

INTRODUCTION

One of the most unusual labels to be represented in the Top Pop 100 charts in recent years is the ECM label. ECM, which stands for "Editions of Contemporary Music", was established by Manfred Eicher in Munich, Germany in 1969. Eicher, a classical contrabassist, originally organized the label as an alternative to the more commercially oriented major record companies. His idea was to offer musicians a vehicle to produce music, free of any artistic constrictions or commercial demands. It is interesting to note that Manfred's approach is so unorthodox that, in most cases, written contracts do not exist. His recording deals are often based on a handshake.

In establishing the label, Manfred decided to combine the technical know-how he had acquired as a production assistant for classical product on various major labels in Germany and his love of improvisational music. His initial intention was not necessarily to start a label, but simply to make some "experimental recordings". However, 1969-70 was a time when rock music was exploding and most labels were paying little or no attention to jazz product. The first ECM release was Mal Waldron's "Free At Last", which did well enough to convince Manfred to continue. He then brought in his friend Thomas Stoewsand to help out with distribution. Gradually then, ECM began to develop a reputation for musical integrity as such well known artists as Gary Burton, Keith Jarrett, Chic Corea, Ralph Towner, John Abercrombie, and numerous others began adding to the ECM catalogue.

It is worth noting that, in addition to the musical approach, the actual technical sounds of ECM's records are also important to Manfred. Eicher personally supervises every step of production from recording to mastering and will often fly from one country to another for the best sound or remix facilities for a given product.

Warner Brothers distributes ECM in the U.S. were Robert A. Krasnow, V.P. of Talent Acquisition comments, "It is a rare privilege when one gets to work with someone as talented as Manfred Eicher and his team, including Bob Hurwitz here in the States, who are extremely professional. This is one of the most satisfying experiences in my record business career to date".

CONVERSATION WITH BOB HURWITZ

Q: I noticed that, in many cases, there are no written contracts with artists on the label. How does that work?

A: Well, there have been a couple of cases where the artists have actually asked Manfred to sign a long-term contract for their protection or just symbolically. But we've never made long term deals with our artists simply because the basis of our relationship has been trust.

Q: Give me a little bit of a feel for the structure of the company. I understand that when it started it was a one-man operation.

A: Well, it started as a one-man operation, and in essence it still is a one-man operation in terms of production and musical direction. However, when you start getting a lot of musicians you eventually start getting more responsibilities and become a little more involved in the business of selling records. So after ten years we've swelled to a staff of six or seven people.

Q: Give me a chronological breakdown of the additions to the staff.

A: Up through 1975 there were two people, Manfred and Thomas. There were no secretaries. They had a couple of assistants once in a while. Then in '75 they added a third person in their office and I started here. I don't think they had their first secretary until they were seven years as a company. Now there are five or six people there and myself and Meredith here.

Q: Please explain the distribution situation. At first the label was independent and then ECM was distributed by Polydor . . .

A: Four years after the label was started Polydor picked up the distribution. Actually, I think it was better that it happened that way. Manfred built up Europe very slowly, while in the States companies tend to be much less patient. By the time Polydor got the catalogue there were a lot of very good records that were already made and a lot that had sales that would keep Polydor's interest up . . . Many of those initial records still get as many sales a year now as they did six or seven years ago.

Q: Are those records still in the Polydor catalogue?

A: No, everything is with Warner Brothers now.

Q: Let's go back again. The label was set up in '69 and went to Polydor about four years later . . .

A: Yes, Polydor in '73 until '78. Then since June of '78 we've been with Warner Brothers. What you should remember, though, is that one of the reasons ECM has done well as it has is that Manfred and Thomas have been very careful controlling the distribution all over the world. It's not the kind of situation where we sign with one company for the world. Our European distribution is as strong to Europe as having Warner Brothers in the States. In each country it seems that there is something that the distributing company does to release ECM in a special way.

Q: What about publishing?

A: They have a publishing operation in Germany, but it is not a major part of our business.

Q: Tell me about A&R. How does that work?

A: Material comes to either this office or Munich. If I feel anything is strong enough to warrant Manfred's attention, we'll send it from here to Munich. Manfred ultimately makes the decisions in terms of A&R direction. He still produces all the records on the label. Manfred also has another person in Munich who's name is Hans Wendl. He is a production assistant to Manfred who also is involved in screening material.

Q: Is Pat Metheny's recent pop success any indication as to a change in direction or attitude for ECM?

A: The one thing that I think ties all the music together at ECM is that we have given the musicians the freedom to make the music that they've wanted to without having to follow the current fashion. Even though Pat Metheny's music has received a tremendous amount of attention, as a fusion record might get, it wasn't really a fusion record but just an extension of Pat Metheny's work. It happened to coincide with the commercial market. It may happen again, but it was not by design. All we're trying to do is make the best records possible with little to no emphasis on sales. We may not do as well on a record to record basis, but over the long run over many years, when you begin to see what the final figures show, I believe our records do much better than you would think. You see for us our catalogue never dies. We begin to really tell about a record after six months, not before, and you'd be amazed how every month we have fifteen or twenty records that just continue to sell year after year.

WHO'S WHO IN A & R AT ECM

MANFRED EICHER



Manfred, who was born and raised in Germany, began playing violin at age six. He continued on the violin until age sixteen at the Berlin Academy, when he moved to contrabass. He was also researching musicology and composition and even spent a year on the road with the Berlin Philharmonic. At the same time Eicher was developing a parallel interest in jazz. In the late fifties the phrase "jazz classicism" was coined, and this was a period that especially interested teenaged Manfred. By the early sixties he began playing the unorthodox jazz typified by the likes of Bill Evans, Paul Bey and Ornette Coleman. Meanwhile, he was working as a production assistant for several classical labels in Germany, including Deutsche Grammophon. Realizing the great disparity between the recording, pressing and production of classical as opposed to jazz albums, Manfred sought to make some "experimental recordings" to redress this problem. This, in turn, led to the formation of ECM Records.

THOMAS STOEWESAND

Thomas also grew up in Germany. An accomplished cellist, he also worked as a journalist before coming to ECM. Today he is responsible for the general business management of the company. This includes the areas of distribution, sales and tour co-ordination, among other things.

HANS WENDL

Hans works as an assistant to Manfred. In that capacity he co-ordinates all recordings, artist arrangements and is another ear for the company in screening material.

BOB HURWITZ

Bob grew up in Los Angeles where he began playing piano at the age of seven. After graduating from Berkeley as a history major, he then worked as a musical journalist for various publications before accepting a position in publicity at CBS in '72-73. Bob then met Manfred and became label manager for ECM at Polydor. The present offices were set up when ECM moved to Warner Brothers for distribution.

MERIDITH BREITBARTH

Meridith, who holds a masters in business administration, works with Bob in managing the New York operation.