, Wilbur De Paris, Jimmy Giuffre, and many others. One of the most fascinating and tantalizing aspects of a discography such as this is what it reveals about unissued material, and there is plenty here to whet the appetite, among it a session led by the late tenor saxophonist Brew Moore in 1954. (This session is also an acute example of missing personnel details, which in this case could have been provided by bebop specialists.)

Atlantic's huge contribution to the popularization of Black music can be traced in great detail through Ruppli's work. Since the state of the discographer's art and craft is not as advanced in this area as in jazz, researchers will undoubtedly find a goldmine of information here--which is not to say that there isn't much that will be new to jazz scholars as well.

Not the least interesting aspect of the work is what it has to reveal about the changing technology of recording. As Ruppli notes in the introduction to Vol. 4, "it was more difficult to obtain recording dates for... this volume...since most Atlantic recordings are now made using multitrack recording and mixing," and he goes on to explain that while many separate dates and locations may be involved, the only available date will be that of registration. In addition, a growing amount of material is by now not recorded by the label itself, but independently produced and merely distributed by Atlantic. The plot thickens!

There is a wealth of information contained in these four volumes, and it is quite impossible to do justice to a work of this size and scope

until one has used it for some considerable time--in day-to-day work and in browsing. (I feel sorry for those who have yet to discover the pleasures of reading discographies, as distinct from merely looking things up in them.)

Suffice it to say at this point that Atlantic Records is a significant contribution to discographic literature, and that it is good to see it published by a house that has the wherewithal to disseminate it properly. Discography is coming of age, but it is ironic that most major work on American music is still being done by Europeans, who pioneered in this important, demanding, and ultimately thankless science.

Duke Ellington's Story On Records, 1963-1965. Compiled by Luciano Massagli, Liborio Pusateri, and Giovanni M. Volonte. Cartotecnica Bolzoni, Milano, 1979. 162 pp.

The 13th volume in this outstanding series maintains the high standards of discography set by these diligent compilers from the start of their labors. (All but the five most recent volumes are out of print, but may soon be restored in revised editions.)

Ellington's exceptionally long and productive recording career sets formidable tasks for the discographer, yet he has attracted more specialists than any other jazz artist. Among them (Aasland, Jepsen, Sanfilippo, Timmer) the team at hand stands out for the detail and thoroughness of the work, though Dick Bakker's Ellington on Microgroove, the first volume of which appeared last year, measures up in its own specialized area.

In addition to the standard discographic information, Massagli et al. provide such details as soloists, length of solos (in bars), and instrument used when the player doubles and all known takes, whether issued or unissued (differences between takes in solo routines, etc. are given in notes at the end of each session, and these notes also include other relevant information, such as variant titles--Ellington often tried out several names for new compositions). Three indexes list (1) all compositions, their structure, bar length, and composer(s); (2) all the players, with full details of their stay(s) in the band; and (3) all LPs or EPs containing material appearing in the volume, with fully detailed contents plus clarifications--as in the case of a horrendously messy French reissue series.

This wealth of information is neatly and practically laid out. Each session is assigned a number, and each consecutive recorded item is identified by this number plus a letter. If the session is a broadcast, show or concert, known details are given in the note. During the period covered here, non-studio sessions were numerous, ranging from Tonight Show appearances to concerts in such exotic venues as Ceylon or Damascus. Wherever the band went, it seems, someone was on hand to tape the music, and the industrious team of discographers has managed to audition and sort out the contents of the tapes. (The bulk of them, by the way, remain

unissued thus far, though Ellington is the subject of more unauthorized record releases than any other jazz artist.)

Even so, some things are bound to have slipped through the net. In the preface, the authors urge anyone with relevant Ellington information to contact Liborio Pusateri, P.O. Box 947, I-20100 Milano, Italy. As an indication of the accelerating volume of Ellingtonia in the '60s, the next book in the series will cover only 1966-67. Thus we can look forward to at least four more volumes until a series that will stand as a model of the discographer's craft reaches completion.

Dan Morgenstern