PROJECT SUMMARY

Genre: Documentary
Language: English
Running time: 115 min
Release year: 2018
Directed by: Eric Friedler
Nationality: Germany
Starring: Herbie Hancock, Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, Quincy Jones, Lou Donaldson, Sheila Jordan, Ron Carter, Rudy van Gelder, George Benson, Rolf Kühn

PRODUCED BY

NDR, Neue Road Movies
Studio Hamburg Enterprises
SYNOPSIS
In 1939, Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff, two young émigrés from Berlin, founded the legendary jazz label Blue Note Records in New York. The label dedicated itself exclusively to the recording of American jazz music and developed its own unmistakable recording style and sound. Blue Note Records discovered and produced an impressive roster of international jazz stars. This included Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, Thelonious Monk and Quincy Jones. At a time when Afro-American musicians in the USA were discriminated against and ostracised, Blue Note records respected them as artists and equals. Not only did the label value their talents, it also gave them a much-needed platform. „It Must Schwing!“ tells the moving story of two friends, united by a passionate love for jazz, and of their profound belief in equality and freedom for every single human being.
ALFRED LION and FRANCIS WOLFF

Alfred Lion (1908-1987) and Francis Wolff (1908-1971) first met when they were teenagers in their home city of Berlin. Their close friendship was cemented by a mutual love for contemporary American music. After 1933, their Jewish faith made it increasingly difficult for them to live in Nazi Germany, and Alfred became the first of the two to make the move to America. But they always knew that jazz was their vocation and that one day they would try to earn their living together recording the music they loved. Francis Wolff escaped to New York on one of the last ships to leave Germany without being scrutinised by the Gestapo, Hitler’s secret police. Reunited, the two friends worked together for their record label, Blue Note Records. Alfred, the talent scout and producer, created the unmistakable Blue Note sound with the assistance of the congenial recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder (1924-2016); and with his photographs and the ideas of graphic designer Reid Miles (1927-1993), Francis developed the unique look of the Blue Note records. The company grew slowly from humble beginnings and the two never attained real wealth - but they did leave an indelible mark on the history of jazz music. The most important thing was that the music had the right swing, or as Alfred Lion used to put it in his characteristic accent, when issuing the only instruction he ever gave to the musicians: "It must schwing!"

At a time when Afro-American artists in the USA were discriminated against and ostracised, the Germans Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff regarded the musicians they signed as admirable, extraordinarily talented people. They simply wanted to show their respect to these artists and treated them with tremendous dignity and humanity. Long before the civil rights movement reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s and Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream" speech in Washington, Blue Note records had already turned this utopian vision into a reality. Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff should now be recognised as early supporters of this movement. Irrespective of skin colour, they worked on an equal footing with all their artists and discovered jazz greats such as Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman and Ron Carter. In 1965, Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff sold Blue Note and Alfred retired. Francis Wolff, who had continued working for the label, died suddenly in 1971; on his tombstone it says "Friend of Alfred Lion".
Because in 1939, two German Jews emigrated to New York. They shared a common fascination for Jazz and for the great black instrumentalists who were playing amazing stuff, but who found no record companies that would publish their music in America. These two Germans started to record this music, photographed (for the first time) all these (now) legendary musicians for the record covers and produced albums that are now part of the classic repertoire of 20th Century music.

"It Must Schwing! The Blue Note Story" combines extraordinary music documents and amazing period film materials with a newly conceived animation framework that tells part of the story of Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff. How else to tell their adventure, as there were no cameras around, of course, when they started to conceive their label with no financing at all, just their enthusiasm.

They both spoke pretty poor English, and Alfred's classic advice as producer and engineer to his artists was: "It must schwing!" That also became the title of the film.

"It Must Schwing! The Blue Note Story" is an unique film, not only for Jazz fans.

Wim Wenders, Executive Producer

If you're a Jazz connoisseur (and even if you are not) the label BLUE NOTE is a household name for you: "Blue Note Records" is the one and only record company that released single-handedly most of the avant-garde jazz in the US from the Forties through the Fifties and Sixties. In 2019, the history of BLUE NOTE is 80 years old!

Neue Road Movies (NRM) was established in 2008 as a film production company in Berlin. It is managed by Wim Wenders. NRM has been producing documentary films, such as PINA, the series Cathedrals of Culture, and most recently Pope Francis – A MAN OF HIS WORD, but fictional films have always been the company's other focus, from Palermo Shooting via Every Thing Will Be Fine to Submergence. With a history of altogether five feature-length films in 3D, NRM has been recognized as a leading force in the field.

The company borrowed its name from Road Movies Film Produktion which was in operation for more than a quarter of a century. Founded in 1974 by Wim Wenders, it became one of the most successful independent arthouse production companies, producing and co-producing over one hundred national and international films out of Berlin. Road Movies folded in 2001, in the turbulences of the ‘New Market’.

NRM shares its office space with three other companies that Wim Wenders is involved in: Wenders Images, Wenders Music and Wenders Foundation.
PROTAGONISTS

Herbie Hancock
Sonny Rollins
Wayne Shorter
Quincy Jones
Lou Donaldson
Ron Carter
Sheila Jordan
Rudy Van Gelder
Kenny Burrell
Jimmy Heath
George Benson
Reggie Workman
Cecil McBee
Charles Tolliver
Rolf Kühn
Bennie Maupin
Benny Golson
Michael Cuscuna
Kenneth Wolfe
Dan Morgenstern
Peter-Joachim von Drenkamn
Barry Singer
Quincy Jones
(*1933)

"Blue Note is like home base, it's the core where I began my career."

"We watched the genesis and the evolution of America's most powerful music. They knew what they were doing, they got their chops together, and it's taken over the world."

Wayne Shorter
(*1933)

"The Lion and the Wolf we called them... They never gave up with their mission. Because looking at them from the outside, we can say they were on a mission."

Herbie Hancock
(*1940)

"Blue Note is possibly the record company that changed the face of the music. And it changed the face of the music completely."

Musical artist and producer Herbie Hancock was already working on arrangements for the bassist Oscar Pettiford at the age of 17 and in the course of his work met jazz greats such as Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and even Miles Davis. The trumpeters Miles Davis and Clifford Brown have always been his main role models. Today, Quincy Jones' arrangements rank among the classics of jazz, and together with Michael Jackson he produced the album „Thriller”, which is still considered to be the most successful record of all time.

The saxophonist and composer Wayne Shorter played for Horace Silver and Maynard Ferguson. From 1959, he was a member of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers until finally recording his first solo album „Night Dreamer” for Blue Note in 1964. He is still signed to Blue Note today. In 1970, Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul and Miroslav Vitouš formed the legendary band Weather Report. Fifteen years later, Shorter left the band, recorded solo albums and toured with artists such as the Rolling Stones. Wayne Shorter has been awarded the Grammy ten times. He also has an honorary doctorate in music from Berklee College.

The saxophonist Lou Donaldson was discovered by Blue Note co-founder Alfred Lion in 1952. Two years later, he was playing in the legendary Art Blakey Quintet at the side of band leader and drummer Art Blakey, pianist Horace Silver, trumpeter Clifford Brown and bassist Curly Russell. The most important sound document of this time is the live album „A Night at Birdland”, recorded in 1954 at the New York jazz club Birdland. With his „Alligator Boogie”, Lou Donaldson is regarded as one of the fathers of jazz soul and funk fusion. He is a member of the International Jazz Hall of Fame and received the prestigious NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship in 2013.
Ron Carter (*1937)

“I’m not sure at that point the industry was prepared to accept all these Afro-American guys as great players, except Frank and Alfred.”

Ron Carter is one of the most recorded bassists in the history of jazz. He has played with many musicians, including Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis and Horace Silver. He has been under contract to Blue Note Records a number of times since 1952. Since 2008, he has been a member of the faculty at the Juilliard School in New York and teaches jazz bass there. With “Building Jazz Bass Lines”, he created a standard work for jazz bassists. He is the recipient of two honorary doctorates: one from the New England Conservatory of Music and one from the Manhattan School of Music. Ron Carter still plays all over the world.

Rudy Van Gelder (*1924 - +2016)

“Blue Note sound was Alfred sitting next to me... If you hear a Blue Note record, you’re listening to Alfred Lion, not to me.”

Rudy Van Gelder’s fascination with sound technology began in his early youth. He set up his first recording studio in his parents’ living room and cut records there for various labels, including Blue Note. In the 1950s, he established his recording studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, just a few kilometres away from his parents’ home. Between 1953 and 1972, Rudy Van Gelder recorded many albums for Blue Note Records and numbers that are now regarded as classics. Among his most famous are “Blue Train”, “The Sidewinder”, “Midnight Blue” and “Maiden Voyage”. In 2016, a few weeks before his death, he gave Eric Friedler his last interview. Blue Note paid tribute to the sound legend on its website with the words: “Thank you, Rudy, for all that you gave the world of music.”

Sheila Jordan (*1928)

“He’s the soundman of all time. I don’t know what it is; I don’t know what he does, but all I know is he does it.”

Sheila Jordan about legendary Blue Note recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder

In his only German interview, Blue Note Records founder Alfred Lion talked in glowing terms about Sheila Jordan: „[she] is a huge talent, an incredible singer with so much feeling and totally, totally modern.” Two years earlier, the American jazz singer had recorded her now legendary LP „Portrait of Sheila” (1962). She is one of the few vocal artists to have recorded an album of their own for Blue Note. Sheila Jordan can look back on a career spanning 70 years. She works as a singer and vocal coach. She still tours internationally and regularly performs in Germany.

Jimmy Heath (*1926)

“Physically they moved around, sometimes not in the groove that the music was in, but they had their own way of moving, it affected them.”

Jimmy Heath about Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff

The saxophonist, composer, arranger and flutist Jimmy Heath worked for Blue Note Records from 1953 to 1961. He has been nominated for a Grammy three times and in 2011 he wrote his highly-regarded autobiography „I Walked with Giants“. Jimmy Heath, who answers to the nickname „Little Bird“, lives in New York.
The jazz guitarist Kenny Burrell has worked for Blue Note Records since 1956. He has played with many musicians, including John Coltrane, Benny Goodman, Bill Evans, Stan Getz, Billie Holiday, Quincy Jones, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollins, Jimmy Smith and Stanley Turrentine. He can be heard on more than 100 recordings, among them the legendary LPs "Midnight Blue" and "Then Along Came Kenny". For four years in succession (1968–1971), the renowned jazz magazine DownBeat named him Jazz Guitarist of the Year. Kenny Burrell lives in Los Angeles.

The jazz guitarist and singer George Benson is a ten-time Grammy award-winner. He has played with many jazz musicians, including Miles Davis and Lou Donaldson. His hits in the fields of pop, soul and disco include "On Broadway" and "Turn Your Love Around". He was signed to Blue Note Records from 1967 to 1996.

The bassist Cecil McBee originated from Oklahoma and went to New York in 1963, where he soon began working for Blue Note Records. He has played with many musicians, including Blue Note colleagues Jackie McLean, Lee Morgan, Herbie Hancock and Sonny Rollins, and still performs internationally. Cecil McBee lives in New York.

The bassist Reggie Workman has worked for Blue Note Records since the early 1960s. He has performed live with many groups and musicians, including Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, Lee Morgan and Thelonious Monk. In addition to appearing regularly in concert, he now also works as a professor at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York.

Kenny Burrell about Alphonse Lion and Francis Wolff:

“I don't think they were trying to make records for the sake of selling a lot of records. They wanted to make records that were important - important art, by important artists.”

George Benson about Blue Note’s practice of going into the studio after a live performance:

“We still had all that powerhouse stuff from last night in our minds. So the records held up over the years.”

Cecil McBee about Alphonse Lion and Francis Wolff:

“To be that concentrated on something such that other things didn’t really matter, except that one thing. We were very blessed.”

Reggie Workman about Alphonse Lion and Francis Wolff:

“I would say they were visionary.”
Charles Tolliver (*1942)

“Jazz is about the freedom of imagination.”
Charles Tolliver about what the Blue Note producers demanded from their musicians.

The trumpeter, flugelhornist and bandleader Charles Tolliver has been a member of the Blue Note family since 1964, when he made his first recordings for the label with the renowned saxophonist Jackie McLean. In his long, eventful career he has performed and recorded with many musicians, including Hank Mobley, Horace Silver, McCoy Tyner, Sonny Rollins, Booker Ervin, Gary Bartz, Herbie Hancock, The Gerald Wilson Orchestra, Oliver Nelson, Andrew Hill, Louis Hayes, Roy Ayers and Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers. Charles Tolliver lives in New York.

Bennie Maupin (*1940)

“You can't have a revolution without music.”
Bennie Maupin about what the Blue Note producers demanded from their musicians.

The jazz saxophonist, clarinetist and flutist was signed to Blue Note Records from 1967 to 1979. He has worked with many Blue Note colleagues, including Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard. He lives in Poland and Los Angeles and leads the Bennie Maupin Ensemble.

Rolf Kühn (*1929)

“I don't know of any other record company on this planet that worked like that. Not a single one.”
Rolf Kühn about Blue Note.

The German clarinettist Rolf Kühn is one of the most famous jazz musicians in the world. At the age of eight, he began piano lessons with musical director Arthur Schmidt-Elsie in Leipzig, Germany. However, two years later, in 1938, the Nazis forbade him from attending lessons, since his mother was Jewish. Kühn then was forced to visit his teachers in secret. In 1956, he moved to the USA, where he made guest appearances with a number of performers, including Caterina Valente, and met Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff. In 1957, the DownBeat poll named him the new star of the clarinet. In 1962, he returned to Germany, where he was leader of the NDR Television Orchestra until 1968. Rolf Kühn has composed the music for countless cinema and television films.

Michael Cuscuna (*1948)

“Making money and living a great lifestyle was not their mission. (…) I don't think they thought twice about it, they just did it.”
Michael Cuscuna about Francis Wolff and Alfred Lion.

Together with Charlie Lourie, Michael Cuscuna founded Mosaic Records in 1982. Their aim: to release new limited-edition vinyl box sets of Blue Note recordings. Michael Cuscuna is also known as the “archaeologist of jazz”, because the Blue Note records reissued by him since the deaths of founders Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff have allowed the label to enjoy a veritable renaissance.
Kenneth Wolfe
(*1939)

“My grandparents were thoroughly from first to last like so many other German Jews, they were Germans. And my father said again and again: ‘Suddenly we found ourselves to be Jewish’.”

Francis Wolff’s nephew lives in London, where he works as a academic and author. He remembers his uncle well, who brought him exciting jazz records from America when he was a boy. He describes Francis Wolff as “very quiet, modest, almost shy”.

Dan Morgenstern
(*1929)

“This [Blue Note] live recording at „Birdland“, that’s the birth of „The Jazz Messengers“ really and that to me; that’s still one of the standard musical things in that genre.”

Dan Morgenstern is a historian, archivist, author and lecturer and has dedicated himself to one single subject for more than 60 years: jazz. From 1967 to 1973 he was editor-in-chief of the influential DownBeat magazine. He has produced some of the best writing on music in existence, having been awarded eight Grammys for his liner notes alone.

Barry Singer
(*1957)

“I think it should be the national anthem. It’s deep. Deep. Great recording.”

Barry Singer about „Summertime”, recorded for Blue Note Records by Sidney Bechet in 1939.

The New York author Barry Singer has an intimate knowledge of the New York music scene; he is also the biographer of Lorraine, Alfred Lions’ first wife. After the divorce from Alfred, Lorraine married Max Gordon, the owner of the legendary jazz club „Village Vanguard“ - in this way remaining true to jazz. Barry Singer’s highly readable book about Lorraine Gordon is called „Alive at the Village Vanguard: My Life in and Out of Jazz Time“.

Peter-Joachim von Drenkmann
(*1940)

“My father and Francis (...) had known each other since at least 1934. They were jazz enthusiasts. (...) They called themselves the „Melody-Club“.

For the former president of the Berlin District Court, Peter-Joachim von Drenkmann, jazz lay at the heart of the friendship between his father, Günter von Drenkmann (president of the Berlin Court of Appeal, who was killed by terrorists in 1974) and Francis Wolff. They both fell in love with the new American music when they were teenagers. Von Drenkmann senior experienced his friend Francis’s escape to New York at first hand - the family still have a postcard from the ship on which Francis Wolff left Germany for New York in 1939. The friendship between the two families continued after the war.
Renowned tenor saxophonist Benny Golson only worked a couple of years with Blue Note Records (from 1956 to 58). But he still recalls those years as an extremely important period in his life. His unique warm sound has coined a whole generation of jazz musicians. As a composer and arranger Benny Golson has worked on around 500 pieces of music and has performed with colleagues like Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Shirley Horn, Count Basie or John Coltrane. His most famous compositions include “I Remember Clifford”, “Killer Joe” and “Aloin Came Betty”. He became known to a wide audience by a guest appearance alongside Tom Hanks in the film “Terminal” (2004, directed by Steven Spielberg). Benny Golson is a prize winner of the Jazz Master Awards and holds an honorary doctorate from Berklee School of Music, Boston, MA. He still performs internationally.

Sonny Rollins was signed to Blue Note Records from 1949 to 1957. During this time, he made important recordings such as “St. Thomas” or “Way Out West”, which have since become jazz standards. In the late 1950s, Sonny Rollins left the music business and instead he frequently played against the noise of the road traffic on Williamsburg Bridge in Manhattan. This is why he called his first recording after his comeback “The Bridge”. Miles Davis called him “the greatest tenor saxophonist of all time.”
What interested you about the story of the Blue Note record label?

I've always been fascinated by the story of these two young Germans who went to America and in 1939 started a record label that went on to become a legend. While Hitler and the Nazis were setting the world on fire, the ingenious producer Alfred Lion and his childhood friend, the outstanding photographer Francis Wolff, were establishing the Blue Note Records label, which specialised in modern jazz - probably America's most significant musical form. Blue Note worked predominantly with Afro-American musicians and was the first record company to offer them an unrestricted public platform, as well as fair business and working conditions. Alfred and Francis were passionate about jazz, about free, improvised music that we would not be able to enjoy today if they had not recorded it.

I was also interested in the special historical moment when America's Afro-American citizens began to loudly demand the rights that were owing to them - something they did with tremendous imagination and artistic variety. Or as the Blue Note musician Bennie Maupin put it to us when we interviewed him: "You can't have a revolution without music." In their recordings, Blue Note Records celebrated this revolutionary music.

What was so special about the Blue Note label?

Many, many things contributed to making the label what it was. The most important thing for me was the deep friendship between these two fundamentally different people - the extrovert mover and shaker Alfred and the reserved photographer Francis - who were nevertheless united by their mutual passion for jazz music. Their unswerving friendship remained intact for the whole of their lives - surviving their enforced emigration to the USA and separation from their families and relatives, many of whom were murdered by the Nazis. Against all the odds, they lived the dream that they had had as teenagers in Berlin: to produce exceptional and unusual jazz music and preserve it for the rest of the world.

What's also especially significant about Blue Note is the fact that above and beyond the label's obvious importance for jazz music, it also had great political relevance. At a time when Afro-American artists in the USA were discriminated against and ostracised, the Germans Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff regarded the musicians they signed as admirable, extraordinarily talented people. They simply wanted to show their respect to these artists and treated them with tremendous dignity and humanity. Long before the civil rights movement reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s and Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I have a dream" speech in Washington, Blue Note records had already turned this utopian vision into a reality. Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff should now be recognised as early supporters of this movement.
Irrespective of skin colour, they worked on an equal footing with all their artists and discovered jazz
greats such as Herbie Hancock, Quincy Jones, Sonny Rollins, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, John
Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman and Ron Carter.

How did you go about choosing the protagonists?

It's amazing how many of the musicians are not only still in good health at their advanced age, but
that they also continue to be active in the music business, appearing on stages all around the world.
They're lively and convivial and are simply great interviewees. There's Lou Donaldson, who still
maintains his mischievous sense of humour at the age of 91; Benny Golson (89), who enchanted the
entire film crew with his charm, and Sheila Jordan, also 89, who still fills jazz clubs in Germany to this
day. Besides meeting some of the most well-known musicians - such as Quincy Jones, Herbie
Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Sonny Rollins - one of the special highlights of filming for us was talking
to the ingenious recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who was able to give us his last interview
shortly before his death.

In "$\text{It Must Schwing! - The Blue Note Story}$", some sections of the film are animated. How did that
come about?

Whenever we couldn't find any archive photographs or weren't able to use the newly-shot footage
to tell the story, we fictionalised certain scenes - just like in a docudrama. For example, there are no
photographs or film material that show Alfred Lion listening to jazz for the first time in Berlin. Just as
there's no film footage of Alfred and Frank's first visit to Thelonious Monk's apartment. We decided
not to create re-enactments using actors, because recreating these scenes in animated cartoon form
gave us much more freedom. After a series of intensive meetings with the animator, we finally
arrived at the black-and-white look that you see in the film. In addition to this, we were also able to
use an exclusive radio interview with Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff that was made by the NDR in New
York in 1964, and which had been gathering dust in the archives ever since. The German
correspondent Eric T. Vogel conducted the only interview in German with the two of them.
CREW

Executive Producer: Wim Wenders
Associate Producer: Uwe Kiefer
Written and directed by: Eric Friedler
Book Animation: Silke Schütze, Eric Friedler
Editor: Berndt Burghardt
Camera: Thomas Schäfer
Sound Mix: Sascha Heiny
Animation: Rainer Ludwigs, Tetyana Chernyavska
Expert Adviser: Rainer Placke
Production Manager: Daniel Buresch
Licenses: Iris Paterna, Daniel Albrecht
PBL Drama & Entertainment: Thomas Schreiber
Assistant: Andrea Dams, Sarah Richter, Susann Knießner
Editorial: Christoph Bungartz
USA Producer: Renée Silverman
Associate Producers: Thomas Beyer, Thore Vollert, Stefan Gerdes, Sohar Solomon
Producer: Silke Schütze

Photos: ard-foto.de