



► Newvelle's highly collectible first-season releases

## Very Important Vinyl

WITH ITS LP SUBSCRIPTION PLAN, **NEWVELLE RECORDS** OFFERS A POSH TAKE ON MUSIC-BUYING THAT SERVES CONSUMER AND ARTIST ALIKE

By Brent Butterworth

Even in the best of times, the jazz recording business was, as Duke Ellington termed it, a “money jungle.” Today, when the low royalties paid by streaming services can’t compensate for the sharp reduction in overall sales of physical and digital media, finding money in that jungle may seem impossible. “I haven’t profited from my recordings; they’re really just a fancy business card,” saxophonist Noah Preminger told me, invoking a metaphor used by many musicians.

Last year, jazz pianist Elan Mehler and computer-industry executive Jean-Christophe Morisseau teamed up to launch a new record label with a fresh approach to the business of recording and packaging jazz. You won’t find Newvelle Records on any streaming service. Their recordings are available only on vinyl, and only through yearlong subscription programs. Newvelle produces six records per year, and releases one every two months. At the end of the year, the subscriber receives a box to hold the set. Only 500

copies of each record are pressed.

“The music industry in general is not particularly sustainable,” Mehler said. “To make money with streaming services you have to be listened to by millions of people, and jazz musicians are not. CDs are really dying, so it’s either digital or vinyl, and with vinyl we can charge a higher premium.”

### The Price of Perfection

Subscriptions to Newvelle Records don’t come cheap. The first year’s collection (still available) is priced at \$400, and a subscription to year two costs \$360. But these aren’t just any records. They’re released on clear 180-gram vinyl, 50-percent thicker than standard records and thus less likely to warp. They come in heavy gatefold sleeves adorned with dramatic artwork and brief works of literature. The first year boasted images from French photographer Bernard Plossu and poems by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet (and recently elected U.S. Poet Laureate) Tracy K. Smith. Year two features photos by French collective Tendance Floue, and will include a short

story by novelist Douglas Kennedy on a seventh album at no additional charge, with music based on the story.

Newvelle’s recording process is just as unusual. “Labels tend to cut a lot of corners,” said Mehler, who has released four albums under his own name on other labels. “You may get four or six hours to make a record, or the artist does it themselves and licenses it to the label. We give our artists 20 hours in the studio, and more if they need it. Having two days to record makes the first day sound better, because the artists are more relaxed. And on the second day you can try tunes you haven’t played much, and maybe bring other people in.”

The albums are recorded by engineer Marc Urselli at Manhattan’s EastSide Sound. They’re recorded and mixed using Urselli’s collection of vintage analog equipment, then converted to digital at a minimum (and much better than CD-quality) resolution of 24-bit/88.2 kilohertz for editing in Pro Tools. Mastering for vinyl is done by engineer Alex De-Turk at Masterdisk in upstate New York,

COURTESY OF NEWVELLE RECORDS

and the albums are pressed and shipped by MPO in France.

Most audiophile-focused jazz records have a natural, spacious sound intended to reproduce the ambience of the recording venue, but I'd describe the Newvelle sound as more of an updated version of Rudy Van Gelder's classic sides for Blue Note and Prestige. The records have that same focused, intimate feel of Van Gelder's best work, but with a more modern mix (i.e., no instruments panned hard left or right) and additional sonic detail.

### Nice Work If You Can Get It

The premium price the records command allows Newvelle to not only cover the recording, mastering, pressing and artwork, but also to pay the artist directly for the recording session. "I got paid to do an

album!" enthused Preminger, whose *Some Other Time* was one of Newvelle's first-year releases. "I'm 31 and never reaped the benefit of labels taking care of jazz musicians; that basically ended in the mid-'90s. Elan let me do an all-ballads project that I always wanted to do, and let me assemble a group I really loved [including bassist John Patitucci and drummer Billy Hart as well as guitarist Ben Monder, a frequent Preminger collaborator]." For Newvelle's third year, he's planning another dream project, titled *Preminger Plays Preminger*, where he focuses on music from films directed by Otto Preminger, a distant relative.

The projects and artists recorded by Newvelle are chosen by Mehler with a focus on "melodically driven music. I will happily listen to 12-minute solos in

live shows, but I don't think that's the best thing to put on record. This is about storytelling," he said, adding, "Usually I ask the artist if they have a project they'd like to do that's somewhat to the left of what they typically do." Other Newvelle releases have included drummer Jack DeJohnette's first solo-piano album as well as works by Patitucci, bassists Ben Allison and Rufus Reid, pianist Frank Kimbrough and a duo featuring pianist Kevin Hays and guitarist Lionel Loueke.

According to Mehler, artist response has been enthusiastic. "Everybody we've reached out to says yes," he said. "It's still not clear whether this works. I think it does, but no one knows what's really coming in the music biz. We need as many ideas as possible out there to find the resources for musicians to make records." **JT**

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