

Manfred Eicher - the man who invented himself

THE ECM LABEL HAS JUST CELEBRATED ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY, HAVING CREATED A HUGE CATALOGUE OF RECORDINGS CELEBRATED FOR THEIR SOUND QUALITY AS MUCH AS THEIR MUSIC, YET THE MAN AT ITS HEART REMAINS AN ENIGMA. IN A TWO-PART FEATURE, MARK PRENDERGAST ATTEMPTS TO FIND OUT MORE

A little over 50 years ago a young graduate of the Berlin Academy put down his upright bass and got a job with Deutsche Grammophon as a Production Engineer. The international music industry had exploded, but for rock, pop and soul demand outstripped quality: *nth* generation copy masters and scratchy recycled vinyl with impurities including ground paper were often used for so-called obscure music, and most labels considered jazz of low importance. Yes, there were Miles Davis and John Coltrane but most old jazz musicians struggled on the quality department. Most sessions were recorded not only in a matter of days but often in a matter of hours!

Manfred Eicher had gone without at university to put all his money into records. (Strangely most visionary label magnates have had a similar beginning. Fellow countryman Pete Namlook spent every penny as a young man on records and every waking hour learning every note on them!) In Munich Eicher had a favourite record shop where he had bought hundreds of records, and one day he approached the owner with an idea: to apply the quality of chamber music and classical ‘super pressings’ to new jazz, new ensembles and new music.

Billie Holiday’s former pianist Max Waldron had gone through an horrific time with drug addiction. Eicher liked his approach to rhythm, and offered him an opportunity to record. *Free At Last* was taped in November 1969 and the following month was released as the first album on Eicher’s self-created label: Editions Of Contemporary Music, now better known as ECM.

A recording visionary

Eicher was only 26 at the time but unique in being a recording visionary. Berry Gordy’s Tamla Motown had set the 1960s on fire. In terms of folk-rock Chris Blackwell’s Island Records had an enormous impact in the U.K, while Anthony H. Wilson’s Factory Records was so unique that production, album design and more had to fit into a house style. And who can forget 4AD, Ivo Watts-Russell’s

tremendous London-based label which gave us the Cocteau Twins and Bauhaus.

But none of these had one person responsible for choosing the musicians, the music, the location recordings, the sound, the sequencing and the art work! Strangely, with Eicher, there are no contracts – only a nod, a wink and a handshake – and incredibly he refuses to publish sales figures. His view that the popular stuff feeds the obscure stuff is borne out by the fact that even after 50 years Eicher is only just a millionaire.

Major recordings, major sales

There are major recordings and those with an ear to the ground cite *Koln Concert* as the biggie with 4 million sold since 1975. *Officium* was a real shocker selling over 1.5 million since 1994. And that beacon of the New Simplicity, Arvo Pärt, has clocked up hundreds of thousands of sales of his near static *Tabula Rasa* since 1984. (To put this in perspective U2’s *The Joshua Tree* sold 14 million copies in the first week of release in March of 1987!)

Eicher is quoted as saying that Pat Metheny wanted to make music that was “too commercial.” Frustrated by the distribution and by the fact he couldn’t produce his own records he parted ways to join the David Geffen Group and eventually Warners where he’s had a stellar career.

Neither could Eicher satisfy the recording demands of Bill Frisell who moved to Nonesuch in 1989, wanting to explore a wide palette of sounds and contexts that would mean more frequent releases. Eicher could only guarantee a release every 18 months to 2 years at most. So it’s not all wine and roses by a long chalk.

ECM is now three labels, the old colossus, the ECM New Series begun in 1984 and featuring Composition and the :rarum series where artists are allowed to choose their very best performances across the catalogue. The very first :rarum was *Keith Jarrett: Selected Recordings* (2002) and with not a jot of *Koln*. Eicher is adamant that complete albums will never be broken down into bits and pieces.