

CRITIC'S PICK

'Blue Note Records' Review: A Smart, Exhilarating Look at an Influential Label

Featuring Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and other luminaries, a new documentary examines Blue Note's legacy from Thelonious Monk to hip-hop.



By **Glenn Kenny**

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Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes | NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Sophie Huber | Documentary, Music | 1h 25m

This documentary directed by Sophie Huber makes a point right off that Blue Note Records, the influential jazz label, is still very much a thing of the present. The opening scene shows a convocation of young musicians, including the pianist Robert Glasper and the trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, assembling in a studio. Don Was, the musician and producer who now oversees the label, talks up a "Blue Note All-Stars" session.

In time the younger players are joined by Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, surviving alumni of what jazz aficionados would term the label's third golden age, that of the 1960s.

TRAILER: Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes by Sophie Huber



Francis Wolff and Alfred Lion, German jazz fans who fled Nazi Germany and landed in New York, founded the label in 1939. At first it was a fan pursuit; they merely wanted to make transcriptions of the music they cared about. But the label soon developed a roster, including Thelonious Monk, that gave it cachet and a signature sound.

The recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who got more than 400 Blue Note albums on tape, and who died in 2016, is here with reminiscences and anecdotes. Blue Note Records had a look as well as a sound, beginning with the in-studio photos shot by Wolff. Shorter and Hancock fondly recall that when they saw Wolff doing a little bop dance rather than shooting, they knew they had the take.

Lion and Wolff's legacy wound up feeding hip-hop musicians, who sampled Blue Note LPs for grooves. But artists like Kendrick Lamar heard more than just samples in this stuff. "You gotta do the music or you going to die," Terrace Martin, a musician, rapper and producer who has worked with Lamar, says admiringly of the Blue Note ethos. This tidy, thoughtful film gets at jazz's joy and pain.

Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 25 minutes

Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes NYT Critic's Pick

Director Sophie Huber

Writer Sophie Huber

Stars Ambrose Akinmusire, Art Blakey, John Coltrane, Michael Cuscuna, Miles Davis

Running Time 1h 25m

Genres Documentary, Music