

A Conversation with Bruce Lundvall

“A Conversation with Bruce Lundvall”, president and CEO of EMI Jazz & Classics (which includes the historic Blue Note Records), took place in front of an enthusiastic audience on the Vanderbilt campus on Thursday, September 30, 2004. During the event Lundvall spoke with Curb Center director Bill Ivey about his illustrious career, signing Norah Jones and other artists, and the changing nature of the recording industry.

Ivey: Columbia Records has a heritage that goes back to the 19th century. What was Columbia like when you arrived in the early 1960s?

Lundvall: Camelot. It was Columbia Records, but for me it was it was also “Columbia University,” where I learned everything. Goddard Lieberson, who was the president of Columbia at that time, was the most enlightened man I’ve ever worked under. He was a composer, and he conducted the company as though it was a symphony orchestra. He was an amazing man...he let us know that we had a responsibility for the business because we were a part of CBS, and we had a responsibility to a certain art form called music, and if you get the music right the business comes right. He was so correct about that. And that has been kind of a guiding principal to me from that day.

[Lieberson] said if you are going to be involved in any area of music, reach for the highest level of excellence. So in country music we had Johnny Cash, we had Johnny Horton, we had Marty Robbins; in classical music we had Vladimir Horowitz and Leonard Bernstein... and in jazz we had Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Dave Brubeck. And in contemporary and pop music -- in those days it was called the road music-- we had Johnny Mathis, Percy Faith and Andy Williams. In rock-and-roll --the company was somewhat late getting into it--we had Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel. Lieberson put out a welcome mat for all the artists, and they felt very much at home; it wasn’t like it was a huge bureaucratic corporation. They felt that they were in a very, very creative environment. And not only that: he also hired some of the most enlightened creative people on staff, which was very inspiring.

Ivey: Norah Jones - I’d be curious and I’d bet folks in this room would be curious about what you heard that separated her out from the dozens if not hundreds of artists you’ve heard?

Lundvall: I’ll tell you, it was this: she got signed because I returned a phone call.

A lot of people in our business think they are too damn important to return everybody's calls. I try to return all my calls, and one day I got a call from an accountant in our royalty accounting department. "Oh my God," I said, "maybe we have a royalty problem." I picked up the phone and returned the call. She said, "This is Cheryl White in royalty accounting." I've never met this woman before.

"Well, what's the issue?" I said. "Do we have a problem with payments or something?" She said, "No, no, no. I have this wonderful young jazz singer I want you to hear." I said okay, fine. I told her to send me something to listen to. She said "No, I want to bring her in." I told her to come in on Friday at the end of the day because the phones wouldn't be ringing, and we'd have a chance to hear her. She said great.

I was expecting another Diana Krall sound -alike and look- alike, because lots of buxom blonde piano singers had been in, one after the other-- all quite mediocre, frankly—and they all said, "You know, I happen to be the next Diana Krall." I'm not ever looking for the next anyone; I'd like to hear the first somebody, you know?

So on Friday Norah comes in, a little shy girl with dark hair and glasses and jeans --she was terribly shy. I asked her where she was from, and she said, "Well, from Texas --I was born in New York but I've lived in Texas and now I'm back in New York doing some gigs downtown, some pop gigs and some jazz gigs." She went to North Texas State, where she was a jazz, vocal and piano major.

And I said, "Well, do you have something that I can hear?" She said "I have three songs on a CD." So this is the first song that I heard and I stopped the machine after I heard it.... It's a standard by Tommy Wolf and was written in the 1950's and this is it:
(Music plays and song starts) ...

Once I was a sentimental thing,
Threw my heart away each Spring;
Now a Spring romance hasn't got a chance
Promised my first dance to Winter;
All I've got to show's a splinter for my little fling!

Spring this year has got me feeling like a horse
that never left the post;
I lie in my room staring up at the ceiling,
Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most.....

Lundvall: Well, I was absolutely stunned. It was always one of my favorite obscure standards, and I said "God, how old are you? How do you know this song?"

She said, “Well, I’m 21.” I said, “Do you know who plays piano on that?” She said, “I do – it’s me.” I said, “You are on Blue Note.” Simple as that, one song. I said, “I want to sign you to Blue Note and you have to get a lawyer, of course and do a contract properly, but I’m committed already; I don’t have to hear another thing.”

....And it was like, well, what is the record going to be? You know, she decided on the songs and they were all from the demo--almost every one was on the first record and wow, the rest is history. We are now at 19 million records worldwide which is pretty extraordinary.

Ivey: The A & R function, where genius supposedly connects with a record company- that is, where it gets spotted and nurtured and moved along- you’ve said your observation is that there is a kind of A & R crisis. Do you think it is harder for genius to navigate the system, or if there is a crisis, what do you think is causing it?

Lundvall: I think it is harder for these kinds of artists to be recognized. Arif Mardin [producer and head of Manhattan label] was sitting in an analyst meeting with an A & R head from a very major label, and the man said, “My God, if I had brought that artist to my boss I would have been fired.” Well, how do you like that? It’s flavor of the minute-- let’s get somebody that sounds like somebody else. I’ve heard that all so often-- what does the artist sound like? “Sounds like Joni Mitchell meets Laura Nyro, meets....” I don’t want to hear that artist at all. If the artist doesn’t sound like an original artist, what’s the point? Give me someone that doesn’t sound like anybody else. That is not a popular notion in the A & R departments today.

There’s a young man who is a talent scout.... I asked him how he did it. He said, “I listen to demos everyday, hundreds of them. I only bring in the things that I think are really good, and when I bring them in this is what I’m asked, before I can play a note of music: what is the demographic of the audience, what is the area of radio, the point out of radio for this?” I said and then what? “Well,” he said, “then they say ‘Leave this with me and I’ll listen to it later.’ And I never hear back.”

That is not the way to sign artists at all. You don’t start with the marketing. You sign an artist that is unique, then you have to figure out the marketing after that. And that is always the answer-- it has never changed and it never will change, I don’t believe.