

Manfred Eicher Interview, 23 May 1999

Q: You are a young man, aged 26 and it's 1969 — what was your thinking and what was your motivation in forming your own record company

ME: Well actually it was an excellent — I was always interested in recording and sound at the same time I played bass for with various jazz ensembles as well as with classical kind of orchestra situations and chamber music, and in '68 I got to know the owner of a hi-fi store in Munich which was very interested in selling jazz through mail order services and his name was Mr. Ikka who once asked me why I had haven't done a jazz recording so far, I said because I have no money to start anything like that, and he said if I give you 16,000DM would you be able to do a record with it, I said let me think about it, and a few weeks later I came back with this idea and decided to do a recording with Mal Waldron, who was living in Munich at the time, who had a trio, so we did a recording in Stuttgart and it was titled *Free At Last*. This recording I played for a Japanese agent who seemed to like the tape but wasn't a music expert but an agent, very often you meet agents who are not either experts nor music lovers, they just try and sell tapes, but he did approach a person in Japan, who did know actually about music, he liked very much the tape and he responded, we realised with this advance money we received from Japan we could also start a company so we did start ECM

Q: From the beginning you had very specific ideas about sound and packaging and this is a hallmark of the label and I think it is fair to say that up until that point jazz hadn't been particularly well recorded had it

ME: I don't know, I would say there were some great recording around when you think of Miles Davis and a lot of credit goes to Teo Macero who did I think a wonderful job with the sound picture there, and there was other recordings that sound quite impressive to me. However, I was trained as chamber music and a lot of experience in listening to music and talking to

various people about sound I thought let's do something what I consider an approach to use my experience as recording chamber music, or playing chamber music, in the field of improvised music as well. It wasn't an idea to make something different necessarily, it was an idea to do it precisely and with respect to the music that we were going to record. So we started something that I would say was a very personal approach towards sound, with the aid of a wonderful engineer at the time Martin Wieland from Stuttgart, and so we developed something together which became later on an identity, but at the very beginning we didn't have a concrete idea what this kind of sound should be, it was the music that more or less set the idea of sound, we had to capture the sound of the musicians and not impose a sound of the musicians and we would be happy, you know, it was the music we were happy with and recorded as good as we could

Q: When I got my first ECM, it was the premium quality vinyl, everything was done to the highest standards, how did you evolve this approach

ME: Well since I was very much involved with classical recordings at the time, before I started ECM, I was naturally approaching the possibility to press with Deutsche Grammophon. At that time DG had the best pressing plant, the best vinyl, the best editing situation, so I went there and they gave us the chance to work in this area with them and the result was a better pressing than other people had — the care that came before the pressing had to do with mastering ideas and remixing, because after we made *Free At Last* with Mal Waldron, which was our own recording, I got a tape from Paul Bley which was an old recording he made in New York in not such a great studio but I went with the two-track tape into our studio and tried to get some kind of sculpture in sound into this tape which at the beginning it didn't have, and fortunately we succeeded and the recording which came out in the beginning of the Seventies called *Paul Bley with Gary Peacock* got very good reviews, among others the *Melody Maker* and Richard Williams was writing about this record — it was a time was Richard Williams in the *Melody Maker* he had a very strong voice and everybody read this paper at that time and Richard Williams was one of the sensitive listeners to our records and it helped a lot to get our records around. But the approach towards quality was something that I felt was respect to

the music necessary and we succeeded in getting the best quality possible at that time, from the pressing, from the material we got into the vinyl and all those kinds of things. There was a time later on when vinyl shortage made a big mess in the recording industry and a lot of people had to suffer from horrible kind of material, that was through the oil shortage going around the world and sometimes you felt you had sand in your records rather than vinyl

Q: And the other component part in ECM is the design, how did you formulate your approach to that?

ME: As a passionate movie goer and a person who was always interested in photography and art per se, I also had friends in the arts fields and I had a close friend, his name was Buchold Wojirsch, who was a dear friend from my school years. He was a graphic artist, I asked him first whether we could collaborate, and his wife joined us in this kind of idea, and later on she and myself developed an idea to go to a certain kind of cover design that wasn't so much "a design" but something we liked for our ourselves — the look of it. We tried a different approach, it was not to make it "different" from the others, it was different because we felt we wanted to be more austere, sparse, and maybe a little bit more clear to the direction of how music could be enveloped. The idea of the envelope of the given, to give to the public something that very often was a counterpoint to the musical content or counterpoint to the counterpoint – whatever that means –but it was never the idea to illustrate something that was in the music

Q: In a sense it remains an aesthetic entry point into the music

ME: Yes, but we talk about recordings, this is the most important thing and the envelope is only the envelope of the given, but its not the thing itself, if you at first listen to the music and if you enjoy the covers that's fine but after all, its supportive to the music.

Q: Gradually these aspects coalesced until you had a very specific brand image over the years, did you find yourself working towards this or did it evolve

ME: I believe I can say that we did not work on any image or design or architecture that we wanted to be different or special or whatever, when it happened it was a matter of taste, Barbara Wojirsch and myself and later Dieter Rehm joined the trio. I feel that too much is interpreted in this area it was a matter intuition personal preferences and maybe you could call it also an instinct for the things to come, but not to be different because it was something we would like to do in our own taste and don't react to so-called trends, we don't react to the outside, we do it the way we feel it, lets see how it goes, and in retrospect it didn't go so bad

Q: Let's talk about the music, when you came to record *Afric Pepperbird*, ECM 1007, this was a line in the sand marking a different approach, European approach to jazz than we might associate with a so-called "American" jazz recording

ME: You are talking about a recording with Jan Garbarek, Arild Anderson, Terje Rypdal and Jon Christensen. This was done in 1970 in Oslo and it is indeed one of the remarkable recordings I was able to do with musicians I had just met before in Bologna, and with a sound engineer who was at that time was a beginner, like myself [Jan Erik Kongshaug]. And we did it in a studio night session and I think the music and the sound is quite refreshing and I would even say remarkable for that time, but it happened gradually during the process of making this recording, and again when things fear motions, like in music the motion is travelling towards some desirable kind of goal – achievement – then it flies. And this session was one of these sessions when things did go remarkably well, when we decided to go into the studio, because we tried another studio before which was too remote to record the music precisely and lucid enough, so we decided after two hours that's not the place really, we started in an art museum outside of Oslo that Jan [Garbarek] recommended because they had some good experiences with concerts and then in the middle of the night we felt that's not the place and we called the studio which was called the Arne Bengt studio in Oslo and Jan Erik was there and the next night we started and so it happened, and since then I started to record the Norwegian and the Scandinavian projects with Jan Erik and a lot of other projects in Stuttgart where we did more, lets say music that is directed towards, or comes from the free jazz area, like Art Ensemble of

Chicago, a lot of free music ideas with Don Cherry and Cadonna, so I make this distinction between Oslo and Stuttgart and New York, although in a directional idea to have different sounds for different various projects, because I didn't want it uniform and from the very beginning I explicitly decided to work with different engineers although not to become routined into cliches that makes music part of sound, I want it to be the sound part of the music.

Q: As the label developed you were never concerned whether anything is commercial, you've always followed your own instincts

ME: I followed what I believed I'd like to record and make sense for us to have it, and it's true, it's too blatant to think you can foresee see what will sell and what will not sell and I don't know if this can ever be my judgement. My judgement is whether I like something or whether I don't like it, or sometimes I'm getting to like something during the process of making a recording, sometimes I'm not 100% sure whether it's good for us to do it, but I try it anyway and this kind of risk implied makes life of a producer challenging and interesting, it would be terribly boring if you could foresee all the minor and less good or interesting experiences, its something you have to try and all the successful recordings that are made by ECM now in this years we are talking about could not be foreseen as successful, they just became successful because they touched people with the idea of the musicians, the sound, with whatever, maybe the packaging helped as well, its an experience you can't really analyse, you can only recognise.

Q: Nevertheless there were successful records that helped you establish the company, for example catalogue ECM 1022...

ME: 1022, that's Return to Forever, *Return to Forever*, it's the first recording Chick Corea did, we did it on a very limited money budget for ECM in New York in a day, and then mixed the record, Chick Corea and I mixed the album it in Stuttgart, and it indeed became a very successful record, but you have to see it like this, until this record and until *Piano Improvisation No. 1* [ECM 104] and until [Keith Jarrett's] *Bremen/Lucerne* [ECM1035-37]

ECM's records were not selling in big quantities, but also *Return to Forever* did not sell in such incredible quantities at the very beginning, in all the years it sold very well, but it was not until 1975 when we were already six years in business, when we had the big success with the *Koln Concert* [ECM1064-65], so one cannot really say we had to have this record to build up the company or the catalogue, the catalogue was built up with *Free At Last* and so it started and so it continued, and with the *Koln Concert* and then people started to find out about *Bremen/Lucerne*, about *Facing You* [ECM 1017] and the solo records of Keith Jarrett, and started to buy them and started to become aware that ECM is doing something different in this area, but there are a lot recordings that just have a high musical quality that were not recognised at the time they were released, but later on in time people found out about these recordings and so there are many recordings that help to do what we do right now and make us independent

Q: With the *Koln Concert*, I have spoken to Keith Jarrett about it and he said practically everything was against it, he didn't feel very well at the time, the piano he wasn't entirely satisfied with...

ME: Oh, he was not liking the piano at all because we ordered a Steinway Grand, but the day the concert there was a strike in the supply company so the special piano that we rented for this occasion in the opera was not arriving so he had to play with the piano of the common pit. In the afternoon he really felt like not doing the concert, and we made some soundcheck and we played him the tape and he didn't like the piano and anyway, he decided at the end to do it, and I think he was just incredible that night, he just played, forget the piano and played something he has never played before and never played again afterwards in the same kind of line and archetype, so after the recording we played because at that time we were driving to Germany for various concerts in a small R4 Renault which I had at that time and drove and we played this tape over and over in the car and we felt there was something really special happening, but we were kind of irritated by the sound and so he said let's go in the studio and I did go in the studio months later and worked for three or four days on the given tape and the result was actually quite remarkable despite the piano, the tuning of the piano can never be retuned in a mixing session, however, it seems this was speaking to a lot of people and to a lot

of famous sound engineers and this record won many awards – curiously enough also for the sound, and sometimes it's a surprise to me why – but anyway, it did have some miraculous kind of quality otherwise it would not reach more than 3 million people, and it's a kind of a nice surprise but its an interesting story behind this record, yes!

Q: I read somewhere it gave you the financial security to develop the company the way you wanted it

ME: I wonder. Of course in thirty years it has sold 3 millions, but I think it is a cliché it gave us the financial security – it can be said a high percentage of our income went to Keith Jarrett, because we are known to pay royalties to musicians and as I said before, this record helped us to be generous to other artists that had no international profile yet but were great musicians so we take the risk to record them, but it wasn't the only one, as I said before, there are so many other records that helped to make our records and our company to survive.

Q: What interests me is that when people are getting into the label for the first time, they like one artist and they might find this artist has recorded with someone else, it's like a road map of discovery, you were responsible for putting Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek together in the European Quartet

ME: The Belonging Quartet, yes. There are many other artists that joined Jan because of this kind of encounter, I think the recording with Ralph Towner *Solstice* which to me is a classic recording in the early ECM days, with Ralph Towner, Eberhard Weber, Jon Christensen, Jan Garbarek, then you can recall the recording with Egberto Gismonti and Charlie Haden, *Folk Songs*, these recordings were based on a high risk, whether it would work or not, we had to take the risk, and in the case of Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek the affinity towards each other was there from recordings, they had heard of each other of course, still the other people had to fit in the band, it was Jon Christensen and Palle Danielson, and so we tried and in this case we did two studio recordings and a wonderful first live recording in the Village Vanguard, and later on we released a record from Japan which is called *Personal Mountains*. I think this band

was incredibly influential as far as a lot of musicians in America and I do not regret that I did take the risk to make the attempt to bring these musicians together

Q: Indeed, and hearing a favourite artist in a different context also pushes the listener in different directions, they like one artist and perhaps have never heard of another artist

ME: I don't want to push people in different directions, I offer people a different approach to different cultures, and sometimes I have the feeling certain musicians would be great interactive partners in musical language and then we discuss it with musicians and then say lets try this and so very often seemingly natural or seemingly awkward combination vice versa, sometimes has a very good or a very bad result, I don't know. This kind of thing you have to try and then you see, and you either release it or you don't

Q: I think one of the challenges for a musician is creating an effective context

ME: Very important and very often they get challenged by different ideas and arrive at a very different territory, because someone else guided them into a different place, so they become beyond their expectation, musicians that they have not played with before and if you get into this experience more often you arrive at a different musical scale, a different kind of musical artistry and you become just suddenly, your speech becomes refined and different, and I do feel that happened with recordings and I guess that the musicians admit this as well

Q: Lets talk about a few major figures you had a role in developing, Pat Metheny is maybe one

ME: I think he was a really quite remarkable artist when he was starting with ECM, we did a recording with Jaco Pastorius and Bob Moses, *Bright Size Life*, it was in the beginning, that was an offer to him when I heard him with Gary Burton as a second guitar player when he played with Mick Goodrick in a the band with Gary Burton, so I realised this was a very significant talent that I would like to ask to do a record for us, and so we did and we started and we made some very good recordings, I think and later on he felt he had to go and continue with a

larger label because he needed probably different, or better distribution, whatever that means, however he did decide to leave ECM and then went to Geffen records and from there he made recordings with Ornette Coleman and some interesting and some less interesting records, still I'm proud of the records we made in the early time of Pat Metheny

Q: With Jan Garbarek and other European musicians there is a "European sound", can we talk about this

ME: That's true, I wouldn't think so much about the sound, I think about the cultural difference, even though they were influenced by a lot of American musicians and one could see the influence of Coltrane, Archie Shepp, and Albert Ayler on early recordings of Jan Garbarek's, he very often says this in interviews, so it wasn't such a European approach but with more musicians in the context like Edvard Vesala, Arild Andersen, Terje Rypdal there was a kind of European "speech" in the time to come available which was somehow obviously an idea that could be something else, that the American mainstream that was coming across, and it's not so much the American or European sound, I think it's much more the content, the idea of fluctuating sounds or ideas or ideas what kind of harmonies to choose, that had to do with the surroundings, that was an urban effect, and I would put so much emphasis on the European sound, I just think people live at that time in Scandinavia, and Scandinavia was open to a lot of influences, also great ones from England and America, but somehow the musicians understood the solitude and probably they lived in solitude sometimes in these areas and they understood transparency and clarity and somehow formulated a certain kind of approach towards music that was entirely different to an American musician living in New York would do. But that had to do with the sociological context and whatever, it is clear that ECM is a European company and my kind of cultural experience – whatever that means – that's where I'm coming from, it was my approach to music I didn't try to imitate what American producers did probably much better in their field

Q: There's a comment here I just like to finish, and this from Jack deJohnette who says, 'I think Manfred had no idea that some 600 productions later that ECM would have carved out such a unique niche in the history of contemporary music'

ME: Certainly we had no idea when we did *Free At Last* because that was the beginning but I realised later, of course, that we had some influence because we did introduce some major musicians from that time in improvised music and jazz, as well as in classical music or new music, and I realised that this value of this achievement of the artist has a meaning but I realised it after record 32 or 22, I don't remember anymore, but it didn't need 600 records to realise there is some kind of significance in this music.

Q: You're still forging ahead, the catalogue is some 700 strong now

ME: Yes

Q: And you're still as enthusiastic as ever

ME: Well, I would say it is music, the music that drives me to what I am doing and I love music and that's what I can say, that's the thing that makes me go on, it's probably like bread and water to me.

Q: Thank you!