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MOVIES ENTERTAINMENT

Review: 'Blue Note Records: Beyond The Notes' celebrates legendary jazz label

By **KENNETH TURAN**
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Herbie Hancock, from left, Marcus Strickland, Wayne Shorter and Ambrose Akinmusire in the documentary "Blue Note Records: Beyond the Notes." (Mira Film / Eagle Rock Entertainment)

Jazz may be a quintessentially American art form, but it is Europeans who make some of the best jazz documentaries, with the captivating "Blue Note Records: Beyond The Notes" being the latest case in point.


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documentary in the last few years to have that legendary place, the *ne plus ultra* of jazz labels, as one of its major focuses.

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Eric Friedler’s “It Must Swing: The Blue Note Story” was a hit at Telluride last year and before that came “I Called Him Morgan,” Kaspar Collin’s knockout doc on Lee Morgan, a trumpeter with a tragic life who was a significant Blue Note artist.

All three films share components that can’t help but be involving, starting with music from many of the giants of jazz, players including Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Horace Silver and more, all of whom recorded for Blue Note.

One of “Blue Note’s” secret weapons is the exceptional archive of photographs taken by Francis Wolff, who co-founded the label with Alfred Lion. (The musicians puckishly called them “the animal brothers.”)

Key to making this film especially effective is its focus on the current incarnation of Blue Note, with the legendary producer and jazz fan Don Was as president.

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exceptional job talking about their art form and the people who came before.

Wayne Shorter, for instance, says that “the courage to be vulnerable is a challenge,” while Robert Glasper says “most of the great art comes out of messed up situations. You just need something to be released from that, to go somewhere. That’s where jazz is born out of.”

Given that European interest in jazz is so strong, one of the interesting aspects of the Blue Note story is that its founders, Lion and Wolff, met as fellow teenage fans in Germany who fled the country in the 1930s and founded the label in the U.S. in 1939.

Both men can be heard on a wonderful WBAI-FM radio interview talking about their shared love of the music, something which never left them and helped them forge strong relationships with their artists.

In fact, unusual among label owners, they made records not to make money but simply because

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And there is Shorter’s view of Davis as someone who sometimes “wanted to play like he didn’t know how to play, who wanted music that didn’t sound like music.”

Aside from the musicians, “Blue Note” pays tribute to wizardly recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who recorded many albums in his parents’ Hackensack, N.J., living room, and designer Reid Miles, who came up with album covers that were “all different but all looked like Blue Note.”

Though it had its economic ups and downs, Blue Note Records never totally went away, and one of its later incarnations got a big boost when vocalist Norah Jones was signed.

Also helping the label survive was the way hip-hop artists began to sample classic jazz riffs, with the veteran Lou Donaldson quipping he found out about the trend by looking at his royalty statement.

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Glasper. This loving and involving documentary tribute helps bridge that gap.

'Blue Note Records: Beyond The Notes'

Not rated

Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes

Playing: Starts Friday, Laemmle Monica Film Center, Santa Monica.



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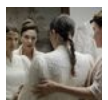
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