

# Act of Faith

Fifteen years old this year, the ACT label has become one of the key independent jazz labels. **Stuart Nicholson** talks to the label's founder, **Siggi Loch**

The history of jazz would read rather differently had there been no independent record labels. Imagine it. No Blue Note, no Verve, no Pacific Jazz, no Prestige, no Atlantic, no Riverside, no Contemporary and no Savoy. They, and others not quite so well known, once played a vital role in documenting the history of the music as it happened – indeed, many bona fide jazz greats may well have ended up as shadowy figures in the footnotes of history but for the independents – not least a Thelonious Monk or a Sonny Rollins. Yet today, the importance of the independents is probably greater than ever since all the major recording companies have downsized, and in some cases closed, their jazz departments.

As a result, almost all the new jazz documented on recordings is from the independent labels as the great tradition established by the likes of Verve, Blue Note and Contemporary in jazz's Golden Years is continued into the present. But there is one big difference. Today, the most important of these labels are no longer to be found in the United States but in Europe. Coincidentally, two of the most critically acclaimed and internationally respected independents of the current era are to be found in one European city – Munich, which is home to the long established ECM label and ACT, founded as an independent record and music publishing company in 1992.

The rise of the ACT label in just 15 years has been one of the rare success stories in an industry that has seen a global downturn of CD sales during the late 1990s and early millennium years. This is down to the vision of Siegfried "Siggi" Loch, the founder, managing director, producer, art director and talent scout for the label. "I like to see ACT as a very individual label in the tradition of the great American independents," he says. "I am privileged by the fact that I was a successful player in the corporate music industry for almost three decades before I decided to realise the dream of my own label and to put all my experience and financial resources behind it. Now I am out there as the master of my own destiny finding new and exciting talents and helping build careers."

Loch's professional life in the music industry began as a 19-year-old when he was appointed sales promotion manager of EMI's import music service into Germany, Ausland Sonder Dienst. He had become a devoted jazz fan at the age of 15 after seeing Sidney Bechet live at a club in Hanover in 1955. After just a year with EMI he moved to Phillips in Hamburg as label manager. Here he was able to realise his ambition of becoming a record producer. "The first album I produced in 1963 was called *Jazz Made in Germany* by the then unknown Klaus Doldinger, who became one of the most prominent musicians in my country until this day," he recalls. Other successful releases followed, but this was the 1960s, and it was Loch's early recognition of the R&B scene and a new generation of British pop groups that opened up a new chapter in his career.

In 1963 The Star Club in Hamburg had just opened with the Beatles topping the bill. Loch made a compilation album of several bands that had appeared at The Star club, including 'Sweets For My Sweet' by an as yet unrecorded group called The Searchers, which sent his stock within Phillips skyrocketing. But in 1966 he moved to Liberty Records and by the following year was the youngest managing director in the recording business when Liberty opened its first affiliate outside the USA in Munich. In 1968 the label was taken over by United Artists and after two years Loch decided to move on.

He was head hunted by Nesuhi Ertegun of Atlantic Records, who told him the Kinney Group, which owned the Warner, Elektra and Atlantic labels was planning to set up its own international operation and wanted him to head up a new WEA affiliate in Germany. Loch accepted, and within 10 years had become senior vice president of WEA International. After further corporate mergers Loch rose to become president of WEA Europe, where he completely reorganised the European set-up for the corporation. However, in 1987 he decided to resign and form his own record label. In 1988 he created his ACT label, signing a licensing deal with



Polygram. But boardroom machinations intervened and Polygram pulled out of the deal, putting the label on hold. Loch, frustrated, decided to distance himself from the music business and relocated to Mallorca with his wife Sissy.

After a year, he made the decision to go it alone and create an independent company run entirely by himself, and in 1992 the ACT label was re-born. "I have been fortunate enough to be involved in a number of albums which still have a certain relevance today, including the recording debuts of some artists who have really become important. When I made the decision to work entirely on my own, I thought that if I was able to produce records with a long life-span – like I did in the 1960s – then that would give me the greatest possible satisfaction, much more than earning a high salary as a corporate executive."

Since then Loch has built up an impressive catalogue with a wide range of artists. "We have been very selective and have released over 200 albums in 15 years," he says. "It would have been easy to release a lot more but not market and promote them with the care and devotion ACT has become known for. About half of the recordings on ACT were produced by myself based on original concepts and realised in cooperation with the artists of my choice. This is how I started in 1992 with the recording of *Jazzpana* by Vince Mendoza and Arif Mardin followed by projects like *Round About Bartók* by Richie Beirach, *Europeana* by Michael Gibbs and Joachim Kühn, *Swedish Folk Modern* by Nils Landgren and Esbjörn Svensson – prior to the international success of EST.

"The other half of the ACT catalogue consists of recordings produced by the artists themselves, but nothing is released on ACT that I do not personally like. This is the label philosophy. I

am trying to find the right balance between the artists that bring in the 'bread and butter' like EST, Nils Landgren, Nguyễn Lê, Viktoria Tolstoy and Rigmor Gustafsson who finance the new ACT artists of tomorrow like Michael Wollny, Peter Apfelbaum or Geir Lysne. After all, we are not making records to keep the artists happy or to satisfy the international jazz police but to produce recordings for a music loving public, music for people with open ears and an open mind!" In 1998, Loch received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the German record critics, one of several awards that have come his way over the years. But while 2007 may mark the fifteenth anniversary of the ACT label, Loch is more excited by future developments than past achievements. "Listening to [pianist] Michael Wollny I decided to create a new series of recordings called Young German Jazz. Of course, I can only support a few upcoming talents but I am happy to see a positive and overwhelming response to our series. The next exciting project for me is the first ACT release by the young trumpet player Matthias Schriefel and his Shreefpunk. And there will be Berlin Calling a new band by Carsten Daerr and Daniel Erdmann coming soon."

If he is forced to look back on 15 years of ACT history, Loch says the one thing that has given him greatest satisfaction is that. "The company can now stand on its own feet and has self financed all its activities over the years and I don't have to subsidise it any more," he says. I am happy in my niche and we do not need to sell millions of albums to run a successful label. For me the music comes first and for the last 15 years I am grateful for the luxury to be able to produce and publish hopefully interesting and challenging music of my personal liking and to share this enthusiasm with the greatest possible amount of people around the globe."



Siggi Loch with Duke Ellington and (top) as a drummer back in the day

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