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Steve Backer Interview

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*Tell me about your musical background.*

My father played tenor in the Ben Webster/Coleman Hawkins tradition; he was a businessman also. I was always impressed with the way music kept him young, but business made him older. So I tried to get involved with music. I studied jzz bass on the West coast, and I found that I didn't have the chops. So I decided to get as close to the music as I couldwithout settling for being a journeyman bassist. I had a degree in business and a love for the music. I got close to it by combining art and commerce.

In college at Hofstra University I worked at a club on Long Island. Everybody that played Birdland played this club as the additional gig. I got to hear Billie Holiday, Lee Morgan, John Coltrane; that enhanced everything. Sooner or later, I had to get as close to it as possible in the most logical way for me: in a way that I could hopefully make a statement and excel.

*From whom did you learn production?*

I pretty much picked it up on my own watching people. But I really am not a hands-on producer. I'm a combination of things: a production company and an executive producer, which is quite different. I don't have the time to stay in the studio, so I try to match the artist with the most harmonious individual on a production level to oversee a project.

*Speaking philosophically, how would you define the executive producer's job?*

You make the project possible by your role in the executive end of the corporate structure. You create opportunities: from conception through contractual negotiations with the artist to communicating about the project the artist has in mind to overseeing, conceptually, the actual recording process. Then, once the album is delivered, you advise and consult with the company on many levels, such as marketing, merchandising, promotion, advertising, the touring and so on. It's a multifaceted role.

In regards to Bluebird, it means that I'm the person that made it possible for the vaults to be reopened at RCA. On a business level and on a creative level, prior to the actual remastering and reissuing of the projects, the executive producer decides which projects to do or not do. He's not necessarily the hands-on producer who's working the board in the recording studio; he's dealing with it on an executive level.

*What are your criteria for choosing an album to be reissued?*

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You want to have as much impact as you can on the consumer and the jazz community (which includes critics and radio and all the people that help you as midwives between thereissuing of the album and its reaching the consumer) from both an aesthetic and commercial vantage point. For example, we've had two, six album releases on Bluebird, and we have an upcoming sixteen CD only release in September. What you look for is balance between aesthetics and commerciality. Hopefully, you can have as much as possible of both in a given reissue.

*Give me some free-associative characterizations of the musical material you've recently put out.*

Fats Waller: The Complete Fats Waller, Vol. IV and Bunny Berigan: The Complete Bunny Berigan, Vol. II.

We're attempting to complete some of the things I feel ethically obligated to complete: the Berigan, Fats Waller and Tommy Dorsey projects that RCA started in the '70s. They end up being completest oriented projects, geared probably more to collectors than to consumers.

Originally, RCA Bluebird was RCA's jazz budget line. But the last incarnation of Bluebird was in the '70s when, working on a completest level, they concentrated on the swing bands of the '30s and '40s. What we've done is try to take a more thorough and comprehensive attack than just the swing bands.

I haven't gone to CD on some recordings for a very practical reason. The technology in trying to move some of that material from the pre-tape era (pre 1948 or 1949) was really not there in an efficient way until recently.

We've now found a company in California whose software reduces the surface noise--the pops, clicks and hisses—of the pre-tape era without altering the high end of (or compressing) the music. Now, I'm able to move more things to CD. For instance, there's a Fats Waller CD in the works.

There are a number of pre-tape things in this first release that have not been run through that system because we hadn't found those people at that point. But in the second release we'll start to get to some of the very critical early stuff.

Sonny Rollins: The Quartets Featuring Jim Hall.

It's great to have these seminal sides of Rollins, which have been in and out of print, back available to both collectors and new jazz fans. This album is a must.

Charles Mingus: New Tijuana Moods. This is one of the finest reissues we've put out this far. As far as I'm concerned it's a five star reissue, because this material has never been out and the alternate takes bring out just as much excitement as the original takes, and they're better handled through the excellent production technique of Edwin Michel.

Coleman Hawkins: Body And Soul. It spans a pretty wide range of time--from 1939 to 1956. Some of it is pre-tape era and some of it is post-tape era. The quality of the sound on the early works could stand to be a bit better, but the strength of the album, even on a CD level, which tends to exacerbate the difficult sounds of the early period, is not to be denied. It, also, is one of my favorites. "Body and Soul" had been sitting in the vaults for I don't know how long. Bob Porter [the album's producer] did a good job with this one.

Duke Ellington: The Blanton-Webster Band. I have dual feelings about this. From a conceptual point of view, I think it's a brilliant project. Down Beat just awarded it reissue of the year, so obviously a lot of critics feel that way also. Musically, it's wonderful to get material from that particular band collated in one package for the world. However, from a sonic point of view, it has given me a lot of heartache. It was one of our first packages.

We've now redone the Ellington entirely, and the newly remastered version should be out around October. It will be the same package without sonic mistakes (and without one musical mistake that drove me up the wall).

Duke Ellington: And His Mother Called Him Bill.

Here and with the Hodges recording you're talking about the post-tape era which is a piece of cake compared to the pre-tape era, in terms of digitally remastering and of moving things to CD. With this album you have an amazing set--the whole band played with an intensity that was remarkable [it was recorded only three months after "Bill" Strayhorn's death]. It's a beautiful CD from both a musical and sonic point of view. Musically, what we've done is find four previously unreleased cuts (two had been issued overseas and two had never come out anywhere). So that's revelationary and exciting.

*What is the shape of the vaults at RCA? Do they know what they have?*

They're not as organized as they could be, but they're not bad. There's degeneration on a lot of the early stuff. It's not just RCA. I'm sure this is true of any company that went back as far as the '20s, '30s and '40s. You start to see degeneration on tapes and on the other masters.

Johnny Hodges: Triple Play.

Bob Porter put this together. There's much earlier Hodges available, but this particular date sounded wonderful. We found three titles that had never come out. You've got to realize that for both *And His Mother Called Him Bill* and for *Triple Play* there were additional cuts that simply didn't fit onto the LP format. They weren't necessarily cuts that were throwaways or discarded; they just didn't fit onto the forty-somewhat minute format. But they are perfect for the CD format.

Shorty Rogers: Short Stops.

The guy was, and still is, actually, a brilliant composer and arranger. That dimension and area of the music doesn't hit the marketplace that often. I don't know for what reason, but you don't see much of this material coming out on the major labels. It features some remarkable musicians [a compendium of West coast players].

Dizzy Gillespie: Dizziest.

Here you again have seminal work. It was vital to the establishment of bebop as agreat art form. This material is among of his best, and it hasn't been available for quite some time.

The overview on all this is that most all of this material has not been available for between a decade and two decades. So it feels really good to be able to unlock the padlock on the vaults. This was where the music was made--in this country--and this is where it should be kept in place.

The Sextet Of Orchestra U.S.A.: Theatre Music Of Kurt Weill.

I'm excited about this one because anything Dolphy played well on is artistically worthy of being out on the marketplace. It's an interesting conceptual album. Michael Zwerin [author, trombonist and bass trumpeter, and the arranger of this project's selections] is a friend in Paris, but that's not why it came out. As I was taking over this position, I was in Paris, and we talked about it. I knew the album from when it was originally out, but it was only out for about a minute. I think it still holds up: real good players, the Brecht-Weill material, and Dolphy's playing make it worth having back out there on the market.

Gary Burton: Artist's Choice.

Gary recorded for RCA for a number of years, and this is a compilation for which he chose the cuts. It features a lot of really great players--Steve Lacy, Gato, Carla Bley, Jim Hall and Larry Coryell--in a lot of different settings; the most exciting, for me, is from the *Genuine Tong Funeral* period. This incorporates maybe two or three cuts from each approach Gary took with the label.

Benny Goodman: The RCA Victor Years.

This big box falls into the same category as the Ellington Blanton-Webster Band from a sonic point of view. That was in the very beginning, and I'm not happy with the transfers. The idea behind doing it was as a tribute to Benny, who had just passed away. It's treated with dignity, as far as the graphics are concerned, but, again, from a sonic point of view, it's one of the two that I'm extremely unhappy with.

The 1963 Benny Goodman Quartet Reunion: Together Again, Benny Goodman: After You've Gone, and Benny Goodman & His Orchestra:œ ”Sing, Sing. Sing.

Of the CDs here, obviously, the best sounding one is the reunion session, with Lionel, Teddy and Krupa. Sonically and musically that sounds wonderful, but we've put out the early trio and quartet sessions and the big band as well. Those have not yet been run through. We're catching up with technology as fast as we can find it.

Louis Armstrong: Pops.

This is Louis' complete studio work for RCA. From that point of view, it's a completest approach. There are things in there that musicologically might not appeal, especially from his big band years, but it shows the progression, that cut off point, where he moved into his All-Star, small-band setting.

Our October releases will include a Louis Armstrong CD of his small bands; it will also add his Town Hall concert, which was also small band oriented, and will eliminate some of the more pop oriented material that went into the big band sessions. So from a historical point of view *Pops* is a very interesting LP, but from a musical point of view the CD will be much moreinteresting.

Paul Desmond: Late Lament.

We had leased, or promised to lease, some tracks to Michael Cuscuna at Mosaic for a Desmond box that he's got in the works. We didn't want to conflict, but we did want something on Desmond. The only thing we didn't lease (most of the things we leased to Michael were quartet things) was this session with strings.

The Red Norvo Small Bands: Just A Mood.

There's some great playing on this. I don't know whether Red Norvo is close to a household word from a commercial point of view, but there's some wonderful playing of this and some great players: Ben Webster, Sweets Edison and Tal Farlow. That's a package that one can enjoy from a shearly musical point of view.

Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers: Theory Of Art.

This features some unreleased tracks and Blakey in two settings--the Messengers and the Messengers plus four. With the Messengers, I think it might be the only time that Jackie McLean and Johnny Griffin played together in Blakey's band; so the music is excellent. We've added two previously unreleased tracks in an unusual setting, which added Melba Liston [trombone] and Sahib Shihab [alto sax] and Cecil Payne [baritone sax] and Wynton Kelly [piano] to his existing band at that juncture: which was Lee Morgan, Bill Hardman, Spanky DeBrest, and Johnny Griffin.

Artie Shaw & His Orchestra: Begin The Beguine and Charlie Barnet & His Orchestra: Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie.

In choosing to go toward some elements of the early material, we stayed within the swing and big band era for our first batch [of releases]. I didn't want to expand to the really”major•, early material (that we're going to move towards now) before we had some sort of answers on a sonic level to get them to where we wanted them to be. That's the reason we've gone to just these staples from the swing era. You can see the break off point between Artie Shaw, Charlie Barnet, Glen Miller and the early Benny Goodman and the additional material which falls into the post-tape era. We've done Shaw and Barnet by compiling the best of their material in a best-of manner. It'll be interesting for us to out whether or not it's music or sound that interests CD listeners.

Lambert, Hendricks and Bavan in Live Performance: Swingin' Till The Girls Come Home.

This is compilation from three albums that they did for RCA which were all live performances. When you listen to the individual albums, they don't really hold up anymore as totalities, but when you take the best of those things and put them on CD, it turns out to be pretty exciting.

Stan Getz and Arthur Fiedler at Tanglewood: A Song After Sundown.

This was originally out for a very short time on RCA Red Seal, which is a classical label. Even though it involves the Boston Pops, and even though Jim Hall, Gary Burton,Steve Swallow and Roy Haynes don't get an awful lot of chance to stretch out, the arrangements for strings are quite interesting, particularly Alec Wilder's. They got three arrangers to come in—Wilder, David Raksin and Eddie Sauter—and their various approaches made it an interesting album. Getz plays very well above those arrangements.

J. J. Johnson And His Big Bands: Say When.

There's very interesting playing and terrific players in this setting--if you can get into a bebop or straight-ahead jazz setting. It's standard fare on a very high level. But it's good blowing and some great players, and there's not enough J. J. Johnson out on the marketplace.

The Bud Powell Trio: Time Was.

When you're dealing with Bud Powell, you're dealing with a whole other approach to the artist than when you're dealing with the next five hundred piano players. The same approach could be taken to Bud Powell as is taken with Charlie Parker or Lester Young, which is that everything they recorded is worth having out there, even though it might be not their greatest effort. We approached this album from that vantage point. But it is an interesting album, in the sense that it develops and evolves, over the two or three days of recording, to the point where, all of a sudden, something seems to click. The later stuff in the album really starts to hit the stride that Powell hit as a master.

Big corporations are nothing but individuals grouped together. Sometimes the jazz community gets the idea that they're this big, evil ogre in the sky out there. But corporations are nothing but groups of people. Sometimes they're good at what they do and sometimes they're mediocre and sometimes they're bad--the same as in any field.

For the last five or six years jazz has been in a retrenching period where a lot of people are looking back instead of looking forward, but I think that what has to happen and, I hope, will happen is that people have to start to look forward and move their music forward. A fairly subjective example of that is Henry Threadgill, who never looks back and is always moving forward. I don't see how some of the players who are a part of this neoclassicism are going to want to do that much longer. There are some wonderful musicians that have now got caught up in neo-this and neo-that.

Henry was introduced to me by Anthony Braxton. I think I had done, at that point, maybe about seven albums or so with Braxton at Arista--which is quite a feat in itself--you know, dealing with a major corporation recording music as outre as Anthony's and being able to have the continuity of doing seven, eight, nine albums. We ended up doing nine albums before it all dissolved. But Anthony introduced me to Henry and I started listening to Air, and I was blown away by them. The first two albums that we did with them were, pretty much, open ended free improvisations, and they got a good deal of critical acclaim. But when we settled in on the concept album--which was *Air Lore* that really brought it home for them. Unfortunately, it happened around 1980, and I couldn't go forward any more from there because the entire industry was purging itself of anything that was aesthetically inclined and not commercially inclined. Which we could talk about at another point or whenever you want you. Butthose cycles make a lot of difference in the timing of recording jazz, is an important variable. So we left off with *Air Lore* which ended up being the album of the year in 1980, and picked up again here . . .

The next Ellington that is planned, which we hope to have out before Christmas, is *The Black, Brown and Beige Years*, which would be 1944-1946. I just made a deal with Arista. *Air Lore* is coming out in October on CD, and Braxton's *Creative Orchestra Music* will also come out on CD. Those two can survive in their LP form as important and significant, and, at this point, classic albums.

And then we're working on additional material by John Klemmer and hopefully the Brecker Brothers, maybe Scofield then Coryell. I can tell you that the Air, Braxton and Klemmer will come out on CD in October, along with a lot of others. We just did an entire remix of Gil Evans' *There Comes a Time*, which was only out for about a minute also. It's like regime to regime and then they stop and they're not interested in jazz. And that one was mixed horribly so we've gone to the trouble to bring Gil in and we've remixed the whole thing and it sounds wonderful.

Threadgill's going to be doing a second album pretty soon. We've got a McCovitch?? album coming out in an interesting setting with Charlie Haden and Dave Holland both playing bass. The Steve Lacy project is coming out pretty soon, and then there are a couple of crossover things also. So the dimension of Novus is part of a three-prong attack that we're taking of which Bluebird is but one of the three prongs. We have Novus Blue and Novus Red. Novus Blue is our crossover material, and Novus Red is pure jazz. So it's shaping up in an interesting way, all of the artists being recorded on Novus Red--the jazz artists--have not recorded for a major label in America in a long time. Like, for instance, Moody hadn't had an album out in a decade. Hilton Ruiz has never had an album out on a major label. McCovitch not since 1979. Henry not since *Air Lore*. Steve Lacy not in twenty-five years.

Major Glenn Miller & The Army Air Force Band 1943/44:

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