"When I started out being a president of a record company, I was totally unprepared for it," laughs DON WAS, reflecting on the first few days of his reign as boss of Blue Note, the iconic jazz label that German-Jewish émigrés Alfred Lion, Max Margulis and Emmanuel Eisenberg founded in New York City in 1939. Was, now 62, is sitting in Universal's UK headquarters decked out in Bohemian-like attire (including flip-flops and a wide-brimmed hat nestled on his dreadlocks) and doesn't resemble what most people envisage a record company boss to look like. He took over the reins of the company when it became part of the Universal group in 2012 and confesses, with a wry chuckle, that initially he found his transformation from band leader/hit-maker and Grammy-winning record producer to label president a challenging one. "I had no idea what the fuck I was doing," he explains with an amiable and disarming candour.

Of course, there were some doubters and naysayers who questioned Was's credentials and even his qualifications to be at the helm of a prescient and historically-significant record label that had released groundbreaking jazz records by Thelonious Monk, Clifford Brown, Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers, John Coltrane, Horace Silver, Hank Mobley and myriad others in three fertile decades that were represented by the '40s, '50s and '60s. After all, Was's CV didn't appear to have many jazz associations. Born in Detroit, Was rose to fame as a bass player and songwriter who tasted international chart success in the '80s and '90s with the pop-soul-funk aggregation, Was Not Was, before moving into the realm of record production and helming albums for rock giants such as the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Ringo Starr and Bonnie Raitt (soul fans might recall Was's work with Solomon Burke, Al Green, and more recently, Aaron Neville).
But what many people didn't know was that Don Was fell in love with jazz as adolescent and has been a serious jazz head ever since. In a rare interview, the award-winning producer-turned-record company chief reflects on Blue Note's history, his current role, the label's future and other fascinating aspects of his successful career....

What circumstances led you to become the head of Blue Note?

I was in New York producing a record, man, and it had nothing to do with jazz. It was a John Maher record. I had a night off and went to go see Gregory Porter. I bought his first album which was on a little label called Motemo, a great jazz label out of Harlem, and I just thought that he was an incredible artist. I'd never heard or seen him live but that night I went to see him it was the greatest thing I had seen in ten years. So I sat there for three sets, ate ribs and drank coffee. It was a great night and the next morning I was sat with a friend, an old buddy of mine named Dan McCarroll, who was the president of Capitol Records. We were just talking about other shit but as we got up to leave the restaurant I said: "by the way, is Blue Note Records still part of Capitol, because if it is you should sign this guy Gregory Porter, I saw him last night." And unbeknownst to me, there were big discussions going on EMI about closing down Blue Note as a new music entity altogether and just making it a website that sold catalogue and T-shirts. Dan was not a proponent of that approach so I just happened to come along with a constructive idea on the right day and he offered me the gig. (Laughs)
How did that feel?

Well, to be honest with you I always viewed record companies with tremendous suspicion and they were kind of the enemy and I kept them at arms length. I never wanted to work period. I never wanted a fucking job, you know. That was my goal and I was almost there, I was 59 and I was almost home free without having to get a real job but it was irresistible, the idea of being part of that legacy and being the caretaker the legacy. I was charged with identifying the underlying aesthetic and finding that in the music.

How healthy do you feel the label is right now?

Right now the label is particularly robust. We have some incredible guys, who each has their own way of pushing jazz forward. I just wrote out the active roster and right now, for 2015, our active roster is Wayne Shorter, Bobby Hutcherson - we just signed Charles Lloyd as well - Ambrose Akinmusire, Ravi Coltrane, Gregory Porter, Terence Blanchard, Joe Lovano, Robert Glasper, Jason Moran, Derek Hodge, Chris Dave, José James, Lionel Loueke, the Brian Blade Fellowship, Tukoya Kuroda, Otis Brown III. We've also got Marcus Miller through the French company (Dreyfus) and we've released Jamie Cullum's new album in the US. We've also been doing other Impulse! releases coming out of France: Charlie Hayden and Jim Hall, Dave Holland and Kenny Barron, Steve Burnside, and we've just about started signing Marcus Strickland and Kendrick Scott. Dr Lonnie Smith is doing a new album for his and Kenny Burrell is gong to do 'Midnight Blue Part Two.' So it's really vibrant, the company. I don't know that there's been such a strong active roster at any time in the label's history.

So what's your agenda?

To be honest with you, it's pretty simple: to allow these great musicians to make the records that they want to make and to keep the music going. Not to let it get shut down. Jazz record sales are not what they used to be. No record sales are not what they used to be and it's possible that record sales won't even support the making of a record. We just have to be creative about how we fund it. My gig is to make sure that everyone's got the bread to keep going.
I was reading about a new initiative that you've got with Artist Share...

Yeah, that's one thing. We've done two records so far through them, the Blue Note/Artist Share, with Fabian Almazan, who's a young piano player. He got to make his first record ('Rhizome') that way and then we kicked in and helped him with some marketing on it. And his next one will be on Blue Note. There's also John Cowherd, who plays with the Brian Blade Fellowship. He's done a record with them ('Mercy'). So yeah, we're trying all kinds of different things and so far it's working. We're able to make these records. The other thing is we've got to figure out how to bring the cost of making records down.

Do you see the CD as a dying format/market now? Vinyl sales in the UK are set to hit 1 million this year...

Vinyl sales are great, it's really amazing. We've pressed maybe 1500 of each of classic Blue Note titles. We're doing a 100 vinyl reissues, 100 albums, between now and November of 2015. And then we'll start the second hundred (laughs). They're all selling out. It's not really shocking. It's a nice surprise but it doesn't shock me because it's such a great way to listen to music. I love playing vinyl. It sounds great. There's something about holding a 12-inch album and in seeing the thing physically spin. I find myself sitting around like my kids watching it. It's like having a campfire and people pay attention. And there's something about a 15/17 minute side that's properly programmed. Everybody's got time to listen to that. It's tough to listen to seventy-two minutes of music.

Blue Note has recently moved into the realm of hi-res and HD recordings...

As soon I came to Blue Note there was a call to remaster everything in hi-res. It had never been done. There had been good mastering done but never in the hi-res formats and you can't just give them at 48 KHz and say bump it up to 192. You've got to go back and do it again. So we put the tapes up and they sound amazing.

Do they sound radically different from the original records?
Well, here's the thing. We got into a very interesting philosophical dialogue about how to treat this because it is different. When I pulled the un-mastered master tapes they didn't quite feel like the versions I knew. This whole idea of improving something is highly subjective and it's really not my place to do that. It's my place to represent the original intentions of the artist and Alfred Lion and then (engineer) Rudy van Gelder. I kind of figured that the first edition vinyl represented the definitive mixes so we've gotten the first edition vinyl of every one of these (of all the albums that they intend to reissue on vinyl) and listened to them. The thing about vinyl, it brings the back of the mix a little closer and it makes the room smaller - the imaginary room, right? - but it does some other, really good things. So the idea was to extract the really good things and to get the feeling of it right. The compression, for example, adds power to the drums. Art Blakey sounds like he's been pumping iron and is even stronger and so the idea is to match that feeling but to take advantage of the transparency of 192 (KHz). We went around in circles for months trying to land on an MO for how to do this and then we finally got it. So when we did the vinyl initiative, we'd take whatever mastering we had done for 192 KHz and start reissuing vinyl off of that.

What attracted you to Blue Note recordings in the first place? Was there a particular album that was your entry point?
Yes, there was. A particular solo was my entry point. I was 14 and running errands with my mum and she'd leave me in the car with the keys so that I could play the radio. And on Sundays - only on Sundays - Detroit had an R&B station that played jazz. So I just happened to tune into the station, WAHB, as Joe Henderson's 'Mode For Joe' was hitting the sax solo. And it starts with these kind of animal cries and anguish and I was like fuck, what is that? But I got it. Whatever the form of English I was experiencing in ninth-grade I'm sure if it had nothing to do with Joe's set of experiences but I heard this thing and it sort of starts out with these cries and (clicks fingers) then it clicks in and then he's grooving and it was beyond notes; it was conversation and it was basically saying yeah, I've got a lot of intense shit going on but no one is going to stop me from grooving. And I thought this is the greatest music I've ever heard in my life. I'd never heard anything like that.

So it was like an epiphany for you?

Oh it was. It was just felt like a slap.

Were you into jazz before that?

No, no. I didn't know anything about it. That was it and then the DJ, who's still on in Detroit - a guy named Ed Love, he must be in his eighties now - he back-announced everything so then I just started listening and he was on every night on FM but they didn't have FM in cars so I went out and got a little portable transistor FM radio and I listened to him constantly. Then I started
researching these records and found that all the stuff I liked was coming out of this little label in New York called Blue Note and then I started looking at the covers. I remember one of the first ones I got was Ornette Coleman ‘At The Golden Circle’ and he’s wearing this top hat with a trench coat. He was just the coolest motherfucker in the world and I remember telling my parents of they had to get me a top hat and trench coat, right? But I didn't get the look but I try to look like him (laughs). So in many ways, the things that you project, or teenagers project on like rock ‘n’ roll, hip-hop - and I think hip-hop is that rebellious music today - Blue Note became that for me. And I’d look at those covers and see the Francis Wolff photos, the cigarettes and the saxophones, and the cool clothes and the dark rooms and I just want to be part of that milieu.

Blue Note is 75 years old this year and yet it still cool. Why is it still iconic after all this time?

Because I think the basic aesthetic of the brand never got altered. It's still about authenticity and excellence and being cool. Coolness. And I think there’ve been other that it had these moments of being iconic - for example, you could put an old Motown record on and before you know whether it's the Temptations or the Four Tops as soon as the drums kick in, you know it's a Motown record. Chess records had that. Stax had that but they haven't endured with a thing for 45 years. But I actually think it is that Alfred Lion, who started the company, had an understanding of the endemic nature of jazz and improvisational music which is that on a cellular level, it's based around change and evolution constantly: you're not supposed to play the same thing tonight that you played last night. You're supposed to clear your mind and improvise fresh. He did that and he was not a musician but he understood that about the music; the music was constantly pushing the threshold and he was daring. I'm just finding that he didn't love all the records. I think Andrew Hill might have confused him a bit and didn't groove enough for him but he understood that it was important what Andrew Hill was doing to push and keep the music advancing. So it's always been about revolution. If you go through the history of jazz, every ten years you overthrow the established thing and do something new. There's discord and people say "that's not jazz!" but it becomes jazz and so I think that's the key thing. If we just simply made 1960s hard bop it would have gotten stale by now.

How did music catch your interest first of all?

My mum used to watch American Bandstand in the afternoon, the Dick Clark show, so I knew all the rock ‘n’ roll stuff. My first gig was at a hootenanny in the sixth grade. And the most notable thing about it was my band of six graders playing and the headliner was some guy that taught folk guitar at a music store. But the middle act - (laughs) I still have the flyer - it says Chuck
Mitchell and wife. Chuck Mitchell - do you know who his wife was?

Joni Mitchell?

Yeah, and she's like 18 years old. So my first gig was with Joni Mitchell. It was an auspicious beginning and then the Beatles came along and for everyone who was my age it was mind-blowing. I think not only was the music great and that it looked cool but the girls were screaming.

Isn't that the reason why a guy picks up a guitar in the first place?

I think so. Yeah, it's a great equaliser (laughs). I needed all the help that I could get.

You started off on bass

I still play bass. I've got a gig Wednesday. I'm going to France to play bass for Johnny Halliday. I produced his new album. So I'm going to do a couple of TV shows on him.

How did you get into production then? Was it a natural progression?

Yeah, I was aware of production values. I remember listening to records and thinking on that snare drum, they used the wrong snare sound, so I was aware of sounds and certainly Sgt Pepper (by the Beatles) introduced the notion of the studio being a musical texture. So I was always tuned into that and it was fun to make records. I started on primitive equipment trying to make records and I always enjoyed it. I still enjoy it.
What has been the highlight of your career to date?

I know that I can't cite a single moment but having a 20-year association with the Rolling Stones is pretty amazing.

I read somewhere that you saw them as a young boy

Yeah, I saw them in '64. I saw them with Brian Jones like three times. I saw them whenever they came to Detroit. I basically bought every Stones album that came out and bought tickets to every tour until I started working with them, at which point I got free albums.

How did it feel working with them after idealising them as a teenager?

It's a trip, man. It's great, you know, and to this day there's at least one or two times during a session when I'll go "oh my God, look who's in the room here." We did part of 'Voodoo Lounge' in my house and I just couldn't believe that the Rolling Stones were all hanging out at my house. They are great. Fantastic guys. I've worked with a bunch of my heroes - including Bob Dylan. All I ever wanted to do was be Bob Dylan's bass player and I got to do that in 1989. All these people are all greater than I expected them to be. They are wonderful people and have been really good friends. Trusted friends. And they've all been really generous and kind to me. There's no artist that I've worked with that I say, fuck, I never want to see that motherfuckers
How would you define your style as a producer?

Well, everyone's got their own thing and mine is not to be an auteur producer. What I like doing is working with really great artists who have a vision - they have something in mind - and they need someone to help them realise that vision. I love getting inside their head and helping them do what they want to do. It's not my record. If I want to make a record I can make a record any time I want to. So I can be an artist - I've been an artist - and I would never try to make Bob Dylan sound like Was Not Was. (Laughs). I don't think that's providing a service!

What's your favourite memory of your days as a member of Was Not Was?

Oh, man, there's so many. I just loved travelling around on a bus with those guys. You know, even then... You know David (Weiss) and I have been friends since we were twelve but Sweet Pea (Atkinson) and Harry, I've known them since 1974. That's forty years. So even then in the '90s we'd been friends for twenty years and just riding around on a bus. Everyone had their own particular vices and we'd just sit around and shoot the shit and had great times. The gigs were always fun. But just hanging with the guys in the band was my fondest memory.
Do you miss that sense of camaraderie?

I do, I really do.

Do you find that you spend more time behind a desk now?

I've just produced a new Neil Diamond record (Melody Road') and I produced a new Johnny Hallyday record ('Rester Vivant') this year, so not really...

How do you juggle your studio work with your Blue Note duties?

To tell you the truth, I get more done being out of the office for Blue Note than in the studio. Everyone understands now that I'm going to have to take breaks and go in the other room and return phone calls and everyone's cool with that. And you actually get more done than going into the office where it's easier to get distracted and things come up that are not essential to the mission (laughs heartily).

Are you producing the new Wayne Shorter album that will be coming out soon on Blue Note?

No, Wayne doesn't need a producer. I'm the de facto A&R guy. But I produced this new Jason Moran album with Michelle Ndegeocello ('All Rise - A Joyful Elegy For Fats Waller') and I produced Bobby Hutcherson with David Sanborn Joey DeFrancesco and Billy Hart on a record that just came out ('Enjoy The View') and I'm going to do Lionel Loueke's album in December. If I think I've got a sense of what needs to be done I'll do it but some of these guys are just way beyond what I offer (laughs). I'd like to go with this but I don't think I should be in any kind of leadership capacity.
Well, thanks very much for talking to me.

It was a pleasure to talk to you, man.

Your career’s had an interesting trajectory, hasn’t it?

Yeah. To be honest with you I thought I was done four or five years ago. But I’ve caught another wave. It’s been fun. This is a great period.

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