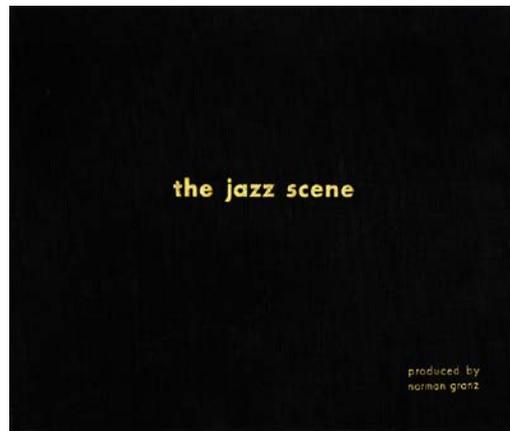


“The Jazz Scene”—Various artists (1949)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Tad Hershorn (guest post)*



Original album cover

When “The Jazz Scene” was released in 1950, Norman Granz had significantly reshaped the jazz world in his image. Jazz historian and senior “Down Beat” editor John McDonough emphatically summed up Granz’s achievements when he wrote, “Two mavericks changed the face of jazz in the 1940s. Charlie Parker changed the way it was played. Norman Granz changed the way it was sold.” By this time, Granz’s popular seasonal national tours of Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP), jam session concerts of jazz superstars, had gone on since 1945 after their debut in his hometown of Los Angeles the previous year. In 1949, Ella Fitzgerald joined JATP in what turned out to be a nearly 45-year relationship with Granz, who both managed her career and had her recording contract. Oscar Peterson began a similar long-term relationship with Granz when he joined JATP in 1950, when Granz likewise managed and recorded him over the decades. Granz also distinguished himself as an unyielding champion of racial justice, who had anti-segregation clauses in his contracts from the very beginning, and also offered top pay, travel and accommodations for those working for him.

Two years later the jazz impresario began annual tours of Europe, where JATP proved to be as popular there as it had been in the United States. In 1953, Granz and his tours and recordings on his independent labels were beginning to crest. Around 500,000 people packed his concerts worldwide, including tours of Europe and Japan, while he also produced half the jazz records in the United States. In 1956, after he got Fitzgerald’s recording contract, he consolidated his previous labels—Clef, Norgran and Down Home—in to his most famous label, Verve Records.

His concerts were juiced-up versions of the jam session, which started as behind the scenes opportunities for musicians to challenge their contemporaries and develop their styles. The “entertainment value” of the format frequently encouraged high-strung, crowd-pleasing “battles” among the musicians meant to fill the best halls in the country.

It is all the more surprising, then, that Granz took exactly the opposite direction when he produced one of his greatest recordings, “The Jazz Scene,” a compendium presenting the full spectrum of contemporary jazz. Here commercial potential was clearly secondary to the elegant presentation, and the remarkable recordings delved into the avant-garde in ways Granz would not have attempted with Jazz at the Philharmonic, which was predicated on mass popular appeal. The album is on par with his other key professional achievements of the 1940s—the nightclub jam sessions, JATP, and “Jammin’ the Blues”—in confirming his focus, energy, and growing financial resources, not to mention his originality and taste. All of these had a part in making “The Jazz Scene” a genuine happening in jazz recording that showed just how diverse his ambitions were.

Granz said in his original liner notes that “The Jazz Scene” was not intended merely to chronicle jazz’s past or predict its future. He revisited the rationale behind the project in 1989, when he said “The Jazz Scene” has been inspired by Gjon Mili. “After seeing what Mili had done on ‘Jammin’ the Blues,’ photographically, I thought it would be a good idea to put out an album that would try in some way...to give you the image and the record,” he said. “I wanted to get as representational a kind of an album as I could in terms of what was happening in jazz then.” Granz’s hopes for the participation of some artists were dashed by recording contractors that prohibited them from taking part. “I was much too small then to convince any major to do a side using their artists.”

To achieve the “distillate” of the musicians’ artistry he sought, Granz offered unlimited freedom. The artists could select any composition, arrangement and instrumentation for their performance and could take the necessary studio time within reason to produce a result that met their standards. The album’s release in December 1949 was the culmination of three years of recording on both coasts and an investment of between \$12,000 and \$30,000. Signed and numbered in a limited edition of five thousand, “The Jazz Scene” sold for an unheard-of \$25, possibly the highest price for a set of records up to that point. The price and its limited circulation further militated against the project’s commercial success. As the British jazz historian Brian Priestly points out in his notes for the 1994 reissue of “The Jazz Scene,” Granz’s expansive concept enabled him to underwrite the creation of important works that have withstood the test of time. The finished product combined the work of Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Flip Phillips, Willie Smith and Ellington’s baritone saxophonist Harry Carney (featured in a rare starring vehicle) with a newer era represented by Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and the Machito Orchestra. The project was equally driven by the contributions of six legendary arrangers: Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Ralph Burns, Neal Hefti, Mario Bauza, and the obscure but memorable George Handy, whose meteoric talents flourished and then all but disappeared in the postwar years.

Granz returned to his roots in jazz to again pair Lester Young and Nat Cole with Buddy Rich in the first season on the set, recording in April 1946 in Hollywood. Their rousing “I Want to Be Happy” recalled the casual brilliance that had distinguished Granz’s recording debut in 1942. Ralph Burns, who was among the first to hear of the project, recorded his composition, “Introspection” the following October, also in Los Angeles. “We were on some kind of vacation, and I remember Norman was some place else and offered to sublet his apartment,” Burns said later. “Introspection” emanated from that period when Burns, a onetime student at the New England Conservatory of Music, was making his name writing, arranging, and playing piano for the orchestras of Charlie Barnett, Red Norvo, and Woody Herman. The recording for Granz came about a year after Burns had left Herman’s band in 1945 to devote more time to writing and arranging. As such, Burns’s piece for a big band of 14 featured many musicians who had been in Herman’s band at the same time as Burns, including the trombonist Bill Harris, who began his periodic involvements with JATP in 1947. Burns’s band doubled in size that October day to spend no less than five hours recording George Handy’s “The Bloos.”

Handy was already nearing the end of his brief period of fame as one of the top jazz arrangers. His work had reached its peak of both quality and quantity in his collaborations with Boyd Raeburn and Dizzy Gillespie, as well as his arrangements of his own compositions and some vocal pieces. Handy supplemented standard big band instrumentation for “The Bloos” with a French horn, oboe, bassoons, a violin, and cello.

Duke Ellington’s unique identity as a bandleader and composer was acknowledged in “The Jazz Scene” by recordings of two rarely recorded compositions, “Sono” and “Frustration,” featuring baritone saxophonist Harry Carney with fellow Ellingtonians Billy Strayhorn on piano, guitarist Fred Guy, bassists Oscar Pettiford, and Sonny Greer on drums, supplemented by three violins, a viola, and cello. The results so pleased Granz that he issued both. “Duke came down and sat in

the booth, and actually supervised the session,” he said. “We worked in kind of tandem, because I didn’t do anything musically. Duke did it, I think. He was intrigued with the idea since he didn’t work with strings often, or maybe at all.” Granz was pleased to offer the spotlight to Carney, whose identity was so tightly bound with Ellington’s sax section. Ellington may have been motivated by these recordings to more fully indulge his appetite for strings in the late 1940s and 1950s. Willie Smith’s selection for the album was “Sophisticated Lady,” recorded in Hollywood in November with a group that included pianist Dodo Marmarosa, guitarist Barney Kessel, bassist Red Callender, and drummer Jo Jones. It was a tasteful if conventional treatment compared to an otherwise daring group of selections.

The December 1947 Charlie Parker date is justly celebrated as much for an encounter that fell through as for an unexpected and fortuitous collaboration that came together on the spot. Granz had booked Carnegie Hall for a recording double-header when studios all over New York were jammed in anticipation of the second recording ban in a decade that had been ordered by the American Federation of Musicians to begin on January 1, 1948. To produce two recordings simultaneously, Granz reserved the recital hall for a Parker quartet. Downstairs on the main stage, an orchestra called together by Neal Hefti was preparing to record two of his pieces, “Rhumbacito” and “Repetition.” Parker and company dashed off a composition of his, “The Bird,” in what turned out to be his longest-ever solo on a studio recording. When Parker dropped in on the Hefti session, Hefti hastily switched gears to include him on “Repetition.” By so doing, they created one of the best-remembered recordings of Parker’s career. “Norman asked me about two days before if I could come up with two other sides [in addition to ‘Rhumbacito’] for the ten-inch single,” Hefti told jazz historian Phil Schaap. The recordings got under way about 11 o’clock or midnight, in part so that Granz might snare musicians making their way from other last-minute record dates. “We had about 15 minutes left to do the other side of the proposed single, and that was ‘Repetition,’ which was just the way it was before the Charlie Parker solo... We ran it down a couple of times, and Norman came over and said, ‘Charlie is here. Can you use him? I said I hadn’t really hadn’t planned it for any kind of soloist, but if he wants to just jam over the last chorus when we reprise the melody, there’s no problem.’”

Gene Orloff, concert master for the date, recalled what happened next. “It was the most phenomenal thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “The lead sheet for him or whatever he had to blow changes on was spread out, a sheet of about ten pages, and he had it strewn out over the piano. He was like bending down, then lifting his head up as the music passed by, reading it once or twice until he memorized those changes, then proceeded to become godly.”

The original plan had called for Parker to record duets with Art Tatum. The pianist was playing at Kelly’s Stables when he got the call from Granz. “I had rented Carnegie Hall for an afternoon to record just the two of them in this enormous place. I thought it would be great to get that big sound,” he recalled. Both Parker and Tatum agreed to do the session, but Tatum was nowhere to be found at the appointed time. “Bird came in early, ready,” Granz said. “Art didn’t show. He didn’t even call. He did nothing.”

Tatum’s change of heart left Granz scrambling to find musicians to accompany Parker. “In those days in New York, you could get on the phone and get fantastic musicians on short notice, and Hank Jones came down,” Granz said. Ray Brown also got the call, and Granz begged, borrowed, or stole Shelly Manne from Hefti long enough to record “The Bird.” Afterwards, the group, minus Manne, made a few attempts at a dummerless trio but gave up when Bird’s tempos defied winging it without a driving percussions underpinning to sustain them. The missed Tatum/Parker date provided Granz with one of the few regrets of his career, but he bore no Tatum ill will. “I accepted that [his decision to skip the date] because I respect genius. And if he did things which were maybe out of the norm, it was a price I was glad to pay. I never even asked him about it.”

The next recording for “The Jazz Scene” was the unreleased remake of Mario Bauza’s “Tanga” with Machito’s Afro-Cubans from December 20, 1948, in which Flip Phillips, who had soloed on “No Noise, Part I,” had the lead role.

In the midst of a project that gave prominence to composers and arrangers, Coleman Hawkins’s unaccompanied solo “Picasso” roared like a lion in its solitary majesty in a piece notable for its lack of easily discernible harmonic, rhythmic, or tonal themes. John Chilton, the saxophonist’s biographer, hailed Hawkins’s conception of “Picasso” as “revolutionary,” and the results as “positively *avant garde*.” According to Gunther Schuller, Hawkins influenced a new generation of saxophonists, notably Sonny Rollins, with his triumph as “a solitary soloist sans accompaniment of any kind, on a single-note instrument... ‘Picasso’ is one of his most visionary and personal, though also thorny, expressions.” Hawkins tried to diminish the effort it took to record this difficult number by saying afterward that he had come up with the idea for “Picasso” that morning. Granz and Hawkins had painstakingly worked out the construction of the piece on a piano for about two hours and then spent another two trying unsuccessfully to record a satisfactory take. They reconvened in the studio about a month later, and Hawkins went through another four-hour lead-up to the recording of a masterpiece.

The final number recorded for “The Jazz Scene,” a sparking version of “Cherokee” by a Bud Powell trio with Ray Brown and Max Roach, dates from January or February 1949. The perfection of the recording was like a brief glimmer of light breaking between two dark clouds. Powell had been hospitalized for mental problems for about a year beginning in November 1947 and was readmitted in early 1949 for two to three months shortly after these recordings were made. Later still he would record for two years for Granz and Blue Note.

What “Down Beat” writer Mike Levin heralded as Granz’s “slightly delayed love child” was issued as twelve selections on twelve-inch 78s in packaging befitting classical recordings. The albums prefigured deluxe box sets of today in that the packaging itself was a work of art. The records came in sleeves enclosed in a black cloth notebook with the title displayed in simple gold-leaf lettering at the center and with Granz’s name in the lower right corner. The package also featured a panoramic drawing by David Stone Martin of a lone trumpeter practicing in his room lit by a naked bulb and strewn with empty chairs, instruments, and cases, with a sultry ingénue sprawled out on the bed. Accompanying Gjon Mili photographs showed musicians who were represented in the recordings and others who were not but whom Granz still considered to be leading figures. The portfolio, entitled “And This, Too, Is the Jazz Scene,” displayed photographs of Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge, Dicky Wells, Ella Fitzgerald, Gene Krupa, Teddy Wilson and Benny Goodman, Harry Edison and Illinois Jacquet, Stan Kenton, Mary Lou Williams, Count Basie, Art Tatum, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie, John Simmons, and Billie Holiday. Granz saw “The Jazz Scene” as the prototype for an annual review of jazz. Rather than meeting that lofty goal, the album is striking as a showcase for Granz’s visual and musical aesthetics of production and as a work of art commensurate with the music making. Numerous projects to come would be similarly ambitious.

Tad Hershorn is a project archivist at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers and the author of “Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice” (University of California Press, 2011), from which this excerpt is taken.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.