Thursday, January 15, 2009, 8pm
Zellerbach Hall

Blue Note 7

Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of Blue Note Records

Blue Note Records History

In 1925, 16-year old Alfred Lion noticed a concert poster for Sam Wooding’s orchestra near his favorite ice-skating arena in his native Berlin, Germany. He had heard many of his mother’s jazz records and began to take an interest in the music, but that concert night his life was changed. The impact of what he heard live touched a deep passion within him. His thirst for the music temporarily brought him to New York in 1928, where he worked on the docks and slept in Central Park to get closer to the music.

On December 23, 1938, Lion attended the celebrated Spirituals to Swing concert at Carnegie Hall. The power, soul and beauty with which boogie-woogie piano masters Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis rocked the stage gripped him. Exactly two weeks later, on January 6 at two in the afternoon, he brought them into a New York studio to make some recordings. They took turns at the one piano, recording four solos each before relinquishing the bench to the other man. The long session ended with two stunning duets. Blue Note Records was finally a reality.

The label’s first brochure in May 1939 carried a statement of purpose that Lion rarely strayed from throughout the many styles and years during which he built one of the greatest jazz record companies in the world. It read: “Blue Note Records are designed simply to serve the uncompromising expressions of hot jazz or swing, in general. Any particular style of playing which represents an authentic way of musical feeling is genuine expression. By virtue of its significance in place, time and circumstance, it possesses its own tradition, artistic standards and audience that keep it alive. Hot jazz, therefore, is expression and communication, a musical and social manifestation, and Blue Note records are concerned with identifying its impulse, not its sensational and commercial adornments.”

At the end of 1939, Lion’s childhood friend Meade Lux Lewis rocked the stage gripped him. Van Gelder had a recording setup in the living room. Blue Note had always been known for its superior sound and balance, but in Van Gelder Alfred found an intelligent, kindred soul from whom he could extract an ideal sound. Van Gelder engineered most of the major jazz recordings of the 1950s and 1960s for many labels and stated, “You don’t find that anymore.”

Van Gelder was both distinctive and beautiful. He had ushered in their swingtet phase, he would also bring them into modern jazz, introducing them to many of the new music’s innovators and encouraging them to document it. Soon they were recording Fats Navarro and Bud Powell and giving Tadd Dameron, Thelonious Monk and Art Blakey, among others, their first dates as leaders. Lion and Wolff became especially fascinated with Monk and helped his career in every conceivable way. Despite critical resistance and poor sales, they recorded him frequently until 1952.

Monk’s case was the first major example of what Horace Silver described in a 1980 interview, “Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff were men of integrity and real jazz fans. Blue Note was a great label to record for. They gave a first break to a lot of great artists who are still out there doing it today. They gave me my first break. They gave a lot of musicians a chance to record when all the other companies weren’t interested. And they would stick with an artist, even if he weren’t selling. You don’t find that anymore.”

Album covers started to become a distinctive component in the Blue Note mix. Frank Wolff’s extraordinarily sensitive and atmospheric photos and the advanced designs of Paul Bacon, Gil Melle and John Hermansader gave Blue Note a look that was both distinctive and beautiful.

Meanwhile, Lion was making debut albums by the likes of Horace Silver, Lou Donaldson, Clifford Brown, Wynton Kelly, Elmo Hope, Kenny Drew, Tal Farlow and Kenny Burrell. He was also recording significant sessions with established modern talents such as Kenny Dolham, George Wallington, Miles Davis, Thad Jones, Sonny Rollins and Herbie Nichols.

In 1952, Alfred became intrigued by the sound of a Triumph recording that saxophonist-composer Gil Melle had done at engineer Rudy Van Gelder’s parents’ home in Hackensack, New Jersey, where Van Gelder had a recording setup in the living room. Blue Note had always been known for its superior sound and balance, but in Van Gelder Alfred found an intelligent, kindred soul from whom he could extract an ideal sound. Van Gelder engineered most of the major jazz recordings of the 1950s and 1960s for many labels and stated, “Alfred knew exactly what he wanted to hear. He communicated it to me and I got it for him technically. He was amazing in what he heard and how
he would patiently draw it out of me. He gave me confidence and support in any situation."

By 1954, Blue Note naturally gravitated toward a system that was much akin to a repertory theatre company: using a revolving cast of sidemen and leaders who would assure them the creativity, compatibility and dependability that Blue Note sought. Leaders would appear on each other's projects: recurring sidemen would be groomed to grow into leaders. Sometimes such instances could be purely serendipitous. Horace Silver's first session was to have been a Lou Donaldson quartet date that Lou had to cancel at the last minute to go out of town. Alfred thought it was time for Horace to make his debut anyway and offered him the same date as his own trio session.

On the subject of Horace Silver, Lion felt in late 1954 that Horace should do a record with horns. He and the pianist arrived at the ideal personnel: Kenny Dorham, Hank Mobley, Doug Watkins and Art Blakey. The date went so well that these five men decided on a common purpose and formed a cooperative band called the Jazz Messengers. The group's idea was to present soulful modern jazz that incorporated the language of bebop (without the virtuosic clichés of its second-generation followers) and the soulful, warm roots of blues and gospel music. It worked, and it became, with Van Gelder's engineering, the Blue Note sound.

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One of the world’s premiere jazz pianists, Bill Charlap has performed with many leading artists of our time, from Phil Woods and Tony Bennett to Gerry Mulligan and Wynton Marsalis. He is known for his interpretations of American popular song and has recorded albums featuring the music of Hoagy Carmichael, Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin.

In 1997, Mr. Charlap formed the Bill Charlap Trio with bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington (not related). In 2000, he was signed to Blue Note Records and has since received two Grammy Award nominations: for Somewhere: The Songs of Leonard Bernstein and, most recently, The Bill Charlap Trio: Live at the Village Vanguard. Born in New York City, Mr. Charlap began playing the piano at age three. His father was Broadway composer Mosie Charlap, whose credits include Peter Pan, and his mother is singer Sandy Stewart, who appeared on the Ed Sullivan and Perry Como shows and earned a Grammy nomination for her recording of “My Coloring Book.” In 2005, Mr. Charlap and Ms. Stewart released the acclaimed Love Is Here to Stay on Blue Note Records. Mr. Charlap is married to jazz pianist Renee Rosnes. The two artists often collaborate in a duo piano setting. Mr. Charlap serves as the artistic director of the 92nd Street Y’s Jazz in July festival in New York.

Nicholas Payton was born September 26, 1973, in New Orleans, Louisiana, into a musical family. Mr. Payton took up the trumpet at the age of four. Encouraged by his pianist/singer mother and his bass-playing father, he swiftly reached a level of proficiency that enabled him, at the age of nine, to play alongside his father in the Young Tuxedo Brass Band. At age 12, he was a member of the All-Star Jazz Band, playing with this group both locally and at European festivals. Encouraged by Wynton Marsalis, he played semi-professionally throughout his school years, and then enrolled at the New Orleans Centre for Creative Arts, where he studied the trumpet and music theory and undertook classical training. He next attended the University of New Orleans, where he studied with Ellis Marsalis.

During the early 1990s, Mr. Payton toured throughout the United States and Europe with many leading jazz musicians, including Clark Terry, Marcus Roberts, the Jazz Futures II project and Elvin Jones, and as a member of the Rising Star tour of Europe in 1996. He has recorded with Marcus Roberts, Elvin Jones, Jesse Davis, Teresa Brewer, Joe Henderson, Manhattan Projects, the New Orleans Collective, Courtney Pine, Joshua Redman, in a trio with Christian McBride and Mark Whitfield, and with fellow trumpeters Roy Hargrove and Marsalis. He appeared on the soundtrack album for the 1996 Robert Altman film, Kansas City. Memorably, he appeared at club engagements with veteran trumpeter Doc Cheatham, and recorded with him shortly before Cheatham’s death in 1997. Mr. Payton has recorded numerous albums as a leader; his most recent, for Nonesuch Records, is entitled Into the Blue.

Born the second son of John and Alice Coltrane in 1965 in Long Island, New York, and raised in the Los Angeles area, Ravi Coltrane was named after Indian sitar legend Ravi Shankar. Starting in middle school, Mr. Coltrane began playing clarinet, though he grew up hearing a variety of music. In 1986, Mr. Coltrane entered the California Institute of the Arts to pursue musical studies, focusing on the saxophone.

In 1991, he connected with Elvin Jones, his father’s renowned drummer from the 1960s, and received his first taste of the jazz life. Within a year, he relocated to New York City and began playing with a variety of players, including Jack DeJohnette, Wallace Roney, Geri Allen, Kenny Barron, Joe Lovano, Joanne Brackeen and Steve Coleman. Mr. Coltrane’s relationship with Mr. Coleman throughout the 1990s was particularly influential on the budding saxophonist, and included tours and appearances on several Coleman albums.

In 1997, after performing on more than 30 recordings as a sideman, Mr. Coltrane recorded his first album as a leader, Moving Pictures, for RCA Victor Records. From the Round Box, Mr. Coltrane’s second album, was released in 2000. In 2002, Mr. Coltrane launched his own recording company, RKM Music, with albums by trumpeter Ralph Alessi and saxophonist Michael McGinnis. That same year, Coltrane produced Legacy, a four-disc thematic study of his father’s career, for Verve, and co-produced and penned liner notes for the Deluxe Edition repackaging of A Love Supreme. Mr. Coltrane continues his role as family archivist.

The year 2003 brought the release of Mr. Coltrane’s third album, Mad 6, on Columbia Records. Mr. Coltrane was the driving and guiding force behind his mother Alice Coltrane’s return to recording after a 26-year hiatus. Translinear Light, featuring performances by Alice and Mr. Coltrane, along with Charlie Haden, Jack DeJohnette, James Genus, Jeff Watts, Oran Coltrane and others, was released in late September 2004 on Impulse! Records.

Mr. Coltrane’s fourth album as a leader, In Flus, was released in 2005 on the Savoy Jazz label, and his new recording, Blending Times, will be released on Savoy Jazz this winter.

In addition to working and traveling with his own group, Mr. Coltrane has made guest performances with McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders, Carlos Santana, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, Michael Brecker, George Duke, Stanley Clarke, Branford Marsalis, and as a member of the collaborative group, Saxophone Summit, alongside Dave Liebman and Joe Lovano.

A native of Hampton, Virginia, Steve Wilson began his formal training at age 12. Playing saxophone, oboe and drums in school bands, he also played in various R&B and funk bands throughout his teens, and went on to a yearlong stint with singer Stephanie Mills. He attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where he studied and performed with Jimmy and Percy Heath, Jon Hendricks, Jaki Byard, John Hicks, Frank Foster and Ellis Marsalis. Mr. Wilson has brought his distinctive sound to more than 100 recordings led by such celebrated and wide-ranging artists as Chick Corea, George Duke, Michael Brecker, Dave Holland, Dianne Reeves, Bill Bruford, Gerald Wilson, Maria Schneider, Joe Henderson, Charlie Byrd, Billy Childs, Karrin Allyson, Don Byron, Bill Stewart, James Williams and Mulgrew Miller. Mr. Wilson has seven recordings under his own name, collaborating with such stellar musicians as Lewis Nash, Carl Allen, Steve Nelson, Cyrus Chestnut, Greg Hutchinson, Dennis Irwin, James Genus, Larry Grenadier, Ray Drummond, Ben Riley and Nicholas Payton.

In 1986, he became a member of O.T.B (Out of the Blue), a sextet of younger players recording on Blue Note Records. In 1988, he toured the United States and Europe with Lionel Hampton. Wilson was the subject of a New York Times profile, “A Sideman’s Life,” highlighting his work with Ralph Peterson, Jr., Michele Rosewoman, Renee Rosnes, Marvin “Smitty” Smith, Joanne Brackeen, the American Jazz Orchestra, the Mingus Big Band, the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, Leon Parker and Buster Williams. In 1996, he joined the acclaimed Dave Holland Quintet, and from 1998–2001 he was a member of Chick Corea’s Grammy-winning sextet, Origin.

Mr. Wilson’s latest two recordings are Passages on the Stretch Records label and Soulful Songs on the MaxJazz Records label.

Born September 3, 1967, in New York City, Peter Bernstein has been an active and important member of the vibrant New York jazz scene since 1989. He has participated in numerous recordings and performed at many festivals, concerts and clubs with musicians from all generations. Mr. Bernstein is a member of the long-standing collaborative trio with Larry Goldings and Bill Stewart. They have performed all over the world, and maintain an annual weeklong engagement at the famed Village Vanguard in New York City. As a leader, Mr. Bernstein has made five recordings for the Criss Cross Jazz label and counts Brad Mehldau as a featured sideman on four releases, including his latest, Stranger in Paradise, on the Japanese imprint Venus Records.

While a student at The New School, Mr. Bernstein met the legendary guitarist Jim Hall, who proved instrumental in helping to nurture Mr. Bernstein’s career. Mr. Bernstein performed as part of Lou Donaldson’s group throughout the 1990s, was a member of Joshua Redman’s band.
from 1995 through 1997, and toured the world as part of Diana Krall’s quartet from 1999 to 2001.

In addition to his recording and touring, Mr. Bernstein has taught at The Julliard School, Berklee College of Music, North Texas State University, the New School Jazz Program and the Jazz Conservatory in Amsterdam.

Perhaps the most recorded bassist of his generation, Peter Washington has a discography of over 350 recordings that grows on a near-weekly basis.

Born in Los Angeles, he majored in English literature at UC Berkeley, and while in San Francisco was invited by Art Blakey to move to New York and join his Jazz Messengers. From there, Mr. Washington became part of two of jazz’s most celebrated trios: the Tommy Flanagan Trio and, for the past ten years, the Bill Charlap Trio.

Mr. Washington’s freelance work roster is a “Who’s Who” of jazz. Among the instrumentalists he has worked with are Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry, David Sánchez, David Hazeltine, Regina Carter and the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, in addition to vocalists Chris Conner, Mark Murphy, Paula West and Ernestine Anderson.

Mr. Washington has recorded and/or performed with many of the legendary Blue Note Records recording artists, including Bobby Hutcherson, Johnny Griffin, Freddie Hubbard, Donald Byrd, Milt Jackson and Jackie McLean.

Lewis Nash is the drummer of choice for an incredible array of artists, from the masters of the music to the hottest young players of today, and is equally in demand as a clinician and educator.

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, Mr. Nash developed an early interest in music and began playing drums at age 10. He performed with local jazz groups by the time he was 18, and by 21 he had become the “first call” jazz drummer in Phoenix, working with Sonny Stitt, Art Pepper, Red Garland, Lee Konitz, Barney Kessell and Slide Hampton.

In 1981, Mr. Nash moved to New York City and joined the trio of the great jazz vocalist Betty Carter. For nearly four years, he toured internationally with Ms. Carter, and is featured on three of her recordings, including the Grammy-winning Look What I Got.

World-renowned bassist Ron Carter hired Mr. Nash in 1984. As a member Mr. Carter’s nonet, quintet and quartet, Mr. Nash toured extensively and is featured on several of the bassist’s recordings. Mr. Nash then joined Branford Marsalis’s band, and their work is documented on Mr. Marsalis’s Grammy-nominated recording, Random Abstract, as well as on two videos: Royal Garden Blues (directed by Spike Lee) and Branford Marsalis: Steep.

When trombone master J. J. Johnson returned to the scene in 1988, he chose Mr. Nash to provide rhythm duties for his band. That same year, Mr. Nash joined the Don Pullen-George Adams Quartet, succeeding the late Dannie Richmond. In 1989, Mr. Nash toured with legendary saxophonist Sonny Rollins. He has also performed with Stan Getz, Art Farmer, Clark Terry and Milt Jackson.

From 1990 to 2000, Mr. Nash was a member of the Tommy Flanagan Trio, and he is featured on seven CD recordings with the late piano master. During this period, Mr. Nash also toured and recorded with both the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. His impressive discography (over 300 recordings) includes projects with jazz legends Dizzy Gillespie, Oscar Peterson, Benny Carter, Hank Jones and John Lewis, as well as new jazz stars Diana Krall, Joe Lovano and Roy Hargrove. Demonstrating his stylistic diversity, Mr. Nash is also featured on recordings by Natalie Cole, Bette Midler, Nancy Wilson, Kenny Rankin, Melissa Manchester and George Michael.

These days, Mr. Nash regularly tours with Cedar Walton and also leads his own band. His latest recording as a leader is entitled Stompin’ at the Savoy on the M&I Jazz Records label.