

PRESTIGE AND SAVOY DISCOGRAPHIES

The Prestige Label: A Discography. Compiled by Michel Ruppli with assistance from Bob Porter. Greenwood Press, Westport and London, 1980. 378 pp.

The Savoy Label: A Discography. Compiled by Michel Ruppli with assistance from Bob Porter. Greenwood Press, Westport and London, 1980. 443 pp.

The excellent series begun with Ruppli's hefty four-volume work on Atlantic Records continues with documentation of two of the most significant independent jazz labels of the post-World War II period.

While the Savoy volume is brand new, the Prestige is an updated and expanded version of Ruppli's Prestige Jazz Sessions (1949-1971), a landmark in label discography published in 1973. The new work covers a full 30-year span.

Both discographies are well organized, the material being presented clearly and practically. Indigenous sessions come first, laid out chronologically. This main section is followed by data on leased and purchased sessions, numerical listings of single and album issues, tables of equivalent foreign releases, and artists indexes. The latter, listing all participating players and singers, greatly facilitates access.

As in the case of the Atlantic books, reproduction (from typescript, apparently) is uneven. A good response to this series might result in better presentation of the text for future volumes, though the mere existence of well-bound and well-distributed jazz discographies seems a blessing to veterans like this reviewer. I understand that the Blue Note label is next in line, which will leave only Riverside and its affiliates to complete the survey of major U.S. jazz independents of the period.

While both Prestige and Savoy belong to this group, and their years of key activity by and large overlap, there are significant differences. Savoy got under way in earnest some five years before Prestige and was strictly a business operation from the start. Herman Lubinsky, its owner, was not a patron of the arts. Prestige's Bob Weinstock, however, began as a fan and collector, opened a collector's shop, and first ventured into producing records when he leased some masters by the Australian revivalist Graeme Bell and his band and issued them on the Jazz Corner label. (Ruppli does not make mention of this arcane fact, though his collaborator included it in his excellent notes for Prestige's 25th anniversary album.)

Prestige occasionally ventured outside jazz. Some 90 LPs were issued on its Bluesville sub-label, and there was dabbling in folk and ethnic musics as well as a smattering of spoken-word records. Savoy, born during the first AFofM recording ban, began with a grab-bag of

gospel, r&b, swing, jazz and country-and-western, eventually focusing on gospel and r&b as well as modern jazz. Savoy survives as an active (as opposed to reissue) label in the gospel field only. Lubinsky gobbled up a host of small labels and frequently leased material. Prestige was much less active in this area.

Both volumes benefit greatly from Porter's access to company files and archives; he has worked as a producer for both labels and is of course himself a knowledgeable and dedicated discographer and historian of jazz and r&b. (This is not in the least meant to slight Ruppli's contribution.) Even so, isolated areas of uncertainty remain, but that is generic to the sweet science of discography, which would soon lose its mystique and become a branch of higher bookkeeping if all were suddenly to become clear.

But that may be an overstatement. As these books so clearly show, a good discography is much more than a laundry list of dates and data. It is a key and supplement to the history of music and can be as exciting to read as a good mystery or adventure story.

These volumes shed much light on the key years of modern jazz and its up-and-down fortunes in the recording world. It can safely be said that without Savoy, Prestige, Blue Note and Riverside and Atlantic, our aural picture of the post-World War II years in jazz would be a mere silhouette. In the case of two giant figures, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, Savoy and Prestige respectively are of cardinal significance. It is interesting to note that Parker's Savoy recordings have never been out of the catalog. At this writing, every scrap of Parker from Savoy's vaults, including false starts and breakdowns, is available; the bulk of it on a five-record set with excellent annotations--a far cry from the garbled and incomplete data on the labels of the first 78 issues of Parker's first session as a leader on November 26, 1945.

Good as it is, the Prestige volume will appeal mainly to the jazz-minded. The Savoy book, on the other hand, contains a wealth of new information on blues, r&b and gospel recordings, which makes it a most welcome addition to the documentation of vernacular musics not yet as well researched as jazz.

While a certain amount of intriguing unissued or rejected sessions and takes is listed in both works, it is clear that nothing like the treasure trove of unsuspected jazz materials presently being unearthed from the Blue Note archives by Michael Cuscuna exists where these labels are concerned. At Savoy, Porter has managed to reissue (or issue for the first time) the bulk of significant jazz materials; most of what remains is a bit too obscure to warrant issuing by Savoy's present owners, Arista.

Prestige, now under Fantasy's wing, has a long and continuous history of extensive reissuing and re-packaging, including a hefty portion of so-called "twofers." Prior to retiring from Fantasy, Orrin Keepnews put together a monumental 12-record set of Miles Davis' entire Prestige

output--an outstanding example of state-of-the-art jazz reissuing by enlightened companies who often would not know what treasures their archives contain if not for the labors of dedicated discographers.

One notes with pleasure that the general editor of this excellent Greenwood series is none other than Brian Rust. The imprimatur of that worthy traditionalist on works chiefly concerned with recordings by modernists is a welcome sign that the days of parochialism are over in the field of jazz discography, as in jazz criticism and historiography. Well, almost....

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