

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Private Equity Blues: Warner Music Group, Nonesuch Records, and Jazz in the Era of Financialization

Dale Chapman

Department of Music, Bates College, Lewiston, ME, USA
Email: dchapman@bates.edu

Abstract

Since the 1980s, the Nonesuch label, a longstanding subsidiary of the Warner Music Group (WGM), has become noteworthy for its steady market performance during a period of volatility for media multinationals. Nonesuch Records, having once been an adventurous boutique classical label under Teresa Sterne, has developed over the last three decades as a creatively idiosyncratic and commercially successful “adult” imprint under Robert Hurwitz, the erstwhile director of the Munich-based Edition of Contemporary Music jazz label.

Nonesuch has not historically been understood as a jazz label, though it has served as a home for a few jazz acts, including Bill Frisell, Fred Hersch, and the World Saxophone Quartet. By the early years of the new millennium, though, Nonesuch had become one of the few major label subsidiaries willing to maintain an active roster of jazz instrumentalists, harnessing its diversified roster as a source of strength.

This paper examines the Nonesuch label’s cultivation of a distinctive jazz niche and situates this development against the backdrop of a period of structural turbulence for the WGM. The leveraged buyout of WGM in 2004, which precipitated the dissolution of the Warner Jazz subsidiary and the transfer of much of its jazz roster to Nonesuch, reflects a contemporary logic of financialization, where value extraction has become the overriding goal of corporate restructuring. Mergers and acquisitions enacted at the uppermost reaches of major label corporate hierarchies pass along significant costs to the label subsidiaries and their artist rosters, installing precarity at the core of the music industry’s creative ecologies.

In 2004, Edgar Bronfman Jr., the *enfant terrible* of the family of Canadian liquor magnates, engaged in the third major entertainment multinational restructuring of his career. As with the PolyGram/Universal merger he engineered in 1998, and the disastrous acquisition of Universal by the French waste management corporation Vivendi in 2000, in which Bronfman participated, the establishment of the Warner Music Group (WGM) in 2004 mobilized a process of financial leverage that imposed onerous conditions upon the new company’s corporate subsidiaries.¹ The end result was the downsizing of thousands of employees and the slashing of artist rosters across each of the company’s major divisions.

The corporate restructuring that accompanied the acquisition of Time/Warner’s music division by a Bronfman-led private equity consortium had decisive implications for jazz artists located throughout the Warner Music corporate umbrella. One casualty of the leveraged buyout (LBO) was the Warner Jazz subsidiary, a unit under the direction of accomplished producer and artist-and-repertoire executive Matt Pierson, with a well-regarded roster of both “straightahead” and “smooth jazz” artists. While the formation of Warner Brothers’ jazz division dates to 1978, Warner Jazz saw dramatic growth under Pierson, who joined Warner as director of A&R in the early 1990s and whose stewardship of Warner Jazz through the following decade saw the subsidiary signing prominent artists such as

¹For a good overview of Edgar Bronfman Jr.’s career as a music industry magnate, see Fred Goodman, *Fortune’s Fool: Edgar Bronfman Jr., Warner Music, and an Industry in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

Joshua Redman, Brad Mehldau, and Kenny Garrett.² The 2004 WMG restructuring saw the shuttering of Warner Jazz and the relocation of its most prominent jazz artists to Nonesuch Records, a distinctive classical subsidiary of Elektra under the direction of Bob Hurwitz. The Warner Jazz transplants would find themselves in the company of a singularly eclectic and “arty” label roster, comprising such disparate artists as Steve Reich, the Kronos Quartet, Wilco, the Buena Vista Social Club, k.d. lang, David Byrne, Emmylou Harris, and Youssou N’Dour.³

The question that interests me here is a deceptively simple one. Why were these jazz artists moved to Nonesuch? In what sense did Hurwitz’s boutique label provide a more congenial ecology for Warner Music’s jazz roster, at a moment of turbulence brought on by the financial restructuring of Warner’s music holdings? At stake is our understanding of how longstanding label subsidiaries navigate the corporate volatility that has become a central feature of the era of financialization. The LBO of WMG reflects a contemporary market logic in which value extraction has become the overriding goal of corporate restructuring.⁴ Whether through share repurchase programs, issuing of special dividends, or the debt accrued via LBOs, financial deals enacted at the uppermost reaches of major label corporate hierarchies pass along significant costs to label subsidiaries, installing precarity at their very core.

The Bronfman WMG acquisition demonstrates how logics of financialization shape the conditions of possibility for creativity in a capitalist society. As Marianna Ritchey has argued, the field of musicology, despite having produced sophisticated close readings of the structures of feeling through which dynamics of gender, sexuality, and race are imbricated in musical practices, has until recently been somewhat inattentive to the material conditions in which these structures of feeling are brought into being.⁵ But even as musicologists have come to devote sustained attention to political economy, there is more work to be done on the *financialization* of the music industry.⁶ Our analysis here must extend beyond music scholars’ laudable recent focus on the dynamics of distribution, marketing, and consumption at independent and major labels.⁷ In the early twenty-first century, these concrete, front-line determinations of which music makes it to what audience, of who has access to and/or ownership of music, are all directly shaped by the music industry’s intimate alignment with the structural contours and cultural logics of the financial markets. In this context, our understanding of the financial stability of an entity such as Nonesuch Records has to be as attentive to its efficacious navigation of its parent corporation’s culture of financialization as it is to its branding, A&R, and distribution strategies. As I hope to demonstrate, Nonesuch accomplishes this successful navigation through its deft balancing

²On the formation of Warner Brothers’ jazz and progressive music division under Ron Goldstein, see Ed Harrison, “All’s Go for WB’s Marketing of Jazz,” *Billboard*, February 4, 1978, 3, 18. On Matt Pierson’s signing of Joshua Redman to Warner Jazz in 1992, see Tom Moon, “New Artist Finally Getting a Break,” *Billboard*, July 4, 1992, J-4; for an interview with Pierson on his career in the music industry, see Matt Pierson, “Matt Pierson, record producer,” March 27, 2014, in *The Third Story Podcast*, by Leo Sidran, accessed December 28, 2021, <http://www.third-story.com/listen/2014/3/25/episode-5-matt-pierson>.

³For a list of Nonesuch’s current and historical artist roster, see “Artists,” Nonesuch, accessed December 27, 2021, <https://www.nonesuch.com/artists>.

⁴For an excellent discussion of how corporate restructuring is mobilized as a crucial tool for maximizing shareholder value in the neoliberal corporation, see Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 122–68.

⁵See Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁶On financialization, see for instance Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

⁷On this point, see Dale Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 103–56. For a few examples of engaging work in musicology and cognate disciplines on the operation of the music industry, in contexts ranging from branding to A&R strategies, see Travis Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Tim Anderson, *Popular Music in a Digital Music Economy: Problems and Practices for an Emerging Service Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and William Robin, *Industry: Bang on a Can and New Music in the Marketplace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Timothy Taylor’s work has been exemplary in providing a sustained analytic of the relationship between music and capitalism. See Timothy Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

of the neoliberalized fiscal demands of its parent corporation, on the one hand, and its thoughtful approach to the curation of its artist roster, on the other.

I speak here of a “neoliberalized” music industry, and yet, as I hope the following discussion makes clear, the reach of neoliberalism is not always as totalizing as the scholarship on the subject may imply. Our assessments of neoliberalized institutions in contemporary scholarship are perhaps indebted to a picture of the ruthlessly dehumanized, metrics-driven practices at work on the shop floor of an Amazon fulfillment center or the trading floor of the Wall Street investment bank.⁸ By contrast, this case study of Nonesuch and Warner Jazz indicates the extent to which human relationships continue to mediate many aspects of the day-to-day operations of the music multinationals, shaping and in some cases mitigating the worst aspects of capital’s ethos of “creative destruction.”⁹ As Eduardo Herrera reminds us in a different context, the large institutions that we scholars habitually treat as faceless monoliths are in fact *peopled*, their actions and strategies together constituting “an [ever-]emerging domain of complex entanglements and webs of relations and ideas, all being mediated and enacted as the result of human, institutional, discursive, and even material actors.”¹⁰ Such entanglements, shaped by the decisions of human actors, must be understood as complicating our picture of the ubiquity of neoliberalism’s instrumentalism, as I hope to demonstrate here.

My discussion here will also complicate our sense of how jazz is positioned within the twenty-first century music industry. Jazz historiography tends to have us look at the jazz record business through the lens of the “jazz label,” whether that label is an independent (Verve or Blue Note, in their original incarnations) or major label subsidiary (such as Columbia Records’s jazz division). The genre homogeneity overseen by A&R executives at such labels leads to a certain set of assumptions, specific to that genre space, about how best to recruit artists, develop repertory, produce recordings, and market albums.¹¹ We can see this, for instance, with Blue Note’s strategy of paying artists to rehearse the hard bop arrangements on its midcentury recordings, or CTI Records’s cultivation of a cohesive house “sound,” at the intersection of jazz and pop, in the 1960s and 1970s.¹² By contrast, we might see Nonesuch’s incorporation of the former Warner Jazz artist roster into its eclectic genre space as a manifestation of a different model, more appropriate to twenty-first century music industry priorities, where the assembly of a more diversified portfolio of artists serves as a strategy of risk management.¹³

Proceeding by way of an account of the LBO of WMG in 2004, “Private Equity Blues” briefly examines the operation of WMG subsidiary Warner Jazz under Matt Pierson throughout the 1990s, and then moves on to a short corporate history of Nonesuch Records under Teresa Sterne and Robert Hurwitz. Since Hurwitz’s departure in 2017, Nonesuch has been managed by former Senior Vice President David Bither; while this study, in the conclusion, will touch upon, in passing, some questions facing Nonesuch in the moment of Bither’s corporate oversight, my focus here is on the period of the

⁸On automated personnel management at Amazon fulfillment centers, see Alec MacGillis, *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), passim. On job precarity in the financial sector, particularly with respect to Wall Street investment banks, see Ho, *Liquidated*, 213–48.

⁹The term “creative destruction” derives initially from the work of economist Joseph Schumpeter and has since come to be embraced as a key virtue of late capitalism in the age of “disruption.” See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1942).

¹⁰Eduardo Herrera, *Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latin Americanism, and Avant-Garde Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62.

¹¹On Verve’s emergence under Norman Granz, see Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); on the history of Blue Note, see Richard Cook, *Blue Note Records: The Biography* (Boston: Justin, Charles, & Co., 2004). On jazz at Columbia Records, see for instance Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2007); John Szwed, *So What: The Life of Miles Davis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

¹²On Blue Note’s use of paid rehearsals to prepare repertory, see Christopher May, “No Room for Squares: A political economy of Blue Note records,” *Jazz Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2007): 29–30; on Creed Taylor’s approach to production at CTI Records, see Charles Carson, “Bridging the Gap’: Creed Taylor, Grover Washington Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 6.

¹³On portfolio management, which I will discuss later, see Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999), 47–8.

mid-aughts, and on the resilient label that Hurwitz managed to steer through the tumultuous period of WMG's private equity acquisition.¹⁴

The Leveraged Buyout of WMG

In 2003, Bronfman Jr. formed a partnership with several private equity groups, including Thomas H. Lee Partners, Bain Capital, and Providence Equity Partners, to make a bid for the WMG, the music subsidiary of AOL Time Warner.¹⁵ In the post-Napster environment, as media conglomerates became aware of the vulnerability of their music divisions in the face of new file-sharing technologies, AOL Time Warner sought to divest itself of its music holdings; the move towards corporate deconsolidation had also become necessary in the context of continued fallout from Time Warner's merger with America Online in 2000, which by 2003 had landed the conglomerate \$29 billion in debt, with a 90 percent depreciation of its stock price.¹⁶ For his part, Bronfman (who may have been looking to redeem himself following the calamitous acquisition of UMG by Vivendi) approached the WMG deal as an opportunity to establish an aggressive precedent for major label involvement in the emerging digital music environment.¹⁷

The LBO of WMG in 2004 took place during a period of tremendous instability for the music industry. In the early 2000s, the emergence of peer-to-peer file-sharing platforms like Napster raised questions about the long-term profitability of music divisions at the media multinationals, who taken together had, by one account, seen a 20 percent decline in sales between 2000 and 2003.¹⁸ In this context, the music multinationals sought expanded market share, which would provide a measure of insulation against the new volatility in record sales; at the same time, mergers would allow these companies to cut costs, and absorb part of the impact of reduced profits.¹⁹

Consequently, before the private equity play by the Bronfman group, both EMI and Bertelsmann Music Group were in talks throughout 2003 about the possibility of a merger with Warner Music. Negotiations with Bertelsmann, Bertelsmann Music Group's (BMG) German parent corporation, in the summer of 2003 proceeded initially from the possibility of a side deal in which AOL Time Warner would sell its book publishing business to Bertelsmann, on the condition that there would be an exclusive 60-day period to discuss a merger of the two company's music divisions. The complexity of a BMG/WMG merger, though, stood as an obstacle to the deal's realization, with uncertainty regarding the potential status of AOL Time Warner's music publishing arm, Warner Chappell, together with its CD manufacturing business. EMI, in talks with AOL Time Warner later in the year, potentially stood to add more value than BMG in the case of a merger with WMG, given its formidable artist roster, but a prospective EMI/WMG merger faced problems of its own. The likelihood that an EMI merger would grant WMG the desired cost savings was undercut by the fact that EMI had already restructured extensively in 2001, and thus an EMI/WMG merger would offer less in the way of

¹⁴“David Bither Named Co-President of Nonesuch Records,” *Billboard.com*, November 20, 2015, accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/david-bither-co-president-nonesuch-records-6770210/>.

¹⁵On the scope of the buyout, see Brian Garrity, “It’s The Majors Vs. The Lessers As Bronfman Bags Warner Music,” *Billboard*, December 6, 2003, 5, 65.

¹⁶On the disastrous AOL Time Warner merger and the corporation's subsequent divestment of its music division, see Scott Fitzgerald, “Time Warner,” in *Global Media Giants*, ed. Benjamin Birkinbine, Rodrigo Gomez, and Janet Wasko (New York: Routledge, 2017), 52–3; Brian Garrity, “Time to Unload: Media conglomerates look to dump music, TV and other assets,” *Investment Dealers Digest*, January 26, 2004, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://advance.lexiscom.lprx.bates.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4BJD-JC60-00GC-J35B-00000-00&context=1516831>.

¹⁷Ed Christman, “Inside Bronfman’s Deal for WMG: Confidential Buyout Details Surface,” *Billboard*, May 29, 2004, 76.

¹⁸Damian Reese, “Music’s moguls in a merger spin: Falling sales are driving music companies into each other’s arms. Bertelsmann wants to marry AOL’s Warner Music, as EMI winks from the wings,” *Sunday Telegraph*, July 6, 2003, 3. To be sure, not all or even most of this decline in sales is likely attributable to the impact of Napster; another important factor has to be the saturation in the market for compact discs, which by the mid-1990s could no longer rely upon the “library factor,” the replacement of vinyl or tape recordings by the newer format, to drive sales. See for example Don Jeffrey, “Music Sales Growth Seen Slowing From 1995–2000,” *Billboard*, August 31, 1996, 102.

¹⁹Garrity, “It’s The Majors Vs. The Lessers,” 65; Reese, “Music’s moguls in a merger spin,” 3.

potential “synergies” than a BMG merger.²⁰ Moreover, in the wake of a previous effort to merge EMI and WMG in 2000, when the deal was blocked by EU antitrust officials, AOL Time Warner remained skittish about the potential regulatory issues raised by a new EMI/WMG merger initiative.²¹ Ultimately, this latter consideration proved decisive for AOL Time Warner. In spinning off its music division to Bronfman’s private equity consortium, it could avoid any merger-related antitrust issues.²² In late 2003, EMI withdrew its merger offer, and AOL Time Warner agreed to proceed with the sale of WMG to Edgar Bronfman Jr.’s private equity group.²³

Understanding the financial mechanism through which Bronfman’s group obtained control over WMG is necessary in order for us to get a sense of the conditions facing staff and artists at the company’s jazz-related subsidiaries. The purchase of the music entity by a group of private investors would turn WMG into the world’s largest independent record company, and this led many observers, inside and outside the company, to emphasize its putative “independence.” These prognostications leaned heavily on the implication that taking WMG private would shield the company from the pressure of quarterly reports, allowing a more artist-friendly environment to flourish. Andy Allen, who was then president of the Alternative Distribution Alliance, an organization formed to provide independent labels with access to more powerful distribution networks, argued that the separation of WMG from AOL Time Warner could only be a positive development, providing a space in which Warner artists would no longer be subject to the diffuse priorities of a larger media conglomerate:

I love the idea of a privately held music company and a music company only

[...] The business will prosper doing things that make sense for a music company and not just doing things that make sense for a larger company that a music company is part of.²⁴

In a similar fashion, Michael Lippman, manager for the Atlantic Records act Matchbox Twenty (Atlantic had been a Warner subsidiary since 1967), argued that “an independent company that doesn’t report to shareholders is much better suited to develop artists.”²⁵ Here, both Allen and Lippman extrapolate a nurturing, artist-friendly A&R environment from the twin facts of WMG’s stand-alone independence as a record company and its private ownership under a consortium of investors.

However, to have hailed the newly privatized WMG as a “superindie,” with all of the supportive, artist-centered associations that such a designation was meant to imply, is to have quite likely ignored the structural contours of the Bronfman Jr.-led WMG purchase itself. The procedure Bronfman and his partners used to secure control of the company was that of a LBO, a debt-laden approach to acquisition favored among private equity firms. In an LBO, the purchase of a company is secured through debt financing (leverage) well in excess of the initial commitment floated by the investors. Leverage allows private equity firms to obtain control over a company with only a fraction of the capital necessary to purchase it outright. Because they’ve used debt to enact the purchase, private equity investors usually only seek to hold the company in question for a finite period before unloading it, often only three to five years.²⁶ This short time horizon ensures that investors will seek to maximize the return on their investment at a concentrated rate, without devoting much attention to the long-term prospects of the company. Private equity firms maximize revenue from the target company through the sale and

²⁰It’s worth lingering here for a moment on the fact that what dissuaded WMG from a merger with EMI was the insufficient opportunity to engage in draconian downsizing of the joint labels’ workforce. This is one of the perverse incentives of the neo-liberal corporation: That the logic of shareholder value takes precedence over any corporate commitment to existing stakeholders. On this point, see Ho, *Liquidated*, 122–68.

²¹Reese, “Music’s majors in a merger spin,” 3.

²²Garrity, “It’s The Majors Vs. The Lessers,” 65.

²³Emmanuel Legrand, “EMI, Analysts Look Ahead: Although It Is Under Pressure, The Company’s Mood Is Upbeat,” *Billboard*, December 6, 2003, 65.

²⁴Andy Allen, in Chris Morris, “The Indies: Allen Expects Good Things from Bronfman Buyout,” *Billboard*, December 20, 2003, 66.

²⁵Michael Lippman, in Garrity, “It’s The Majors Vs. The Lessers,” 65.

²⁶Emily Thornton, Ronald Grover, and Tom Lowry, “Those Bulging Buyouts,” *Business Week*, February 9, 2004, 74.

dissolution of company assets, the accumulation of further corporate debt in the form of junk bonds (with the accumulated financing paid to investors as special dividends), and the issuing of public stock via an initial public offering. Because of the debt that needs to be recouped, mass layoffs are practically a non-negotiable feature of many recent private equity takeovers.²⁷ The result is a model of corporate acquisition that is often enormously destructive to the stakeholders associated with a given company.

It is this decidedly artist-unfriendly business model that Bronfman Jr. brought to the acquisition of WMG in late 2003. Bronfman Jr., Bain Capital, Lee Partners, and Providence Equity collectively fronted \$1.25 billion of the \$2.6 billion necessary to purchase WMG from Time-Warner. The day after the purchase was complete in March 2004, Bronfman implemented a restructuring plan that would achieve \$277 million in cost savings through staff reductions, salary cuts, a slashed artist roster, and the consolidation and dissolution of underperforming divisions. All told, WMG let go 20 percent of its global workforce, totaling over 1,000 employees.²⁸ Even as these draconian austerity measures were being enacted, Bronfman Jr. and his partners enjoyed a banner year, recouping almost the entirety of their initial \$1.25 billion investment in under twelve months. This was achieved in part through the accumulation of additional debt, in the form of junk bonds. By issuing this debt through a separate holding company, Bronfman Jr. and his partners kept it separate from the actual existing debt of WMG proper, thereby possibly avoiding a downgrading of Warner Music from the rating agencies.²⁹ One of the most controversial moves of the investment group overseeing WMG was to draw \$350 million straight out of the company's cash flow to pay investors "special" dividends not subject to public disclosure requirements. In the meantime, the cost-cutting measures of the restructuring plan continued apace, as the company lumbered along under an onerous debt load.³⁰ As Matthew Crain has noted, neither special dividends nor debt repayments add any value to a firm, and usually come at the expense of critical investments in capital and labor.³¹

In addition to these measures, Bronfman Jr. et al. would soon seek additional finances through the introduction of an initial public offering of stock (an IPO) in May 2005, transforming the company into a publicly traded corporation.³² (It is common for private equity firms, having taken a company private, to capitalize upon their restructuring of the company with an IPO. As Crain notes, the act of "delisting and reorganizing" a company is seen to potentially raise its value in anticipation of its re-listing on the stock exchange.)³³ Beyond its surface acquisitiveness, the move also returned WMG to the scrutiny of shareholders and quarterly reports, negating its appeal for those who hailed the "superindie" company (however unconvincingly) as a potential site of creative refuge from the

²⁷See Matthew Crain, "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership in the United States: A Public Interest Perspective," *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 224; David Henry, "Loading Up On Junk," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, January 30, 2005, accessed January 2, 2022, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2005-01-30/loading-up-on-junk>.

²⁸Matthew Crain, "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership," 221; Ed Christman, "WMG Speeds Into New Era: 1,000 Jobs Going; Fresh A&R Sources Sought," *Billboard*, March 14, 2004, 1, 85.

²⁹Henry, "Loading Up On Junk." Through a complicated mechanism, this debt was made available in different tranches, different slices of the debt packaged for those with different risk profiles (i.e., willingness to take on risk). This layered segmentation of debt into different risk tranches emulates the structure of the collateralized debt obligation (CDO), the key vehicle through which individual mortgages were packaged and resold to institutional investors in the runup to the financial crisis of 2008. Both the boom in CDOs and the surge in junk bonds issued by private equity firms at the time of the Bronfman WMG acquisition deal were made possible by an environment of low interest rates and loosened regulatory oversight in the early 2000s. On the congenial interest rate environment for junk bonds, see "Swan Song: Does the Warner Music deal mark the peak of the buy-out business?," *Forbes.com*, June 6, 2005, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/global/2005/0606/022a.html?sh=151cd2bc6e9d>; for a good overview of CDOs, see Carolyn Hardin, *Capturing Finance: Arbitrage and Social Domination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 96–104.

³⁰During the period of its oversight by the Bronfman-led private equity group, WMG was described as carrying an "aggressive" debt load of \$2.5 billion, with interest payments of up to \$175 million per year; in the run-up to the 2005 initial public offering (or IPO), analysts anticipated that the post-IPO landscape would see WMG with a debt ratio of four to one, meaning that its Ebitda (its earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization, a rough measure of its financial performance) would be only one quarter of its overall debt load. See Brian Garrity and Ed Christman, "WMG IPO: No Wow On Wall Street," *Billboard*, May 21, 2005, 6; Brian Garrity and Ed Christman, "Edgar's Digital Play," *Billboard*, March 26, 2005, 54.

³¹Matthew Crain, "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership," 225.

³²Garrity and Christman, "WMG IPO," 5.

³³Matthew Crain, "The Rise of Private Equity Media Ownership," 212 n2.

pressures of the market. For artists under the WMG umbrella, this additional concession to investors seemed to demonstrate the company's indifference to the difficulties that Warner artists had faced under the restructuring. In a move that sent ripples through the financial markets, the rap-rock band Linkin Park, a key signatory to the Warner Brothers imprint, refused to perform for Bronfman Jr.'s celebration of the Warner IPO in front of the New York Stock Exchange, and subsequently asked to be released from their contract. As guitarist and band spokesman Brad Delson argued, the request that Linkin Park perform at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) revealed a fundamental disconnect between the label's artists and the investor class:

[The request to play at the NYSE] just exemplifies how out of touch the ownership of the Warner Music Group is with our band [...] It doesn't make any sense to us why we would play a show at the New York Stock Exchange. I don't know what was going through their minds.³⁴

Financially, Linkin Park had done very well under Warner Brothers, and WMG's management characterized Linkin Park's statements as a set of "unfortunate negotiating tactics" inconsistent with the "requests for unreasonably large sums of money" that the band had ostensibly made during contract negotiations.³⁵ Nevertheless, it seems clear that the Linkin missive, timed to have tremendous impact on the eve of the IPO, served as a powerful and genuine expression of artists' frustration with what they saw as the skewed priorities of Bronfman Jr.'s investor group.³⁶

Warner Jazz and Matt Pierson

The turbulence produced by the LBO of WMG provides the larger context against which we can come to understand the movement of the parent company's core jazz roster from Warner Jazz, the company's dedicated jazz subsidiary, to Nonesuch, an eclectic boutique label with a primarily classical lineage, operating within the same Warner corporate umbrella. Because of the immense pressures to restructure precipitated by developments at the uppermost levels in the corporate hierarchy, the relative fates of WMG's jazz-related subsidiaries seemed to have less to do with their market performance in the abstract than with their different levels of vulnerability in relation to structural upheaval in their parent corporation. In order to grasp the dynamics of this shift, it will be helpful here for us to explore the internal label cultures associated with Warner Jazz and Nonesuch Records, respectively.

Warner Jazz came under the direction of noted jazz producer and A&R executive Matt Pierson in the early 1990s. Before his arrival, the label roster primarily featured a lineup of crossover jazz artists such as Earl Klugh or George Benson; the only more "straightahead" acoustic jazz performer on the label at that time was Mark Whitfield.³⁷ Upon arriving at Warner Jazz, Pierson set about remaking the label through a series of new signings in the domain of mainstream or "straightahead" jazz, including Kenny Garrett, Joshua Redman, Brad Mehldau, and Wallace Roney; the move emulated a trend that was already pervasive at other major label jazz imprints, where George Butler at Columbia Records and Richard Seidel at Verve Records had set about pairing the aggressive reissuing of back catalog with the equally aggressive recruitment of an emerging generation of the so-called "young lions."³⁸

³⁴Jeff Leeds, "A Band Makes Its Case Against Record Label," *New York Times*, May 9, 2005, accessed January 2, 2022, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/09/arts/music/09linkin.html>.

³⁵Jeff Leeds, "A Band Makes Its Case."

³⁶Warner Music set the initial stock price for the IPO at \$17, well below the \$22 to \$24 range expected by market analysts; when Edgar Bronfman Jr. "rang the opening bell, accompanied by power chords from Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page," the stock price quickly dropped, opening at \$15.75 and closing for the day at \$16.40. If WMG did face investor skepticism about the company's ability to compete in the marketplace for digital downloads, it is also possible that Linkin Park's untimely announcement may have had an impact on share price as well. See Steve Gelsi, "Warner Music IPO falls in debut," *MarketWatch.com*, May 11, 2005, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/warner-music-hits-sour-note-in-ipo>.

³⁷Matt Pierson, in Leo Sidran, "Matt Pierson, record producer."

³⁸A print ad for the label in 1995 gives us a good sense of the marquee names on Warner's jazz roster under Matt Pierson in the mid-1990s; see "Following in the tradition of creating tradition," in *Billboard*, July 1, 1995, 61. For overviews of the wave of

Perhaps the paradigmatic signing of Pierson's early days at Warner was his recruitment of Joshua Redman, the son of the celebrated saxophonist Dewey Redman. Whereas Dewey Redman is best known as one of the key figures of the 1960s avant-garde, having performed alongside Ornette Coleman and Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra, Joshua Redman's initial direction at Warner Jazz (as evidenced, for example, on his self-titled Warner album, released in 1993) was much more in keeping with the acoustic postbop of the 1990s "young lions"; Redman's collaborators on these early discs featured figures such as the bassist Christian McBride and drummers Gregory Hutchinson and Kenny Washington.³⁹

Matt Pierson clearly heard something intrinsically compelling in Redman's work, but an anecdote that Pierson tells about the moment of Redman's recruitment at the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition in 1991 indicates the degree to which the atmosphere of major label jazz artist recruitment in that era had already become about "benchmarking" artists in relation to other artists, and looking to external metrics for making A&R decisions:

When I went to the Monk competition and heard Joshua Redman at the finals—it was the night of the [...] semi-finals, I heard him, and of everyone there, I was like, "I gotta work with this guy, I gotta sign him." So I met with him in the lobby of the hotel that night—it was before he won—and we're hanging out, talking about music, talking about records, and I'm saying, "man, I'd love to work with you, man, it would be wonderful to have you with Warner Brothers" [...] And he goes, "but what if I don't win tomorrow?"
[laughs] I don't care! You're Joshua Redman, I'm gonna sign you!⁴⁰

Pierson's anecdote indicates the degree to which Redman had already internalized a logic of "other-directed" artist valuation pervasive at the jazz labels. If he didn't win the competition, if A&R executives didn't have a pseudo-objective measure to legitimate their strategic choices with their colleagues, then could the label really take the risk? Richard Seidel, the key A&R executive at Verve Records during the 1990s and one of Pierson's contemporaneous rivals, also noted the prominent role of the Monk competition as a recruiting site for major label jazz subsidiaries during this period, and as a means of arriving at the market valuation of artists; he notes that, "there is an auction mentality at work. The competitions, with all their publicity and with all the A&R attention, have helped to create a trading-floor atmosphere."⁴¹

Elsewhere, Pierson himself chronicles the slow absorption of this metrics-driven discourse into A&R conversations at Warner. While he recalls that his very first A&R meeting with Warner saw noted industry figures actively listening to demo tapes and kicking around ideas for producers, Pierson asserts that,

Over time, those A&R meetings changed to a point where I would go into an A&R meeting, and one of these new A&R guys would be talking about, "hey man, this band is really great, and everyone's talking about 'em, they're all the buzz, they're playing in front of this many people, and it looks like they have an offer on the table from A&M, but I think we can get 'em" [...] and I'm going, "what the fuck are you guys talking about?" And I would be the guy finally after the guy does his presentation to go, "Could we hear the music?" [...] So that's what happened. And that's one of the things I think that killed the music business.⁴²

artist signings at such major-label jazz imprints as Columbia, Verve, Blue Note, and Warner's jazz division over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, see for example Sam Sutherland, "Major Labels: From Retreat to Resurgence," *Billboard*, June 28, 1986, J-4, J-8, J-13; Jeff Levenson, "Emerging Jazz Artists Learn Art Of The Deal," *Billboard*, April 2, 1994, 1, 72.

³⁹For discussion of Dewey Redman's work with figures such as Ornette Coleman and Charlie Haden, see Stephen Rush, *Free Jazz, Harmolodics, and Ornette Coleman* (New York: Routledge, 2016). For the lineup from Joshua Redman's first Warner Brothers recording, see Joshua Redman, liner notes to *Joshua Redman*, Warner Bros. 9 45242-2, 1993, compact disc.

⁴⁰Matt Pierson, in Leo Sidran, "Matt Pierson, record producer."

⁴¹Richard Seidel, in Levenson, "Emerging Jazz Artists Learn Art Of The Deal," 72. See Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 134–135.

⁴²Matt Pierson, in Leo Sidran, "Matt Pierson, record producer."

Keith Negus and Travis Jackson have each talked about this period in terms of *portfolio management*, where each label subsidiary, treating its artist roster like a diversified portfolio of assets, was responsible for demonstrating a sales trajectory of consistently profitable quarterly earnings.⁴³ In this context, Pierson himself was increasingly pressed to render the narrow, genre-based focus of Warner Jazz legible to the market. He worked to develop such concepts as Brad Mehldau's *Art of the Trio* series, in order to establish a consistent "brand" for the artist across several piano trio releases. Pierson also harnessed Mehldau's propensity (later emulated by the Bad Plus) towards pop and rock crossover settings of music by Radiohead or Nick Drake: Settings of songs such as "Exit Music (For a Film)" or "Paranoid Android" served as a compelling means of repackaging the jazz standard for pre-millennial audiences.⁴⁴

With WMG's restructuring in early 2004, Pierson departed as head of Warner Jazz, and the subsidiary itself was axed as an active label, its back catalog taken up by the parent company's Warner Strategic Marketing UK division.⁴⁵ When the division was shuttered, and its artists dispersed to other parts of the Warner Music organization, Nonesuch was among those labels who reached out to the jazz division's artists; all those who Nonesuch approached, including Redman, Mehldau, and Pat Metheny, the most high-profile figures on the Warner Jazz imprint, agreed to join Hurwitz's label.⁴⁶

In spite of the care with which the artist roster of Warner Jazz was assembled over the course of the 1990s, the label's relatively uniform genre focus, which ranges across "straightahead" and "smooth" instrumental jazz artists, could likely have made it vulnerable to restructuring, particularly at a moment when dedicated jazz subsidiaries at all of the major labels were either downsizing entirely or retooling to focus on the trend in more commercially successful vocal jazz.⁴⁷ By contrast, the comparative eclecticism of the Nonesuch artist roster makes it not entirely different from the way that a label such as Universal's Verve Music Group was operating at that time. In the early to mid-2000s, Verve's continued inclusion of jazz artists such as Diana Krall or Trombone Shorty was less a function of the label's storied legacy as a jazz imprint than its strategic rebranding as a generalized adult contemporary label, with newly signed artists like Sarah McLaughlin, Andrea Bocelli, and Smokey Robinson serving to diversify Verve's portfolio.⁴⁸

However, what distinguishes Nonesuch's identity from a conventional "adult contemporary" sensibility, and what likely rendered it such an attractive new home for former Warner Jazz artists, was its wielding of an entirely different sort of cultural capital, owing to its careful cultivation of a powerful brand identity over several decades. At this point, it will be useful to turn to an overview of the history of Nonesuch Records, beginning with its earlier period of management under Teresa Sterne, to get a sense of the conditions of possibility in which the label could come to sign several of Warner Jazz's most prestigious jazz alumni.

⁴³On portfolio management in the music industry, see Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 47–8; Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away*, 98.

⁴⁴Two of many Brad Mehldau Radiohead covers can be found on Brad Mehldau, "Exit Music (For A Film)," *Art Of The Trio 4: Back at the Vanguard*, Warner Bros. 9362 47463-2, 1999, compact disc; and Brad Mehldau, "Paranoid Android," *Largo*, Warner Bros. 9362 48114-2, 2002, compact disc. Two of many contemporaneous examples of jazz albums featuring crossover covers of pop or rock songs include the Bad Plus's *These Are The Vistas* (2003), with its settings of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" or Aphex Twin's "Flim," and Herbie Hancock's *The New Standard* (1996), with covers of Nirvana's "All Apologies" and Peter Gabriel's "Mercy Street." The Bad Plus, *These Are The Vistas*, Columbia CK 87040, 2003, compact disc; Herbie Hancock, *The New Standard*, Verve 527 715-2, 1996, compact disc.

⁴⁵On the downsizing of Warner Jazz during the WMG private equity acquisition, see Russell Shorto, "The Industry Standard," *New York Times Magazine*, October 3, 2004, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/magazine/the-industry-standard.html>. The Discogs website has Warner Jazz as one sublabel under the Warner Strategic Marketing UK umbrella, which oversaw much of Warner's back catalog between 2000 and 2008. See "Warner Strategic Marketing United Kingdom," Discogs, accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/label/234082-Warner-Strategic-Marketing-United-Kingdom>.

⁴⁶Shorto, "The Industry Standard."

⁴⁷Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away*, 213–14.

⁴⁸Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 110.

“Good Sandwiches”: Nonesuch Records and Teresa Sterne

Nonesuch was founded in 1964 by Jack Holzman, head of the then-independent Elektra Records, who was initially seeking to capitalize upon an early music revival in the world of classical performance. Holzman envisioned Nonesuch as a new kind of discount classical label, marketed specifically to a younger demographic. Repackaged in colorful, accessible sleeves, and sold at an affordable price point just slightly above “budget line” classical releases, the high-quality label would serve as a “‘bridge’ to a receptive new audience—a generation that grew up with the phonograph and was open to fresh sounds and experiences.”⁴⁹

From 1965 to 1979, Nonesuch was overseen by Teresa Sterne, a producer and former concert pianist who brought an adventurous and forward-looking sensibility to the label.⁵⁰ Sterne oversaw an exciting period of innovation in the development of classical A&R. In the context of early music in particular, Nonesuch under Sterne benefitted from the work of Joshua Rifkin, a pianist, composer, and musicologist whose Even Dozen Jug Band had been recording under Nonesuch’s parent division of Elektra. In addition to conducting seventeenth-century repertory, directing a Renaissance vocal-instrumental ensemble called the Nonesuch Consort, and writing scholarly liner notes for Nonesuch classical releases, Rifkin was commissioned by Holzman at Elektra to arrange and direct a series of Baroque settings of Beatles songs titled *The Baroque Beatles Book*. Rifkin’s work for Nonesuch also anticipated its later embrace of jazz, as the pianist’s recordings of piano rags in 1970 pretty much singlehandedly precipitated a rediscovery of ragtime and of Scott Joplin’s work.⁵¹ At the same time, Sterne had been instrumental in commissioning experimental new music works at the leading edge of U.S. concert music, including Morton Subotnick’s groundbreaking 1967 album *Silver Apples of the Moon*.⁵² As Jack Egan would note, Sterne’s classical recordings established a distinct niche for Nonesuch, at a remove from the programming of “opera and symphonic warhorses” by more conventional classical imprints.⁵³

Alongside its critically acclaimed classical offerings, Nonesuch under Sterne pioneered the recording of global musical traditions with the introduction of the Nonesuch Explorer Series in 1967, under the direction of Peter Siegel (Rifkin’s bandmate in the Even Dozen Jug Band). The Explorer Series, which released titles featuring North Indian classical music, Balkan traditional folk music, and recordings of Javanese and Balinese gamelan by Wesleyan University’s ensembles, would lay the groundwork for later so-called “world music” initiatives such as Peter Gabriel’s Real World label or David Byrne’s Luaka Bop imprint.⁵⁴

What is crucial to note, as we look to understand the long-term impact of Sterne on the culture of Nonesuch, is the degree to which she accomplished much of the A&R, production, and promotional work for Nonesuch on a very stripped-down budget. In a 1979 interview, Sterne addresses her inexpensive and expedient approach to staffing, and to choosing performers:

⁴⁹Nonesuch Records, “Nonesuch Records: The First Ten Years,” 1974, “Nonesuch Records” folder, R&H Clippings, Rogers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

⁵⁰For an overview of Teresa Sterne’s life and career, see Anthony Tommasini, “A Scene Stealer Behind The Scenes; Teresa Sterne, Musical Prodigy, Sacrificed Her Own Art So That Others Might Be Heard,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2000, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/31/arts/critic-s-notebook-scene-stealer-behind-scenes-teresa-sterne-musical-prodigy.html>. The title of the Tommasini article frames Sterne’s eventual abandonment of her own career as a teenage piano prodigy (unknown to many during her career in the music business) as an instance of selfless feminine “sacrifice,” in an echo of the patronizing sexism that seems to have bedeviled Sterne during much of her subsequent career in the music industry.

⁵¹Nonesuch Records, “Nonesuch Records: The First Ten Years.”

⁵²Nonesuch Records, “Nonesuch Records: The First Ten Years”; Robin, *Industry*, 191.

⁵³Jack Egan, “Nonesuch: From Bach to Bucks,” *New York*, March 26, 1979, 42.

⁵⁴Nonesuch Records, “Nonesuch Records: The First Ten Years.” For an overview of the role that Peter Gabriel and David Byrne and their respective labels have had in the cultivation of the market in “world music,” see George Plasketes, “Cross Cultural Sessions: World Music Missionaries in American Popular Music,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 18, no. 1 (October 1995): 50. In the case of Byrne, the Nonesuch Explorer series was directly instrumental in introducing him to non-Western musics; on this point, see Richard Henderson, “World Music: What in the World Is It?,” *Billboard*, June 25, 1997, 51.

“We have just about the smallest staff to run a label of this dimension I know of,” says Sterne. “We also keep budgets down by working between the cracks,” she adds. The company hires engineers as it needs them. It records in an Upper West Side church instead of in a well-known recital hall. And it keeps its initial pressings small.

Sterne has meanwhile nurtured a roster of top artists [...] who, while critically acclaimed, work with the knowledge that stratospheric recording fees are not possible with a label like Nonesuch.

“The prima donnas are working on a different wavelength. We can’t afford them, and it’s not the kind of musicmaking we’re involved with. We are people living on good sandwiches, and not *haute cuisine*.”⁵⁵

The fact that Nonesuch operated with a skeleton crew of label executives and consultants, and that it depended for much of its A&R development on Sterne’s distinctive aesthetic vision, points to a continuity that we will see with respect to Bob Hurwitz’s long tenure at the label in subsequent decades, which also saw a small number of executives overseeing the curation of an eclectic, adventurous range of acts.⁵⁶ Moreover, the distinctiveness of Sterne’s vision did not preclude commercial successes for the label, with Rifkin’s Joplin recordings seeing sales in the hundreds of thousands, and even experimental titles like Subotnick’s *Silver Apples of the Moon* selling decently to an unexpected countercultural audience.⁵⁷

In its current incarnation, Nonesuch has acquired a reputation in the industry as somewhat miraculously removed from the worst vicissitudes of the market, having somehow located a sweet spot between profitability and aesthetic quality. As such, Nonesuch is granted a degree of latitude not always extended to other label subsidiaries.⁵⁸ However, Nonesuch did not always lead such a charmed existence, where corporate autonomy is concerned. The period of Sterne’s tenure, despite its many achievements, saw one of the most turbulent moments in Nonesuch’s relationship with its parent corporation, with important ramifications for its managerial staff and its future identity as a label. This episode provides us with an instructive window onto Nonesuch’s subsequent efforts to balance creative production and market position. It also sheds light on developments that were beginning to reshape expectations for record sales in jazz and classical music in the era of emergent media consolidation.

In December of 1979, in a meeting with two executives from the parent company Elektra, Sterne was dismissed from the position that she had held since 1965. Save for the label’s marketing director and his secretary, Sterne’s entire Nonesuch staff was let go, and all twenty-five recording projects in the planning stages were cancelled. Sterne was invited to maintain a relationship with Nonesuch as an independent producer; while the company’s press release claimed she had agreed to stay on in such a capacity, Sterne had in fact expressed shock at the dismissal and declined to continue the relationship.⁵⁹ The firing precipitated an immediate response from composers, critics, performers, and

⁵⁵Jack Egan, “Nonesuch: From Bach to Bucks,” 42.

⁵⁶In a retrospective on Sterne, composer and Nonesuch recording artist William Bolcom noted that, “[Sterne] did things because she wanted to have them done. In many cases, they turned out to be big sellers because she had terrific taste. [...] She was a difficult person sometimes to work with. But that’s because she was just such a stickler. She wanted to make sure that everything was done just so. She had almost impossible standards, which is what we all adored her for.” William Bolcom, in “Profile: Producer Teresa Sterne and how she turned Nonesuch Records into one of the most adventurous record labels,” *Morning Edition*, October 26, 2000, *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, accessed December 31, 2021, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A166114701/OVIC?u=bates_main&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=f1c9c86c.

⁵⁷On record sales of Rifkin’s Joplin settings, see Philip Clark, “Scott Joplin’s ragtime gets its dues,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2014, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2014/jan/22/scott-joplin-ragtime-josh-rifkin-the-sting>; on the popularity of Subotnick’s *Silver Apples of the Moon* among the 1960s counterculture, see Alfred Hickling, “Morton Subotnick’s *Silver Apples of the Moon*: ‘It blew my mind!’,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2014, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2014/mar/07/morton-subotnick-silver-apples-of-moon>.

⁵⁸On the creative autonomy of Nonesuch as a label, see Shorto, “The Industry Standard.”

⁵⁹Is Horowitz and Paul Grein, “Classical Sales Soft: Nonesuch Label Being Restructured,” *Billboard*, December 15, 1979, 4.

classical music enthusiasts, who saw the move as part of a larger attack on the position of classical music in the recording industry.⁶⁰

When asked about the decision to release Sterne, Elektra president Joe Smith cited a decline in sales at Nonesuch over the previous two years, and argued that Sterne's vision for the label had become too narrowly focused and obscure, asserting that "we [at Elektra] can't make records that sell only outside the Russian Tea Room."⁶¹ A similar justification for the dismissal was provided by Sterne's replacement, Keith Holzman (brother to label founder Jac Holzman), who also argued that "the scope of Nonesuch had become very narrow in the past couple of years."⁶² Even Holzman's explanation of the label's relocation to Los Angeles was accompanied by an indirect swipe at Sterne's ostensible elitism. He caustically noted that what Elektra was seeking for its subsidiary was for it to establish its identity "west of the Hudson" river, a clear insinuation that Sterne's Nonesuch catalog was unintelligible to a broader U.S. market beyond Manhattan's confines.⁶³ (Here and elsewhere, I would suggest that a barely disguised sexism seems to inform the way in which Warner/Elektra executives spoke of Sterne. Even the official twenty-year retrospective on the Nonesuch label seems, despite her directorship of Nonesuch from 1965 to 1979 and her 1971 ascension to the position of VP of Elektra, to present her innovative management as an afterthought. The brochure's truncated career biography of Sterne is saved until the second-to-last page, and seems to present Sterne as an almost clerical adjunct to Jac Holzman's visionary oversight.)⁶⁴

As I mentioned above, Joe Smith and Keith Holzman argued that Sterne's firing was attributable to Nonesuch's financial underperformance in the 2 years before her departure. However, according to several industry observers, Elektra's justifications for letting Sterne go did not hold up to scrutiny. While Nonesuch had seen a decline in sales, they insisted that Sterne had been consistent in her oversight of the label, and that there had been no decline in the caliber or appeal of its offerings.⁶⁵ From their standpoint, what *had* changed was the way in which Elektra/Nonesuch's parent company, Warner Communications, approached the question of distribution. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Warner imposed new conditions on the record stores that had historically stocked classical recordings. If specialty boutiques had previously been allowed to order a few records at a time, based upon specific customer preferences, Warner now insisted that they make bulk orders totaling \$200 or more, and reserved the right to check their credit ratings.⁶⁶ Warner's new distribution policies were more congenial to rock sales than those of classical music. To cite a contemporaneous example, the recording of an Eagles album that coincided with the Sterne dismissal had resulted in studio cost overruns roughly totaling \$400,000. In these circumstances, the record company needed immediate and copious sales to make good on its investment. By contrast, sales of both classical and jazz recordings have tended to follow a much longer-term trajectory, with catalog titles selling gradually over a course of many years.⁶⁷ Recall, too, that as Sterne has noted, limiting the pressings of Nonesuch releases was a method

⁶⁰Edward Mendelson, "The Nonesuch Saga," *Hi-Fi News and Record Review*, July 1980, 67.

⁶¹Joe Smith, in Mendelson, "The Nonesuch Saga," 67.

⁶²Keith Holzman, in Mendelson, "The Nonesuch Saga," 67.

⁶³Keith Holzman, in Kory Grow, "Bob Krasnow, Label Exec and Rock Hall of Fame Co-Founder, Dead at 82," *Rolling Stone*, December 14, 2016, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-krasnow-label-exec-and-rock-hall-of-fame-co-founder-dead-at-82-192372/>. Nonesuch Records would subsequently return to New York City during Hurwitz's tenure; see Gerald Gold, "Nonesuch Returns To New York," *New York Times*, June 3, 1984, 2:23.

⁶⁴In the document's language about Sterne's contribution, it is Holzman who is granted agency, with Sterne as a mere "efficient" executor of his strategy: "By the fall of 1965, only eighteen months after its founding, Nonesuch had already become firmly established and, as a result, widely imitated. Jac Holzman realized that the label required firm shaping and intellectual control if it was to retain its position in the industry; to that end he hired Teresa Sterne [. . .] The efficiency with which Miss Sterne ran her operation was recognized by the Elektra management, and in 1971 she was named a vice-president of the company." Nonesuch Records, "Nonesuch Records: The First Twenty Years," 1984, "Nonesuch Records" folder, R&H Clippings, Rogers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

⁶⁵Mendelson, "The Nonesuch Saga," 67.

⁶⁶Mendelson, "The Nonesuch Saga," 67.

⁶⁷For instance, Barry Feldman, who was revamping PolyGram's management of the Verve catalog during this same period, cites this expectation of modest, long-term sales as the reason that it made sense for Verve as a jazz label to be relocated to the PolyGram Classics division: "In the classical environment, over here, we're in an area where they're willing to work with jazz [...]"

that the label used to keep expenses manageable; Elektra's new policy was effectively punishing Sterne for keeping her costs in line.⁶⁸ These limited pressing runs, paired with a strategy calibrated towards modest, long-term sales, ensured that under the new policy, Nonesuch recordings would be squeezed out of all but the largest markets.⁶⁹ What had been held up as a problem of marketing or artist development at the subsidiary level was more likely a matter of shifting institutional culture at the highest levels of Nonesuch's parent corporation.⁷⁰

Nonesuch Records and Bob Hurwitz

The circumstances surrounding Sterne's departure provide us with a useful point of departure for understanding Nonesuch's subsequent direction under Bob Hurwitz, an A&R executive recruited by Elektra label head Bob Krasnow.⁷¹ Upon his arrival in 1984, Hurwitz was tasked with putting a storied and highly adventurous classical label on a sound financial footing, in a business environment that had become increasingly calibrated to pop's bloated economies of scale. Hurwitz's approach was to pursue a strategy of diversification that adhered to the spirit, if not the precise stylistic parameters, of Sterne's Nonesuch. Even as Hurwitz maintained the label's longstanding commitment to classical music, Americana, and "world music" titles, he altered the specific contours of this commitment in interesting ways, tapping into unexpected sites of commercial potential in experimental and contemporary repertoires. The new avenues that Hurwitz pursued in the early years of his tenure would also allow the label to significantly expand the stylistic ambit of its catalog over the subsequent decades: presently, the Nonesuch roster encompasses such wildly disparate artists as neo-folk singer-songwriter Conor Oberst, the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen (until his recent passing), the country singer Emmylou Harris, and Malian kora musician Toumani Diabaté.⁷²

Before Hurwitz became president of Nonesuch, he served as head of American operations for ECM (Edition of Contemporary Music), the Munich-based independent jazz label headed by Manfred Eicher. Hurwitz's tenure at ECM helps us to make sense of the strategy he employed in establishing a new footing for Nonesuch. By the mid-1980s, ECM had already established one of the most distinctive label identities of any jazz imprint, known as widely for its signature aesthetic as for its prestigious roster. With its starkly minimalist cover design, its ethereal, "reverb-drenched" production, and its use of an instantly recognizable sans-serif typeface, ECM presented an exquisitely cultivated brand identity, an appealing frame for the introspective and "pastoral" music that Eicher committed to disk. As David Ake has argued, ECM's house aesthetic, memorably realized in Keith Jarrett's tremendously successful album *The Köln Concert*, was suggestive of a bucolic ethos of "wide open spaces." In the 1970s, ECM recordings by Jan Garbarek, Gary Burton, Ralph Towner and others situated themselves at a remove from prevailing hard bop, jazz-rock, and avant-garde sensibilities.⁷³

ECM would become an important point of reference for critics as they sought to position Nonesuch, after Hurwitz's arrival, in the broader context of the 1980s music industry. One critic in *Musician* magazine in 1987 asserted that "Hurwitz [...] seems to be turning Nonesuch into a slightly hipper version of ECM for American tastes," and the two labels would often be held up as similarly shrewd managers of cultural capital.⁷⁴ As highly autonomous labels catering to a specific portion of the

We'd like to see pieces sell in the eighty thousands if we can do it, but we can live with a five thousand selling album. If we're going to put out Stockhausen records, and we can live with the expectations of those records, we can live with the expectations of jazz." Barry Feldman, in Don Palmer, "The New Jazz Majors," *Musician*, February 1986, 20; on this point, see Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 121–2.

⁶⁸Jack Egan, "Nonesuch: From Bach to Bucks," 42.

⁶⁹Richard Dyer, "Fear and loathing in the record world," *Boston Globe*, December 23, 1979, A9, A12.

⁷⁰For another discussion of Sterne's ouster against the backdrop of Elektra's restructuring, see Robin, *Industry*, 194–5.

⁷¹Grow, "Bob Krasnow, Label Exec."

⁷²See the Nonesuch artist page, at "Artists," Nonesuch, accessed December 28, 2021, <https://www.nonesuch.com/artists>.

⁷³David Ake, Chapter Four, in *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time Since Bebop* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 65–84, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bates/detail.action?docID=570668>.

⁷⁴Jerome Reese, "Manfred Eicher's Reverberations: A Rare Visit With ECM's Producer/President," *Musician*, August 1, 1987, 30.

adult music market, ECM and Nonesuch share a lot of common ground. They have in many instances drawn upon an overlapping pool of artists. While at ECM, Hurwitz developed relationships with a number of artists who would eventually record for Nonesuch, whether as part of its emergent lineup in the 1980s (Steve Reich and John Adams had each recorded for ECM prior to joining Nonesuch), or in some cases, several decades later. (Having worked with Hurwitz at ECM in the 1970s, Pat Metheny signed to Nonesuch in 2004.)⁷⁵

At the same time, the resemblance of Hurwitz's Nonesuch to Eicher's ECM also had a lot to do with their similar visions and methodologies. Both ECM and Nonesuch devoted considerable attention to visual aesthetics and packaging, and in its album cover design Nonesuch has often seemed to emulate the stark austerity of ECM's minimalist design aesthetic.⁷⁶ (Here, attention to detail on the "front end" of the production process, i.e., at the level of high-quality packaging and liner notes, reduces the need for additional advertising expenditures on the "back end.")⁷⁷ With programming, Nonesuch closely resembled ECM in its ability to identify a previously undiscovered audience, and to cultivate an identity that resonates with that audience in unexpected ways. One profile in the *New York Times* from 1986 noted that Nonesuch's commercial success could in large part be attributed to the label's ability to reach a "new audience for serious music—an audience that's familiar with Talking Heads and 'Miami Vice' along with Mozart and John Coltrane."⁷⁸ An important factor here is Nonesuch's astute recognition of the "downtown" aesthetic of New York's contemporaneous avant-garde, with its intuitive linkage of "high-art" and "vernacular" experimentalisms. With its signing of Steve Reich, the World Saxophone Quartet (WSQ), and John Zorn, the label signaled its awareness of a new kind of hip consumer, a listener equally invested in concert-hall minimalism and CBGBs (Country, Bluegrass, Blues, and Other Music For Uplifting Gormandizers).⁷⁹ Both ECM and Nonesuch succeeded through targeting listeners by *sensibility*, rather than by genre. The catalogs for both labels straddled neat boundary demarcations between classical, jazz, and "world music."⁸⁰ Much in the same way that ECM built a following in the early 1970s by identifying itself with a pastoral aestheticism, Nonesuch built its following by localizing itself as the predominant label for a variety of arty urbanisms in the 1980s.

Upon his arrival at Nonesuch, Hurwitz set about remolding the label in the image of this "arty" urbanity, situating the imprint at the interstices of new music, No Wave, and the period's experimental jazz avant-garde. Here, Hurwitz credits Bob Krasnow, then label head of Elektra, with giving him considerable latitude for reshaping the Nonesuch brand. Having approached Krasnow in his earliest days under Elektra to ask about the minutiae of contract negotiations, he remembers being told, "I'll talk to you in five years."⁸¹ Elektra's management of Nonesuch under Joe Smith had cited Sterne's "esoteric"

⁷⁵See John Adams, *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 115; Keith Potter, *Four Young Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209–10; Richard Niles, *The Pat Metheny Interviews: The Inner Workings of His Creativity Revealed* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Books, 2009), 65.

⁷⁶Luke Benjamin Howard, writing about Nonesuch's marketing strategy for Henryk M. Górecki's Symphony No. 3, notes two broad design impulses in Nonesuch releases during this period: He attributes a more "ascetic," "monochrome" sensibility to John Heiden's artwork for the label, while citing the colorful, eye-catching work of art director James Victore. See Luke Benjamin Howard, "A Reluctant Requiem: The History and Reception of Henryk M. Górecki's Symphony No. 3 in Britain and the United States" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1997), 162–3.

⁷⁷See Tom Moon, "Label it a record success; Eclectic Nonesuch lives by one quaint notion: trust your gut," *Toronto Star*, August 17, 2001, E11.

⁷⁸Jon Pareles, "Nonesuch Seeks To Break Down Musical Barriers," *New York Times*, January 14, 1997, 21.

⁷⁹For discussions of the so-called "downtown" aesthetic, and of the erosion of high culture/low culture distinctions in late twentieth century discourse, see Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 135–79.

⁸⁰ECM's New Series, which released recordings by such fashionable "New Simplicity" composers as Arvo Pärt, was in some sense a direct competitor to, as well as a template for, Nonesuch in the field of new music in the 1980s and 1990s. On this point, see Robin, *Industry*, 194–6.

⁸¹Tom Moon, "Hear the innovation: With an eccentric lineup ranging from Sam Phillips to Philip Glass, Nonesuch is the rare record label that goes with instinct, not focus groups," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 12, 2001, H01.

programming choices to justify her dismissal. Hurwitz's artistic choices were not necessarily less "esoteric" than Sterne's, but they did soon reveal his aptitude for locating a balance between aesthetic provocation and commercial success. Among the first projects Hurwitz pursued at Nonesuch were recordings of works by minimalist composers Steve Reich (*Desert Music*), Philip Glass (the soundtrack to Paul Schrader's 1985 film *Mishima: A Life in Four Acts*), and John Adams (*Harmonielehre*); a recording by the groundbreaking Kronos Quartet, juxtaposing Conlon Nancarrow's String Quartet No. 1 against Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze"; and a self-titled LP by singer and composer Caetano Veloso, a key figure in the Brazilian Tropicalismo movement. The new music titles, in particular, enjoyed extended placement on the *Billboard* Top Classical Albums chart, a development that likely reflects their success in connecting to consumers of popular music, whether through crossover appeal, or via the mutual affinities of process music and ostinato-based pop.⁸²

As I noted above, under Teresa Sterne's management, Nonesuch had contributed to a revisitation of ragtime composer Scott Joplin through its groundbreaking recordings. However, it was under Hurwitz, the erstwhile ECM executive, that Nonesuch made important forays into contemporary jazz and improvised music. The signing of John Zorn to the label linked Nonesuch to the exciting cross-currents of jazz, No Wave, punk, and experimental music on offer at clubs such as the Knitting Factory: Nonesuch's Zorn recordings include the 1987 album *Spillane*, with its cultivation of a hard-boiled, neo-noir sensibility, and *Naked City* (1989), in which the album's eponymous band (comprising such artists as Bill Frisell, Fred Frith, and Joey Baron) assembles a jarring, fragmented superimposition of knowing pop culture allusions.⁸³ Guitarist Frisell, who met Hurwitz in 1983 while still at ECM, would record the first of over twenty recordings for Nonesuch in 1989.⁸⁴

One of Hurwitz's earliest and most interesting excursions into the jazz world was his signing of the WSQ to the label in 1985. The WSQ, initially comprising Hamiet Bluiett, Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, and David Murray, was first brought together in 1976 for a series of seminars and concerts at the Southern University campus in New Orleans.⁸⁵ Hemphill, Bluiett, and Lake had each been key figures in the founding of the Black Artists Group, a St. Louis collective in part modeled after the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).⁸⁶ Murray was a California saxophonist with a background in gospel music and jazz organ trio, who had become associated with the Los Angeles avant-garde community by way of his affiliation with Stanley Crouch's Black Music Infinity (while Crouch was still affiliated with the Black avant-garde).⁸⁷ The music of the WSQ represented a more capacious take on jazz neoclassicism than what the term later came to represent. For artists such as

⁸²For the chart placement of Glass, Reich, and Adams recordings, see "Top Classical Albums," *Billboard*, November 23, 1985, 43; "Top Classical Albums," *Billboard*, April 12, 1986, 38; for the Kronos Quartet debut for Nonesuch, see "Top Classical Albums," *Billboard*, July 5, 1986, 38; "Top Classical Albums," *Billboard*, December 6, 1986, 61; James McCalla, *Twentieth-Century Chamber Music* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 234–5; Enrique Fernandes, "Latin Notas," *Billboard*, October 5, 1986, 52. Susan McClary and Robert Fink have, in different contexts, explained something of the structures of feeling that aligned genres like disco and rap with music as otherwise different as minimalism; such affinities likely informed the ease with which Nonesuch could forge new audiences for its minimalist releases. See Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 25–61; Susan McClary, *Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture* (Lincoln: College of Fine and Performing Arts, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1998).

⁸³On Zorn, see John Brackett, *John Zorn: Tradition and Transgression* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); on *Spillane* in particular, see Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 145–52.

⁸⁴See Bill Frisell, "Biography," accessed January 2, 2022, <http://www.billfrisell.com/biography>; Bramley Bamgardner, "Nonesuch Expect's Frisell's 'Train' to Make Some Noise," *Billboard*, December 13, 1997, 80; "Bill Frisell," Nonesuch, accessed January 2, 2022, <http://www.nonesuch.com/artists/bill-frisell>.

⁸⁵Julius Hemphill, in Gene Santoro, "The World Saxophone Quartet: Building on a New Tradition," *Down Beat*, July 1989, 17.

⁸⁶Benjamin Looker, BAG: "Point From Which Creation Begins": *The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis* (St. Louis, MO: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004). On the social conditions that allowed BAG to flourish, and that would later give rise to the sensibility of the World Saxophone Quartet, see George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 121–5.

⁸⁷See Joachim Berendt and Günther Huesmann, *The Jazz Book: From Ragtime to the 21st Century*, seventh edition (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 166; Steven L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 138–9.

Hemphill, Murray, or Arthur Blythe (who would join the quartet later on), interpreting “the tradition” meant embracing its complete historical legacy, a sonic palate extending from New Orleans polyphony to the radically multivalent avant-garde aesthetic of the AACM. Its revisitation of the jazz canon was an expansive conception of “neoclassicism” that rejected some “young lions” suspicion of the experimental avant-garde.⁸⁸

The catholicity of stylistic impulses represented in the WSQ’s output positioned them as vital avatars of a postmodern jazz sensibility during the 1980s. It also proved to be a key source of the group’s commercial appeal. In 1985, Bob Hurwitz approached the group, who were then recording for the Italian independent label Black Saint, about the idea of putting together a Nonesuch record based around the compositions of Duke Ellington. Historically, the group had mostly written its own music, and so an all-Ellington album would have constituted a dramatic change in direction. Nevertheless, Hurwitz’s proposal was attractive to the group, for both economic and aesthetic reasons. A Nonesuch relationship held out the promise of circumventing the distribution problems they were encountering with Black Saint. Moreover, as Bluiett and Lake pointed out in a 1989 *Down Beat* interview, the WSQ saw the prospect of an Ellington-themed album as an intuitive choice:

Hamiet Bluiett: When Hurwitz said Duke Ellington, it was the one name where there was no problem—*absolutely* no problem. In fact, we wondered, ‘Damn, why didn’t *we* think of that?’ See, our whole thing had been to do our own music because one of the frustrations for musicians is not being able to do their own music. But Duke Ellington—he’s like the grandfather, the great granddaddy; it’s impossible to get around him. [...] So for me, doing Duke was no problem; he represented creativity to me. [...]

Oliver Lake: I thought it was a great idea, myself. Duke Ellington had been my idol for a long time, and David [Murray’s] too, so we were excited about that. I also understood where the record company was coming from, to have some kinda marketing angle. We already had a string of albums that were all originals, so maybe it would bring some more people to us if they heard us interpreting one of the masters.⁸⁹

Lake’s point is worth emphasizing. In pairing current performers with classic repertory, WSQ’s 1986 Nonesuch album *Plays Duke Ellington* anticipates the marketing strategy that Verve and other major label jazz affiliates would take up in the 1990s. To give an album thematic focus, producers would pair an artist on the label’s current roster with songs composed or performed by a second, more well-known artist. This concept-driven focus of album programming by major label jazz subsidiaries in the 1990s had become such an established technique that the bassist Christian McBride would summarize the process, sardonically, as “X plays the music of Y, X plays love songs, X plays music for driving to.”⁹⁰ Joe Henderson’s Verve recordings from the early 1990s, produced by Richard Seidel (including *Lush Life: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* [1991], *So Near, So Far (Musings for Miles)* [1992], and *Double Rainbow: The Music of Antonio Carlos Jobim* [1994]), together constituted an especially successful iteration of this strategy, with the first two Henderson albums achieving unit sales of 450,000 copies.⁹¹ The WSQ Ellington project anticipates Henderson’s *Lush Life* project in more ways than one. Owing to the common misidentification of Ellington as the author of numerous Billy Strayhorn songs, *World Saxophone Quartet Plays Duke Ellington*, released in 1986, covers much of the same ground that Joe Henderson would revisit on *Lush Life* in 1991.⁹²

⁸⁸On the contested meanings of the “neoclassical” label for jazz in the early 1980s, see Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 9–12.

⁸⁹Hamiet Bluiett and Oliver Lake, in Gene Santoro, “The World Saxophone Quartet,” 17–18.

⁹⁰Christian McBride, in “Artists Perspectives of the ‘90s,” *Down Beat*, January 2000, 33.

⁹¹Elaine Guregian, “Grammys open doors for tenor saxophonist,” *Wichita Eagle*, April 23, 1994, G6.

⁹²In a similar vein of “X plays the music of Y,” the WSQ would release an album of classic rhythm and blues covers in 1989 titled *Rhythm and Blues*, on the Elektra Musician imprint, a jazz subsidiary of Nonesuch’s parent label. See World Saxophone Quartet, *Rhythm and Blues*, Elektra Musician 60864-2, 1989, compact disc.

Nevertheless, if the WSQ's tribute to Ellington could be read as a version of what McBride later derides as "X plays the music of Y," the quartet's angular, jarring textures animated the music with an energy well-removed from the more conventional musical settings that McBride is referring to. The WSQ's setting of "I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart," for instance, almost entirely eschews the form of Ellington's original, basing its relentless ostinato on the syncopated chromatic figure from the fifth bar of the song's repeated "A" section (understood here in relation to the AABA sections of the 32-bar popular song form) and yielding a reading of the song that is radically transformative. As with many subsequent WSQ tracks, this formal shift substitutes an absorbing groove for the conventional Tin Pan Alley contours of the conventional jazz standard, immersing the listener in a thorny, turbulent extended present.⁹³ In this respect, Nonesuch releases by WSQ or then-labelmate John Zorn cultivate an experimental edge that is more aligned with Nonesuch's distinctive classical new music legacy than with the relatively homogenous "straightahead" and crossover releases that would be put out by conventional jazz subsidiaries over the subsequent decade.

Conclusion: Nonesuch's Business Model in the Age of Financialization

Several decades on from the first WSQ release, what accounts for Nonesuch Records' ability to maintain adventurous releases of this kind, relatively free from the kinds of structural pressures that Matt Pierson faced at Warner? What is the A&R context at Nonesuch that would allow those artists whose contracts migrated from Warner Jazz in the early 2000s, including Joshua Redman, Pat Metheny, and Brad Mehldau, to flourish on the Nonesuch artist roster to this day?

The answer here does not reside in any dramatic break with the approach to artist development that Pierson would have taken on individual projects with Redman, Metheny, and other Warner Jazz labelmates. In their post-restructuring releases for these artists, Nonesuch sometimes emulated Pierson's tendency to "brand" a project by giving it a conceptual theme, if in a slightly more subtle form. For instance, while Hurwitz may not have worked with Mehldau to cultivate as overtly defined a set of projects as the Art of the Trio series under Pierson, Nonesuch has positioned Mehldau in the context of thematically coherent records, as for instance with the 2005 Brad Mehldau/Pat Metheny collaboration titled *Metheny Mehldau*, a record whose promotional copy presents the album as the culmination of a longstanding collaborative friendship based upon "shared inspiration":

For Brad Mehldau, this collaboration started at that "life-changing moment" when, as a 13-year-old, a friend played him "Are You Going With Me" from the Pat Metheny Group's 1982 live double-album, *Travels*. Years later, Pat Metheny heard "Chill" from saxophonist Joshua Redman's 1994 album *Moodswing* that featured Brad Mehldau on piano. Since, the two artists have forged an artistic partnership based on shared inspiration, not just mutual admiration.⁹⁴

Elsewhere, Nonesuch has released albums for both Mehldau and Joshua Redman setting the compositions of Patrick Zimmerli, a move that invites consumers enamored with Zimmerli's work on one album to check out the other one.⁹⁵ Such projects demonstrate that there is not a complete break with Warner Jazz in the way that Nonesuch approached the question of programming individual jazz albums.

⁹³"I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart," on the World Saxophone Quartet, *World Saxophone Quartet Plays Duke Ellington*, Nonesuch 79137-1, 1986, LP.

⁹⁴"Metheny Mehldau by Pat Metheny + Brad Mehldau," Nonesuch, accessed January 9, 2022, <https://www.nonesuch.com/albums/metheny-mehldau>. The following year, Nonesuch would follow up on *Metheny Mehldau* with another album titled *Quartet*, keeping the same lineup (essentially adding Metheny to Mehldau's working trio of himself, Larry Grenadier, and Jeff Ballard), and linking the two albums through cover art featuring the same bold, sans-serif, all-capitals font. See Pat Metheny and Brad Mehldau, *Quartet*, Nonesuch 104188, 2007, compact disc.

⁹⁵Brad Mehldau and Kevin Hays, *Modern Music*, composed and arranged by Patrick Zimmerli, Nonesuch 528371, 2011, compact disc; Joshua Redman and Brooklyn Rider, *Sun on Sand*, composed and arranged by Patrick Zimmerli, Nonesuch 554796, 2019, compact disc.

What may have been far more instrumental in establishing a base of stability for Redman, Metheny, or Mehldau's work at Nonesuch is the broader context established by the sheer stylistic diversity of the Nonesuch roster. As I have noted throughout this discussion, a pattern established by Teresa Sterne, and developed further by Hurwitz, is a commitment to programming in which artists from such radically divergent genre spaces as those occupied by Laurie Anderson, Nicholas Payton, or the Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir could coexist on the same label. If there is a branding strategy at work in this arty, urbane eclecticism, there is a more brutally financialized logic here, too. Unlike the tight genre focus of the 1990s-era Warner Jazz imprint, Hurwitz's Nonesuch was nothing if not a pointed realization of a "diversified portfolio" of artists. What may superficially present itself as an appealing polyglot inclusivity tends to have considerable value in establishing a stable risk profile for the label, with each distinctive intellectual property potentially absorbing financial losses incurred through the portfolio's less lucrative properties.⁹⁶

Nonesuch's eclecticism is in some ways the product of a stripped down, parsimonious approach to financial oversight. In contrast to the situation at other comparable label subsidiaries, Hurwitz reportedly made virtually *all* artist and repertory decisions by himself. Hurwitz's tenure at Nonesuch began with only two full-time employees; at the time of the 2004 LBO, Hurwitz's Nonesuch staff consisted of just twelve out of WMG's 4,400 employees.⁹⁷ A profile of Nonesuch in the early 2000s asserts that Hurwitz's typical approach to A&R decisions was to take a pile of demo CDs, hop into his Audi, and drive—sometimes as far as Vermont—before returning to the Upper West Side with a sense of those artists he found sufficiently striking and original to sign to the label. This decision-making process, pursued without intermediaries, and light on overhead, was apparently sound enough that, in the 2003 runup to the Bronfman-led acquisition of WMG, he got through a meeting with the other WMG label heads without incident, even as other subsidiaries were being asked to slash their rosters.⁹⁸

The Nonesuch approach to financial oversight, which Hurwitz describes in another context, aligned with what Keith Negus has described as the *loose-tight* strategic vision characteristic of the modern, federated music multinational, loose in oversight of artistic decisions, while tight in its oversight of the bottom line:⁹⁹

[Y]ou know, I would be glad to do an infomercial, I have to say, about Warner—having been there since 1978, first with ECM, then with Nonesuch—that in the entire time I've been at Nonesuch, I have never been told that, we had to sign an artist, or we had to drop an artist, you couldn't make this record, the budget was too high. And I think that the reason was just the reality that it was our responsibility to make sure the numbers took care of themselves, and if that happened, no one was going to question any of our artistic decisions.¹⁰⁰

Here, Hurwitz's prudent fiscal management of Nonesuch at the time of the WMG buyout sounds, if anything, indistinguishable from what Teresa Sterne had to say about her approach to running Nonesuch in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Sterne, Hurwitz was happy to work within reduced economies of scale, keeping costs down by eschewing production of music videos, placing ads and promotion in carefully chosen contexts, and not exceeding a marketing budget of \$50,000 for a given recording. For promotion, Nonesuch under Hurwitz privileged niche publications and media venues targeting a

⁹⁶Done correctly, stylistic eclecticism perhaps offers a label an ideal means of achieving the goal of prudent "portfolio management" taken up in Keith Negus's account of corporate strategy in the contemporary music business. See Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 47–8.

⁹⁷See Jon Pareles, "Nonesuch Seeks to Break Down Musical Barriers," 21; Shorto, "The Industry Standard."

⁹⁸Shorto, "The Industry Standard."

⁹⁹On "federated" structures in the music industry, see Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock n' Roll, The Labor Question, and the Musician's Union, 1942–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 201–4; on the "loose-tight" strategies of subsidiary oversight at the major labels, see Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 50; see also Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 118.

¹⁰⁰Bob Hurwitz, interviewed by Rita Houston, "Robert Hurwitz of Nonesuch Records on Art Versus Commerce," thetop22-video, August 9, 2017, YouTube video, 1:53, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrdCnujLb88&t=113s>.

liberal, upscale market, such as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and NPR, over television and commercial radio, and it deliberately cultivated long-term relationships with media, critics, and fans, so that buzz about a given title anticipates its arrival in retail stores.¹⁰¹

Every now and again, the very frugality of the Nonesuch operation, which essentially kept artist recruitment in the hands of one A&R executive with a reputation for exceptional good judgement (rather than the “committee mentality [...] short on conviction” that one profile of Nonesuch attributes to its competitor labels), resulted in an astounding commercial breakthrough.¹⁰² Nonesuch has encountered this several times, whether in the unexpected case of the 1992 release of Henryk Górecki's *Symphony No. 3* (which sold hundreds of thousands of copies in a short period of time, precipitating a new music boomlet at major label classical subsidiaries), or in the runaway success in 1997 of *Buena Vista Social Club*, an album of Afro-Cuban *son* music recorded in Havana and featuring a group of local veteran musicians. (*BVSC* was the best-selling release in Nonesuch's history, already at more than 3 million copies as of 2004.)¹⁰³ Nonesuch's successful signing of Wilco in the early 2000s (after the band's former label, the Warner-owned Reprise, dismissed their new record as “horrible”) resulted in the subsequent release of an arty post-rock classic, the 2002 release *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, which sold some 600,000 units over a 2-year period.¹⁰⁴ In such cases, Hurwitz's judicious picks upended the kinds of conventional wisdom that would dismiss the lucrative commercial prospects of a classical release, or the sales potential of an experimental, noise-inflected album reflecting a band's mid-career shift in sensibility.

To be sure, any label vision that is so closely tied to one person is going to be shaped by the personal prerogatives and aesthetic prejudices—and, by extension, the ideological positioning—of that one person. Despite the considerable diversity of the Nonesuch artist roster, there are some genre orientations that did not seem to find their way into Robert Hurwitz's conception of an eclectic, “arty” and urbane label identity. Hip hop, for instance, seemed to fall outside of Nonesuch's remit. When the jazz clarinetist Don Byron sought to go in what he called an “urban music” direction, Hurwitz, with whom Byron had what he described as a “thorny” relationship, became less invested in his work, and Byron subsequently decamped for other labels.¹⁰⁵

Nonesuch markets its recordings predominantly to a middle-aged demographic, and so generational considerations are clearly important here. But it is also worth meditating on what race and class dynamics potentially inform this generation gap, discouraging the incorporation of genres like hip-hop into the Nonesuch “brand.” In the case of hip hop, its continued exclusion from more “serious” musical institutions (the music for which Nonesuch has been key in documenting) has been shaped by, among other things, the lingering impact of respectability politics, which plays an outsized role in official culture's understanding of Black cultural production.¹⁰⁶ Nonetheless, while such ideologies potentially factor into the exclusion of a range of popular music genres from the Nonesuch catalog, the most salient point here is perhaps the envisioned target market of a label whose primary promotional venues have historically consisted of such outlets as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's* magazine, or NPR. Whatever the diversity of Nonesuch's lineup of recording artists may be, the media sites where Nonesuch has placed their ads suggests that their anticipated audience, in addition to being somewhat older than pop music's core demographic, is potentially more homogenous on race and class lines, comprising the mostly white, mostly affluent and college-educated middle-class listenership hailed by NPR's programming and the thinkpieces of the *Atlantic* monthly.¹⁰⁷ All of which is to say that,

¹⁰¹Shorto, “The Industry Standard.”

¹⁰²James Oestreich, “At Nonesuch, the Many Sides to a Big Personality,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1997, Sec. 2, 25.

¹⁰³Robin, *Industry*, 190; Shorto, “The Industry Standard.”

¹⁰⁴Shorto, “The Industry Standard.”

¹⁰⁵Don Byron, in Shorto, “The Industry Standard.”

¹⁰⁶On this point, see Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁰⁷Alongside hip hop, electronic dance music is also not well-represented on Nonesuch, though there are exceptions, as for instance with crossover albums for Nonesuch artists like Steve Reich, whose work was taken up on the remix compilation *Reich Remixed*, featuring DJ Spooky, Coldcut, and Andrea Parker. See Steve Reich et al., *Reich Remixed*, Nonesuch 79552-2, 1999, compact disc.

even in the period of Bob Hurwitz's oversight (and that of his longtime collaborator David Bither, who became sole President following Hurwitz's departure in 2017), the label has perhaps not entirely shed the aura of cultural elitism attributed to it by Teresa Sterne's onetime antagonists.¹⁰⁸

With respect to Nonesuch's studied eclecticism, there are aspects of this aesthetic that dovetail with what Andrea Moore, in a recent context, has pointed to as the utility of genre-boundary transgression, realized as a kind of "market-friendly multiculturalism," in reinforcing neoliberal value systems. In much the same way that Benetton's iconic "United Colors of Benetton" campaign, with its striking iconography of racial and ethnic inclusivity, constructed a powerful brand for the clothing line in which the consumer was invited to identify with Benetton's performance of cultural difference, Nonesuch could be accused of enacting a similar move, inviting listeners to see their own liberal pluralism commodified and reflected back to them, in the guise of a record collection (or Spotify playlist, at least) in which Brazilian Tropicalismo and Senegalese mbalax rubs shoulders with "holy minimalism" and contemporary jazz.¹⁰⁹

Alongside the ideological and market conditions that shape Nonesuch's recent past, the label (like so many of its peers) must also contend with an uncertain future. As Nonesuch proceeds under David Bither's direction, one important consideration is that in the music streaming economy, younger listeners' relation to music is increasingly shaped by the consumption pattern of the curated, algorithmic, or user-generated playlist, rather than that of the album; this shift has clear implications for a label that has shaped its identity around the production of well-curated albums.¹¹⁰ By extension, the Spotify algorithm's dismantling of patterns of listening shaped around the album also potentially undermines the listener's investment in the label identities that have often historically led consumers to purchase albums under a particular imprimatur. For artists looking to sign on to a supportive label culture, the appeal of entities like Nonesuch may well continue, but on the consumer end, there may in the future be little to incentivize the listener's loyalty to a label whose product the streaming algorithm semi-randomly intersperses with that of other labels on its playlists.¹¹¹

At the very least, though, Nonesuch's pairing of fiscal prudence and aesthetic adventurousness models a kind of major-label curation that is surprisingly adaptive to the structural turbulence of music multinationals in the age of financialization. As such, it suggests an admittedly partial and imperfect means for carving out certain kinds of creative potentialities at the core of otherwise

A 2021 account of NPR's venture into podcasting cites the network's efforts to break outside of the "older and whiter" demographics of its conventional radio audience, in which listeners of color constitute merely 21 percent of its overall market, and where listeners older than 44 predominate. See Elahi Izadi, "Why your favorite new NPR show may sound a lot like a podcast," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2021, accessed June 7, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/npr-50th-anniversary-podcast-audience/2021/05/03/af0d49a0-a8fa-11eb-8d25-7b30e74923ea_story.html. While numbers on the racial demographics of the *New Yorker/Harper's/Atlantic* readership are harder to come by, a Pew Research Center report from 2012 finds that 41 percent of the readership for magazines in this vein, a large plurality, make upwards of \$75,000 a year (the same is true of 43 percent of NPR's listenership); along the same lines, almost two thirds of this "*New Yorker*, etc." readership holds a college degree or greater level of educational attainment, making it the most educated readership among the many media outlets studied in the report. (54 percent of NPR's audience is made up of "college +"¹⁰⁹ listeners.)

Finally, fully 83 percent of the readership for the *New Yorker* and similar publications, and 87 percent of NPR's listenership, is over 30 years old, all of which suggests that Nonesuch, in looking to these media venues as among its primary vectors of promotion, is not aggressively pursuing the youth market, perhaps making the label a suboptimal vehicle for developing artists in such genres as hip hop, electronic dance music, or reggaetón. See "Trends in News Consumption: 1991–2012: In Changing News Landscape, Even Television is Vulnerable," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., September 27, 2012, accessed June 7, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>.

¹⁰⁸"David Bither Named Co-President."

¹⁰⁹Andrea Moore, "Art-Religion for a Global New Age," in Judith Lochhead et al., "Boundaries of the New: American Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium," *Twentieth-Century Music* 16 no. 3 (October 2019): 386.

¹¹⁰For a discussion of the effects of curated and algorithm playlists on the sales of albums, see U.K. Parliament, House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee, *Economics of Music Streaming: Second Report of Session 2021–22*, HC 50, July 15, 2021, accessed June 8, 2021 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6739/documents/72525/default/>.

¹¹¹On the declining importance of record label identities to the consumer-facing aspects of the music business, see Françoise Passerard and Phillip Cartwright, "Business-to-artist: record labels and sub-labels in the digital age," *The Conversation*, posted July 1, 2019, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/business-to-artist-record-labels-and-sub-labels-in-the-digital-age-118950>.

inhospitable institutions. In a context where the business model of the music multinational depends upon the production of near-ubiquitous hit songs, and where the brainstorming, writing, recording, mastering, and marketing rollout of a single hit may in some cases cost millions of dollars, the ongoing success of an entity like Nonesuch may seem unfathomable. With such reduced economies of scale, it must operate according to entirely different market logics, reliant upon word of mouth, niche marketing, and the cultivation of an artist roster sufficiently attractive to convince listeners to check out other Nonesuch artists.¹¹²

In effect, Nonesuch's business model suggests the continued resilience in the music industry of sensibilities that we have, perhaps prematurely, consigned to a closed chapter in its history. Even as neoliberal market logics clearly govern aspects of WMG's operations at the uppermost reaches of the corporate hierarchy, Nonesuch demonstrates how a different logic may shape conditions "on the ground," one more closely aligned with the practices of an earlier iteration of Warner Music. Warner's own historical incarnation as WEA, a federated structure comprising semi-autonomous Warner-Reprise, Elektra-Asylum, and Atlantic divisions, suggests what kinds of work could be accomplished when constituent divisions were left to forge their own creative directions, under the guidance of strong personalities whose curatorial visions were somewhat protected from market pressures.¹¹³ As former Talking Heads singer David Byrne points out, Hurwitz's Nonesuch could be understood as having retained some of the best attributes of an erstwhile Warner Bros. label culture; in this, it has much in common with those contemporary indie labels that continue to cultivate compelling artists and advocate for their work:

Talking Heads spent many years with Warner Bros., and in 2004 I released *Grown Backwards* through their boutique Nonesuch label. Part of the attraction of Nonesuch was that we felt in good company with their eclectic roster of acts, like John Adams, the Black Keys, Laurie Anderson, Caetano Veloso, Wilco [...]. Like the Warner Bros. of old and indie labels today like Warp, 4AD, Tomlab, Daptone, and Thrill Jockey, Nonesuch's taste is reflected in their roster of artists. If you like one record on the label, you just might like another.¹¹⁴

One of the most oft-repeated assessments of neoliberal capitalism is the claim, circulated as often by its celebrants as its detractors, that "there is no alternative" to contemporary free market logics, no "outside" to capital in its present incarnation.¹¹⁵ In many ways, Nonesuch Records flies in the face of such claims to an absolute, totalizing hegemony. It suggests that the music industry continues to offer spaces for cultural production that resists the most mercenary impulses of late capitalism. Nonesuch, along with other like-minded labels, has succeeded in doing what Scott DeVeaux, writing of bebop artists' navigation of the institutional hegemony of their day, referred to as locating "cracks in the monolith," spaces where creative work is permitted to flourish in the teeth of otherwise insurmountable structural forces.¹¹⁶ In the context of the music industry's present domination by financial capitalism, a viable artist response to this situation is perhaps, as Nonesuch artists have clearly done, to find institutional niches that serve as beacons for those looking to do unhurried, thoughtful cultural work, even as so much that is solid melts into air.

¹¹²For a useful breakdown of the expense involved in producing and promoting a major label hit in the twenty-first century, see Zoe Chance's account of the production of Rihanna's 2011 song "Man Down," in Zoe Chance, "How Much Does It Cost To Make A Hit Song?," *NPR.org*, posted June 30, 2011, accessed January 9, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2011/07/05/137530847/how-much-does-it-cost-to-make-a-hit-song>.

¹¹³On the corporate structure of Warner's music division in the 1970s, see Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, *Rock n' Roll Is Here To Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 201–9.

¹¹⁴David Byrne, *How Music Works* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012), 235.

¹¹⁵On Margaret Thatcher's proclamation that "there is no alternative" to neoliberalism, see for example Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 8; on the impossibility of locating and working within an "outside" to late capitalism, see for instance Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 45.

¹¹⁶Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 301.

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Dale Chapman is associate professor of music at Bates College. He is the author of *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture*, published with the University of California Press. His work has appeared in *JPMS*, *JSAM*, *Popular Music*, the *Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising*, *Cybermedia: Science, Sound, and Vision*, and *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry, and New Audiovisual Aesthetics*.