

# Blue Note's HERITAGE

Blue Note Records is an American jazz record label. Established in 1939 by Alfred Lion and Max Margulis, it derived its name from the blue notes of jazz and the blues. Originally Blue Note Records was dedicated to recording traditional jazz and small group swing. The label switched its focus to modern jazz around 1947.

## The unusual collaboration that inspired the whole music scene

*This is the story of two Jewish Germans who came to America and fundamentally changed the Afro-American Jazz scene. What may sound like a mix up of cultures and backgrounds is a wonderful story of equality and the love for good music. Their work significantly impacted the Jazz scene and inspired many musicians and record labels to this day.*

Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff met in 1925, when they were still teenagers, during a concert of the black pianist Sam Wooding at the concert hall "Berliner Admiralspalast". This concert marked the start of their love for jazz. The two friends admired and collected anything that had to do with the music genre from then on. But when Hitler gained power, it was an uncertain and dangerous time for the two in Nazi Germany because they were Jews. In 1936, Lion was the first to leave Germany behind to find a new New York home.



Wolff was still in Germany, which made Lion anxious, so he got him out of the country in October 1939. Wolff went with one of the last ships from Germany to New York. He joined Blue Note Records and was responsible for the accounting, marketing, and delivery of records. He also started working right by Lion's side as his artistic partner. Lion and Wolff were opposites, but they complemented each other. While Lion was more of an

extrovert and made the recordings, Wolff was more introverted and stayed in the background during the recording sessions. He captured every moment with his camera. The pictures of the musicians were used on the record covers. This style was very unusual; covers never had a connection with the music. It was also noteworthy that the two friends and the musicians decided together on every aspect of the recording.

Black jazz musicians appreciated Lion and Wolff. These musicians felt like there was a connection between their own oppression and the story of the two Jews. The German men didn't show any interest in the musicians' background or even making a profit. Instead, they aimed to record "important music from important artists" (quote by guitarist Kenny Burrell). They contributed a significant part to the African American Culture and stood up for equality and diversity.

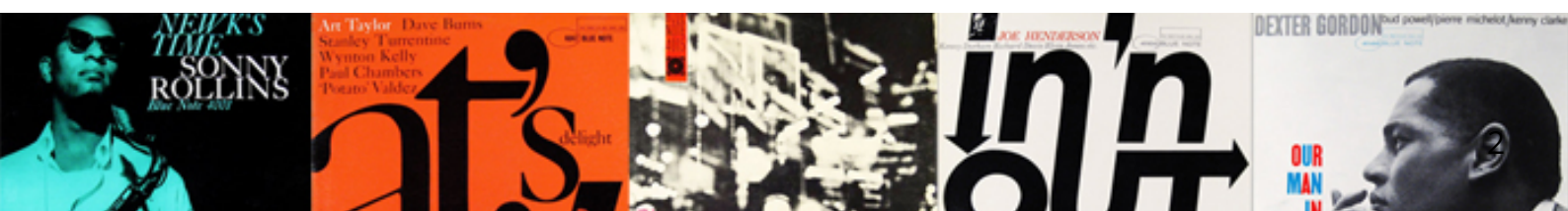


Lion and musician Hank Mobley

The two immigrants worked together with many well-known artists from Monk, Fats Navarro and Bud Powell to Howard McGhee, James Moody and Miles Davis. In the fifties and sixties, Rock 'n' Roll gained popularity and they sold. Blue Notes to EMI Music in 1965.

Wolff died in 1971 and it showed that he was much more of a background figure for Blue Note, as his tombstone said "friend of Alfred Lion". In contrast to that, they named a bridge in Berlin-Schöneberg after Lion, who died in 1987.

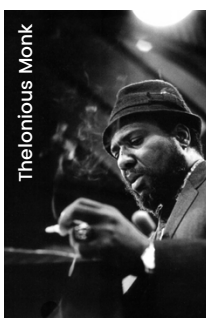
The two friends inspired and complemented each other, but they also created an intellectual legacy that inspired tons of bands, artists, and other creatives to this day. But how did they become a source of inspiration and what distinguishes them from other record labels? >>



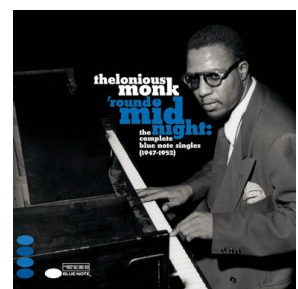


The first differentiation of Blue Note is its way of producing music. While recording, Lion and Wolff had a specific way of treating the recording band. They used to meet with bands after their concerts to record, and they supplied them with alcoholic refreshments, as they called them. This resulted in recording until the early hours or mornings after their work in clubs and bars had finished. By choosing this unusual way of recording, the artist got involved in record production. It made the label soon well known for treating his musicians uncommonly well.

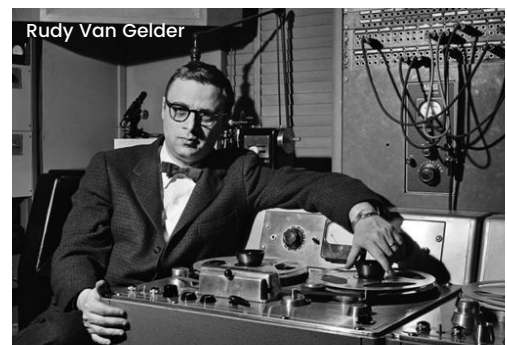
After Lion went to the army for two years, in late 1943, the label was back in business, recording musicians and supplying records to the armed forces. So they even inspired this group of non-recording partners of the Blue Note label. At the end of the war, saxophonist Ike Quebec recorded for the label. He brought new names, like Monk, to the table. Even though Quebec belonged stylistically to a previous generation, he could appreciate the unique bebop style of jazz that Blue Note internalized.



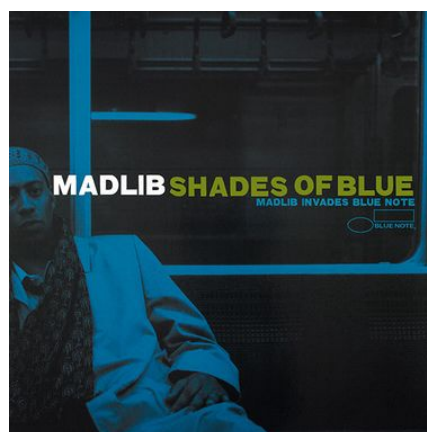
Blue Note Records started to work with pianist Thelonious Monk, who was discovered by Quebec in 1947. Monk had to deal with a lot of neglect before Blue Note took him under its wings. At first his work wasn't popular, because he had his very own individual style. Luckily for him, in 1957 Jazz was looking for a new approach and Monk managed to contribute to that with the support from Blue Note, which he received from the very start.



Rudy Van Gelder, described as the architect of modern jazz, also made sure there was a clear distinction in the way Blue Note recorded and other companies did. He was the go-to engineer for Blue Note from 1953 to 1972. He always stayed independent, even though a lot of people directly linked him to the record label. During the recordings organized by van Gelder, he paid the musicians for rehearsal time before the recording session. It helped them ensure a better result.



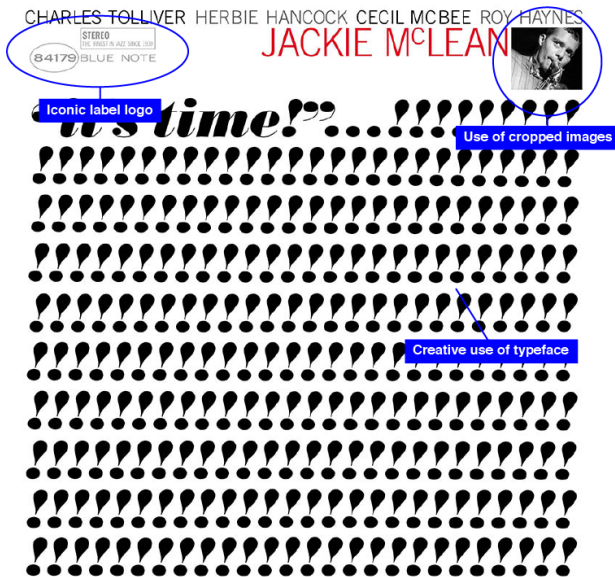
As for recent years, in 2003 hip-hop producer Madlib released the album "Shades of Blue", collecting his remixes and interpretations of Blue Note music. In 2008, hip hop producer Questlove of The Roots compiled "Droppin' Science: Greatest Samples from the Blue Note Lab", a collection of



original Blue Note recordings sampled by modern-day hip-hop artists such as Dr. Dre and A Tribe Called Quest. Blue Note will certainly keep on inspiring artists and others. Wolff and Lion created one of the most appreciated and honoured record labels of all time.



# A small analysis on the design of vinyl covers



## IT'S TIME!

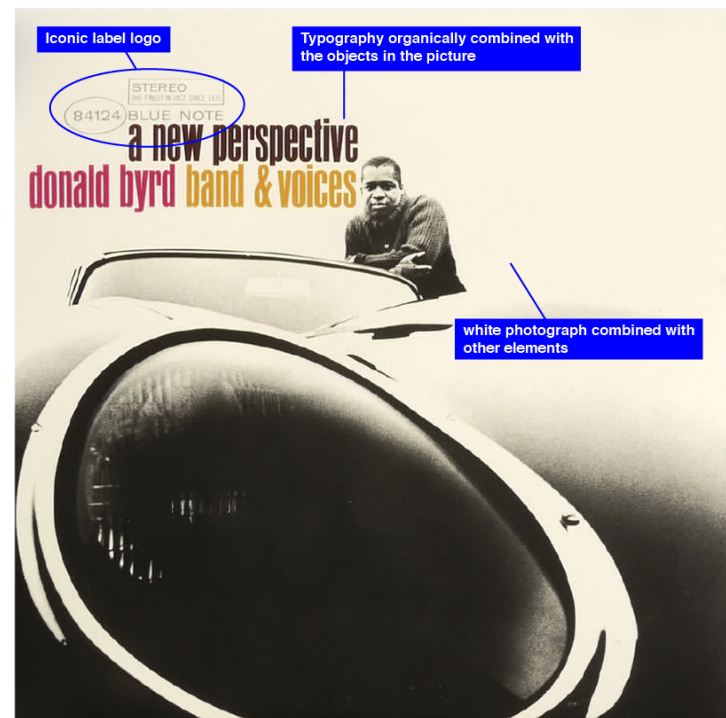
This cover was made for Jackie McLean's album "It's Time!" which was released in 1965. Jackie McLean was a versatile person: he was an American jazz alto saxophonist, composer, bandleader and educator. McLean died in 2006. This cover truly stands out because of the extreme use of exclamation marks in bold letters, 244 to be precise. Blue Note's graphic designer Reid Miles had a penchant for exclamation marks, which can be seen here.

The use of bold typography is an attribute that is typical for Blue Note Records' covers. The bold black exclamation characters create a stronger impression than hardly any graphic ever can. A bold serif font is used for the album's title, "it's time!" and a thin sans-serif font is used for the musician's name. This creative mix-up of font types is a heritage for the label. There is a small image in the right-hand upper corner. It is a stamp-sized picture of McLean. The musician's cropped image in the upper right corner is also a distinct feature of Blue Note records' heritage. These pictures were taken by Francis Wolff, the artistic partner of the label's founder Alfred Lion.

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE

There is something special to be seen in Donald Byrd's cover of "A New Perspective" (1963). The photo plays a more prominent role on the cover than the graphic design. Nice to know is that the photo was taken by the designer Reid Miles himself. The headlight of Byrd's E-type Jaguar plays a prominent role. It was taken from an unusual perspective, which is a metaphor for the title of the album. Byrd was an American jazz and rhythm & blues trumpeter and vocalist.

Miles used a black and white photograph for this album cover. The white space and margin in the photograph are part of the heritage of the Blue Note Records. The car, which takes up a lot of space on the cover, contrasts with the narrow, dense typography. The picture draws the attention to the artist, even though the perspective of the picture makes it seem like >>

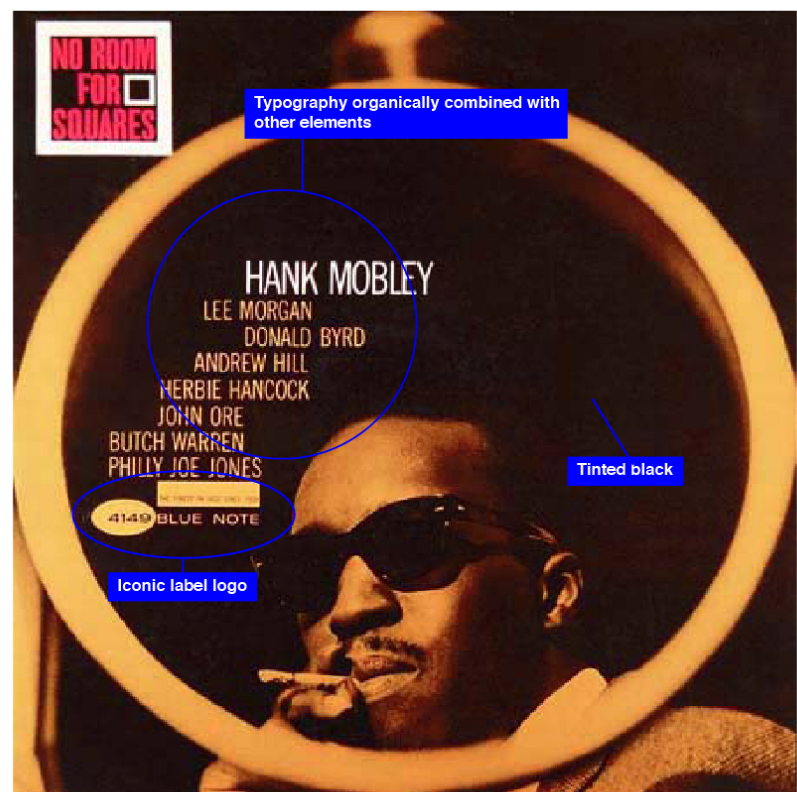


he is far away from the viewer. Miles' strong photography work is obvious here. The font of the title is a narrow bold sans-serif. The letters have three colours, but they come from the same colour palette. The album cover has a white Blue Note logo, which can also be considered a distinguishing feature of Blue Note Records. The album's title, which is placed right next to the musician, gives the cover a visually organized feeling. The cover shows that history was essential to Blue Note. In 1963 there were a lot of shifts in culture and politics but also in the automotive industry. That year was the second-best production year in industry history.

## NO ROOM FOR SQUARES

One could take the title of Hank Mobley's album "No room for squares" (1964) literally. Reid Miles loved having visual puns on the album covers he designed, which is very visible here. The cover shows a cool-looking Mobley wearing shades while he has a cigarette. There isn't a square around his face, but a circle. The circle was part of a fence structure, behind which Mobley was standing. It was not an effect that was manipulated afterward.

This album cover is primarily filled with a photo of the artist. Miles used a black and white photo with orange shades. A black and white image is the most popular heritage of Blue Note Records. The label often gave the pictures, which were focused on the performer's faces, a tint of colour such as cyan or red, and added suitable typography. The typography is organically combined along the musician's face. As a result, the letters and photos seem to be integrated into one whole, so the viewer's eyes can naturally move from the musician to the letters. The iconic Blue Note Records' logo is filled with orange to harmonize with the background. The focus lies on the face of the artist with its shade of colour. The label played with the figures of circles and squares, as well with words in this. The title says "No room for squares" while the artist is in a circle. This shows that Blue Note did not only make playful use of graphics but also of words. The title of the album is squeezed into the top left corner. It did not matter for Blue Note if the title was placed in a tiny corner, as long as it was graphically appealing and looked good.





## TROMPETA TOCCATA



case the colour red. Cropped photography between letters is a way to effectively use small photographs. It is a Blue Note Records method to fill the album cover with a varied and broadly bold sans-serif font. All the letters are in the same font, which makes it hard to distinguish the title, author and other info on the album. But that once again didn't matter, it looks good and appeals.

Reid Miles used a combination of large capital letters with ultra-bright colours to make "Trompeta Toccata" (1965) by Kenny Dorham, an eye-grabbing album cover. Miles used a variety of bright red, pink, purple and orange to draw attention to the cover. Besides the remarkable typography, Dorham can also be seen on the cover. Dorham was placed in a black and white rectangle while holding his trumpet. This makes him look like a human exclamation mark, which is not surprising, giving Miles' love for exclamation marks.

Miles, the designer of Blue Note Records, ensured that the colours were bound in one tone, even with a variety of colours. The use of limited colours is the heritage of Blue Note. The colours are easy to distinguish from each other, but still have the same foundation, which is in this

To summarize, Blue Note never seems to lose the scene. After all these years, artists are still finding their way to the label. They inspire many others in different ways to this day and will continue to do so. The covers discussed were just a small foretaste of everything Blue Note has to offer. Each cover has its own individuality, but still feels like the work of Blue Note. It's iconic how Lionel Wolff worked together and made an icon of a label. Not all of Blue Note's records were successful, but if you ask us, they will continue to have a large share of the jazz market.

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