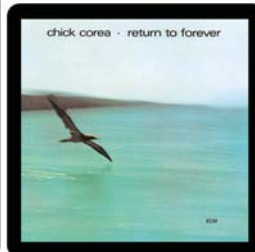


DAVE HOLLAND, ZAKIR HUSSAIN & CHRIS POTTER

# DOWNBEAT

Jazz, Blues & Beyond



# ECM RECORDS

## MANFRED EICHER'S 50-YEAR JOURNEY



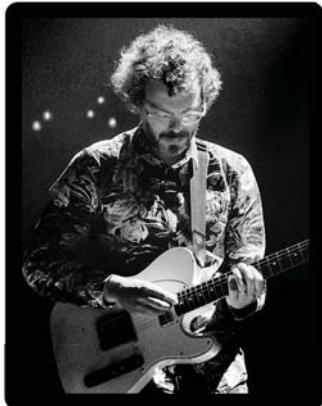
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# NOVEMBER 2019

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BY JOSEF WOODARD

Established in 1969, ECM Records has become one of the most respected labels in jazz. In honor of the label's milestone anniversary, DownBeat travels to Munich to sit down with the head of the label, Manfred Eicher, for a discussion about his 50-year journey and his unique approach to recording. We also check in with numerous artists who have recorded for ECM over the decades.



BART BABINSKI

Vijay Iyer (left) and producer Manfred Eicher during the June 2014 recording sessions for the pianist's trio album *Break Stuff*

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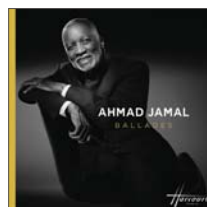
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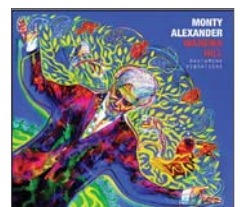
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C. ANDREW HOVAN

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## First Take > BY BOBBY REED



Jack DeJohnette (left), Gary Peacock and Keith Jarrett

# ECM's Golden Anniversary

THE PHRASE "VAST IN SCOPE" CERTAINLY applies to the ECM Records catalog. In celebration of the label's 50th anniversary, we take an in-depth look at a company that has released more than 1,600 albums. The huge ECM catalog includes jazz and classical music, as well as many works that defy easy categorization.

The Munich-based label Edition of Contemporary Music—widely known by its acronym, ECM—has a devout following around the world. As longtime readers know, ECM is a frequent winner in the Record Label category of the annual DownBeat Critics Poll, and the head of the label, Manfred Eicher, is a perennial winner of the Producer category in that poll.

Who, exactly, is Manfred Eicher? The prolific and enigmatic producer was profiled in the 2009 documentary *Sounds and Silence*, which gave many fans a glimpse of an artist whom they previously had known only as a name listed in the credits of hundreds of albums. DownBeat wanted to find out what drives Eicher. So, for our cover story, journalist Josef Woodard traveled thousands of miles and spent several months conducting interviews with Eicher and numerous artists who have recorded for ECM.

The network of musicians who currently record for ECM—or who have worked with the label in the past—is quite extensive, as evidenced by this issue of DownBeat. In our Drum School section, we talk gear with Peter Erskine (whose credits appear repeatedly in the ECM catalog), and we present a transcription of a Jack DeJohnette solo from one of the many brilliant ECM albums he has recorded in a trio with pianist Keith Jarrett and bassist Gary Peacock.

In The Beat section, there's a review of the Chicago Jazz Festival, which hosted a perfor-

mance by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, the groundbreaking collective that has a long history with ECM. Our Reviews section includes critiques of new albums on the label by trumpeter Enrico Rava with saxophonist Joe Lovano; pianist Ethan Iverson's quartet with trumpeter Tom Harrell; and a collaboration between trumpeter Avishai Cohen and pianist Yonathan Avishai.

We also have a feature on the Crosscurrents Trio, which has a terrific new album on Edition Records titled *Good Hope*. Each member of the group—bassist Dave Holland, tabla master Zakir Hussain and saxophonist Chris Potter—has recorded important works for ECM.

Our Fall/Winter Festival Guide has details on festivals around the world, including several that will feature tributes to ECM.

Play the game "Six Degrees of Separation from Manfred Eicher" and you'll wander into some intriguing pathways. For example, Eicher has worked with Paolo Fresu, who has recorded with Carla Bley, who frequently has collaborated with Steve Swallow, who has played duo concerts with Julian Lage, who has recorded with Nels Cline, who is a member of Wilco. (This parlor game could go on for hours.)

We hope our article on ECM provides you with a deeper understanding of Eicher's aesthetic, and perhaps a greater appreciation for the breadth of the label's cultural accomplishments.

And we hope you'll smile when you see the old-school ECM T-shirt that DeJohnette is sporting in the 1976 photo in our cover collage. (Details about this collage are on page 6.)

If you're anything like us, reading about ECM will inspire you to revisit a few of its landmark albums—and to check out some of the label's new releases. The journey continues. **DB**

# In Search of THE SUBLIME

**Led by Manfred Eicher, ECM Records celebrates 50 years of transcendent sonic quests**

By Josef Woodard | Photo by Bart Babinski

**A** search for the heart of the ECM Records operation leads to a small, quiet space located on the second floor of a compound in an industrial section of Munich, Germany. Here, in visionary label head Manfred Eicher's peaceable central office—filled with audio equipment from different eras—the producer and curator of the ECM aesthetic plots his company's moves.

Nearby, the bustle of the Autobahn serves as a reminder of an extant urbanity. But, aptly, a sitting position in Eicher's office affords a deceptively bucolic view of a canopy of trees that surrounds the building, ECM's home base since the 1970s. Part of what makes the ECM story such an important one within jazz and classical circles is the label's magical blend of timeless introspection and contemporary sophistication.

On many ECM albums, one hears the calm of the trees alongside the thrush of the traffic.

Fifty years ago, Eicher co-founded Edition of Contemporary Music, better known as ECM. The label has issued more than 1,600 titles and earned a sterling reputation among fans, critics and concert presenters the world over. During a conversation with *DownBeat*, Eicher reflected on the past, present and future of the imprint, which topped the Record Label category in the 2019 *DownBeat* Critics Poll. Eicher also topped the poll's Producer category.

Stepping into the Eicher epicenter can evoke a sense of reverence for those familiar with the producer's work: The space feels like a temple of deep listening.

Despite the appeal of such a personalized space,

Eicher hardly is chained to his desk. Moving between studios and coordinating recording sessions around the globe has made him inherently itinerant. In Peter Guyer and Norbert Wiedmer's 2009 documentary, *Sounds and Silence: Travels with Manfred Eicher*, the label head admits, "I like to travel. Music has no fixed abode."

At 50, the label thrives, releasing about 50 albums each year. And the catalog features a who's who from the world of creative music: pianists Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea and Vijay Iyer; guitarists Pat Metheny, John Abercrombie and Jakob Bro; bassists Charlie Haden, Dave Holland and Eberhard Weber; vibraphonist Gary Burton; vocalist/composer Meredith Monk; saxophonists Charles Lloyd and Jan Garbarek; trumpeters Enrico Rava and Tomasz Stańko; and bands, such as Oregon and the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

In 1984, Eicher—who started his career as a classically trained double bassist—launched the New Series, a dedicated classical line, spotlighting such names as Arvo Pärt, György Kurtág, Kim Kashkashian and Steve Reich. To date, Eicher has won three Grammy awards, all for his production work on classical recordings.

Eicher explained how he maintains a balance between jazz and classical music. "One line deals with music created primarily through improvisation," he said. "The other line starts from the carefully realized score. Both approaches are important to me—form and freedom. I benefited from one and the other."



Manfred Eicher (foreground) with Nana Vasconcelos (standing), Pat Metheny and Jan Erik Kongshaug.



©DEBORAH FEINGOLD/ECM RECORDS

In Munich, Eicher invited DownBeat to a savory Italian dinner at a humble restaurant close to his home near the Isar River. Also along was Steve Lake, an ECM mainstay since the late 1970s, who has had a variety of roles: writer, organizer, conceptualist and sometimes producer. The dinner discussion ranged from the label's history to Eicher's rural upbringing in the German town Lindau, on Lake Constance, near the Switzerland and Austria borders. That formative setting partly could account for his taste for music that is earthy, open and folkloric.

Describing his ECM experience, Eicher mused that, despite the international profile afforded by various high-profile distribution deals, he has enjoyed remarkable artistic freedom. "I've had great luck in being able to do what I want, without answering to anybody, with no corporate boss in the back," he said. "We've been able to keep it going all this time."

Lake added, "This is one of the great independent labels."

Whereas other record company headquarters might flaunt a sense of flashy style, ECM's Munich hub shuns extraneous frills. While leading a tour of the Munich offices, label publicist Christian Stolberg asserted that Eicher "loves things functional, and that's it. I think he wants to use the money for the productions and not for show."

In one large room, cabinets with massive

archives line the walls, and another area belongs to the design station for the label's legendarily subtle and refined album cover graphics, currently created by Sascha Kleis, in collaboration with Eicher. (Previous designers include Barbara Wojirsch and Dieter Rehm.)

In a rare touch of whimsy, the room also houses a female mannequin sporting an ornate cap once owned by drummer-bandleader Paul Motian (1931–2011), who recorded influential ECM albums in a trio with guitarist Bill Frisell and saxophonist Joe Lovano.

"Paul was a good friend," Eicher said, "and a great musician whom I'd admired since Bill Evans' Village Vanguard recordings [1961]. *Conception Vessel* [1973] marked Paul's debut as a composer and leader. I'm glad to have encouraged him on that path."

On the office's far end, ECM's founding (and funding) partner Karl Egger's health food and wine company LaSelva has a showroom combining its products with an ECM record store, with a small performance space attached. The night before DownBeat's visit, the ECM-aligned duo of cellist Anja Lechner and guitarist Pablo Márquez performed there.

Egger, who ran the Elektro-Egger record store, played a key role in the label's origin story, offering Eicher a seminal record-making opportunity. The result: pianist Mal Waldron's *Free At Last*, recorded on Nov. 24,

1969, at Tonstudio Bauer in Ludwigsburg, West Germany. It became the first ECM release, with early partner Manfred Scheffner (who died in September at the age of 79) listed as producer.

ECM's 50th anniversary has been celebrated at numerous festivals this year, including the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, Tennessee, the Healdsburg Jazz Festival in California and the Montreal Jazz Festival.

More celebrations are forthcoming. One will be at the Deutsches Jazzfestival Frankfurt in Germany on Oct. 23–27. SFJAZZ in San Francisco will salute the label Oct. 24–27, with performances by 10 acts; Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York will present an ECM tribute Nov. 1–2; The Skopje Jazz Festival will spotlight ECM Oct. 17–20 in Skopje, Macedonia; and Flagey will present the "ECM 50th Anniversary Weekend" Nov. 21–24 in Brussels, Belgium.

Despite the numerous tributes, Eicher admitted, "I'm not a celebration kind of guy. We will do a few things [to mark the anniversary], but I mostly want to do the work, and just let people [hear the music]. ... That's the most important thing."

In a 1975 Saturday Review article, writer Chris Albertson noted that Eicher's "sensible approach to jazz recording, perceptive ear, venturesome spirit, sensitivity, and stringent technical demands are widely appreciated now, but they will be even more appreciated in years to

come.” True enough.

Last January, the celebratory year commenced with a two-night, ECM mini-fest, part of Manhattan’s Winter Jazzfest, at (Le) Poisson Rouge. The roster included pianist Shai Maestro, trumpeter Ralph Alessi, drummer Billy Hart and the piano duo of Iyer and Craig Taborn.

Eicher, who tends to eschew public appearances, traveled to New York for the occasion, which was sandwiched between two other important matters: He visited the rural New Jersey home of longtime friend Jarrett, whose health issues have interrupted his music-making, and he produced a recording session by trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith.

Amid a busy Gotham weekend, Eicher sat down in the lobby of his Midtown hotel, over a pot of tea, and spoke about his adventures.

Regarding his perspective after 50 years, Eicher offered a pithy assessment of the ECM manifesto, as such. “It is all about curiosity,” he said. “It began that way and I am still pursuing that. I am always searching for new sounds.”

Soon after the 1969 Waldron recording, Eicher was drawn deeper into officially starting a label, though without any particular role models: “It was more a simple matter of following my musical interests. This gradually led to what was perceived as the label’s ‘identity.’ But there wasn’t a grand plan. I just wanted to make some recordings and had some ideas about sound in mind.”

Acoustics and the recording process have been central ECM concerns. Eicher’s aesthetic involves a sonic landscape of purity, the judicious use of silence and an insistence on live tracking rather than excessive takes, overdubbing or other production trickery.

Eicher’s studio techniques and his malleable “producer” role entail the critical art of “attentive listening,” paying close attention to details and the structure of the musical experience.

“I believe in going with a plan,” he said, “but also being open to whatever might happen unexpectedly in the studio, in the improvisational process. Sometimes, you have to stop and start again, if it’s not coming together or working.”

“Each project brings its own demands, such as whether to use a studio with isolation for the musicians or to put them all in the same room, or whether to use a studio at all—compared to, say, a church, as we have done many times with the New Series projects.”

Key sonic collaborators have included

such frequently called-upon engineers as Jan Erik Kongshaug in Oslo, Grammy winner James Farber in New York and others. “Together,” Eicher explained, “we worked on developing a sound, and an appreciation of space and silence. We were looking for a sound that was transparent, detailed and lucid.”

Further along in the creative process, Eicher emphasizes the importance of sequencing and shaping the final program. “It’s like film editing,” he said, “telling a story and giving a rhythm to a project.”

An avid cineaste who co-directed the 1992 film *Holozän* and has worked with iconoclastic director Jean-Luc Godard, Eicher has also cited his admiration for French filmmaker Robert Bresson.

Eicher’s reverence for storytelling helps explain why the album concept is still so important to him, regardless of the format. ECM finally joined the streaming revolution in November 2017, easing a once-firm disinclination to break up an album’s continuity. “Young people don’t understand the power of the *album*,” Eicher said ruefully, “which is too bad. An album is like a film or a play, presented in a certain way, with an overall sense of rhythm, dynamics and a story being told.”

Back in Munich, ECM’s export manager Heino Freiberg—part of the team for 30 years—was in his office, laying out the chronology of ECM’s technology and platform history, moving from vinyl to CDs, and then, eventually, to digital streaming on platforms like Spotify.

“ECM has been trend-setting in many fields,” Freiberg said, “but in this very special case [of streaming], we followed a little bit.”

The album format, Freiberg said, “remains important—the order of how you present the music, but also, from the very beginning, how to present it, graphically. [Eicher] wanted to have nice packaging and not any kind of short-minded artist photo or instrument. Manfred introduced typography, photography and painting, and this was a way to consider this as an artifact.”

One recent ECM “artifact” of note is the Iyer-Taborn duo’s *The Transitory Poems*. The pair sat down with DownBeat at ECM’s New York office the day after their high-profile Winter Jazzfest concert. They belong to a coterie of New York-based pianists, including Ethan Iverson and David Virelles, who have become part of the ECM roster in the 21st century.

These two, though, aren’t tethered to “a stylistic thing,” according to Taborn. “It’s just very personal approaches, and I



Producer Manfred Eicher (left) and classical violist Kim Kashkashian

## Respecting the Score

For a jazz-centric record label to launch a classical series might seem like a stretch, but for ECM, the 1984 birth of the New Series imprint seemed nearly inevitable. Classical elements long had been a part of the ECM world: Its roster included gifted artists working in the realm of “new music,” and producer and label head Manfred Eicher is a classically trained bassist.

By the early 1980s, Eicher explained, “We had already recorded Steve Reich—such as *Music For 18 Musicians* and *Tehillim*—and Meredith Monk on ECM. But I wanted to make records of scored music, compared to the improvisational music of most of the ECM catalog. Very early, I discovered Arvo Pärt.” The Estonian-born composer’s *Tabula Rasa*, featuring pianist Keith Jarrett, became an immediate and lasting success for the New Series.

Among the loftiest artists involved with the label is classical pianist Sir András Schiff, who said, “My relationship with ECM and Manfred Eicher is deeply satisfying. It’s a very lucky collaboration, in these distracted times. I would not like to work with any of the ‘big’ record companies.”

Since 1985, violist Kim Kashkashian has been a key figure in the success of the New Series. Her extensive discography includes *Kurtág & Ligeti*, a 2002 album that earned her a Grammy.

According to Kashkashian, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the New Series is that it showcases both modern and historic repertoire. “Representing contemporary composition is an important part of any interpretive musician’s role in the world,” she said. “It’s a bit like ‘telling the news,’ instead of always living in a museum of older works.”

She expressed a deep respect for Eicher’s intense focus on quality: “This work is his entire life, and it takes most of his conscious thought, aesthetic and spiritual drive. The library of music reflects this utter commitment.” —Josef Woodard



Clockwise, from lower left: Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnette, Eicher and Keith Jarrett



Don Cherry with Eicher



Adam Cruz (left), Eicher, David Virelles and Thomas Morgan during the 2016 recording sessions for Virelles' album *Gnosis*

think [Eicher] got excited by that.”

Iyer added, “It doesn’t feel like any one of us is a marginal outlier. Actually, we’re all outliers, a group of nonconformists.”

As sidemen, Iyer and Taborn made their ECM recording debuts with saxophonist and Art Ensemble of Chicago co-founder Roscoe Mitchell—Taborn on *Nine To Get Ready* (recorded in 1997) and both pianists on *Far Side* (recorded in 2007). Their debuts as ECM leaders arrived with Taborn’s 2011 solo album, *Avenging Angel*, and Iyer’s 2014 album *Mutations*. Both have since released ECM albums in varied contexts and idioms.

Iyer appreciates the label’s broad scope: “Given the fact that [trumpeter] Lester Bowie’s *Avant Pop*, [tabla player] Zakir Hussain’s album *Making Music*, and [pianist] Andrés Schiff playing Bach exist under one umbrella, there’s nothing wrong with anything that we propose here. We have to keep reminding ourselves that this is a vast spectrum of music.”

Iyer and Taborn’s connections to Mitchell reinforce ECM’s many links to the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians. Eicher noted, “We recorded musicians from the AACM from the early days of ECM onwards. Anthony Braxton plays on [saxophonist] Marion Brown’s *Afternoon Of A Georgia Faun* [1970], the fourth ECM album, and would soon reappear on Circle’s *Paris*

*Concert* [1972] and Dave Holland’s *Conference Of The Birds* [1973].

“As a bassist, I played in 1970 with Leo Smith and Marion Brown in their Creative Improvisation Ensemble [documented by Theo Kotulla in his film *See the Music*]. And I still work with Wadada: Next year we’ll put out a new album by him.”

On the ECM-dense January weekend in New York, trumpeter Mathias Eick, 40, spoke to *DownBeat* about his ECM path. Eick is one of the most popular of ECM’s more recent Norwegian contingent—a list that includes saxophonist Trygve Seim, trumpeter Arve Henriksen and keyboardist Christian Wallumrød.

After playing on guitarist Jacob Young’s 2004 ECM album, *Evening Falls*, Eicher invited the trumpeter to record his own work. Eick’s ECM debut, *The Door*, was released in 2008.

Working with Eicher was both exhilarating and a bit nerve-racking. “He’s one of my idols,” Eick said. “I was trying not to think of the history that he has had his hands on, and all that he has meant to me. It took me a couple of albums to really relax. Maybe after we had a few glasses of wine and went out and had dinner, and he came and met my family, he became human.

“That was the biggest challenge for me, personally, just to relax and to trust myself and my own opinions in the context of working with Manfred.” With a laugh, he added, “I would do

whatever he told me.”

ECM has done more to disseminate the “Norwegian jazz” sound to other countries—especially the United States—than any other label, beginning in the ’70s.

“My choice of Norwegian musicians was very selective,” Eicher said, citing saxophonist Jan Garbarek as a prime example. “The four players of [Garbarek’s 1970 album] *Afric Pepperbird*—Jan, [guitarist] Terje Rypdal, [bassist] Arild Andersen, [drummer] Jon Christensen—had a big influence on the music that followed. For a long time, Oslo seemed a good place to record and develop ideas, because it was so far from the center of the jazz scene. And the studio became my home—Talent Studio, and then the first Rainbow Studio, with Jan Erik Kongshaug.”

But if there is a flagship ECM artist, it is Jarrett, whose first ECM title was the 1972 studio solo album *Facing You*. A few years later, Jarrett recorded his most popular album—also ECM’s most celebrated title: *The Köln Concert*. The landmark solo piano improvisation opus was recorded on Jan. 24, 1975, at the Opera House in Cologne, Germany. Today, it has sold millions of copies and appeared on many “Best Jazz Albums of All Time” lists.

Jarrett’s ECM discography, upward of 70 titles, chronicles his so-called “American” quartet with Haden, Motian and saxophonist Dewey Redman; his “European” quartet with Garbarek,



Christensen and bassist Palle Danielsson; the Standards Trio with drummer Jack DeJohnette and bassist Gary Peacock, as well as numerous solo works. Among his classical releases are works by Bach, such as *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *Six Sonatas For Violin And Piano*, a collaboration with Michelle Makarski.

"It's impossible to sum up in a few sentences what Keith and his music have meant to me personally and to ECM as a label over the decades," Eicher said. "We have been proud to present the full range of his music, which is, by any definition, a unique body of work from a master of spontaneous invention." He added, "We have a great trust in each other."

Early on, there were many bases of compatibility. "[Jarrett] was very much into classical music," Eicher said, "but also the music of Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan. Early on, I wrote a letter to Keith, before *Facing You*. I was proposing he make a record with Jack DeJohnette and Gary Peacock."

For 1976's *Hymns/Spheres*, Jarrett improvised on an organ at the Benedictine Abbey in Ottobeuren, Germany. Eicher worked the organ's many stops: "He was playing and telling me which stops to pull at which times."

In a 1995 interview (with this writer), Jarrett reflected on ECM's role in his career: "The ability to find somebody who heard what I was doing and let the format be determined by me, basically, was what I needed. So, if there wasn't anyone like Manfred—in my case, that's who there was—I don't know what would have happened otherwise."

"On the one hand, the story might have been different and I might not have been able to do what I've done. On the other hand, I know how early I felt that I was going to be doing something. I just wasn't sure when. I knew that my work would be of value. I don't know if I ever would have found the outlet, so in that case, there would have been a horrible difference between the beginning that I did have and the nonbeginning that I might have had."

One striking recent ECM release was veteran bassist Barre Phillips' solo project, *End To End*. (Interestingly, ECM also released Larry Grenadier's solo bass album *The Gleaners* on Feb. 15.)

Eicher noted, "I knew Barre already before ECM began and admired his playing. Hearing him together with Dave Holland inside an NDR Workshop project led to [1971's] *Music From Two Bases* and a working relationship that extended over half a century."

While at the FIMAV festival in Victoriaville, Quebec, this year, where he delivered a remarkable solo set, Phillips recounted the origins of *End To End*. A seasoned solo bass concert performer with a handful of solo bass albums—including his 1984 ECM album, *Call Me When You Get There*—Phillips approached Eicher about another solo venture.

"For me, it would be some kind of full circle," Phillips said. "I started so many things with Manfred in the '70s. I called him up and he said, 'Yeah, I want to do it tomorrow.' That surprised me very much, because he's such a busy man. We made the record. I made the music. He made the record. I have to be clear about that."

During July's Moldejazz Festival in Norway, Bill Frisell, 68, sat in his hotel's lobby, in plain view of the adjacent Romsdal Fjord, recounting his history with ECM. Early on, Frisell earned the sobriquet "ECM house guitarist," via sideman roles with Garbarek, Weber and others. He recorded three leader albums for ECM in the 1980s before becoming frustrated with creative control issues, later recording for Nonesuch, Savoy and OKeh, and recently signing with Blue Note.

Before a duo concert with bassist Thomas Morgan, Frisell recalled a fateful 1981 gig at Moldejazz with Arild Andersen, which virtually marked the launch of his initial ECM chapter. Three decades later, apart from appearances with Motian, Gavin Bryars, Lee Konitz and Kenny Wheeler, the ECM/Frisell drought ended in 2017, when he and Morgan teamed up for duo album *Small Town* and its 2019 follow-up, *Epistrophe*.

Frisell asserted that the catalyst for the recent ECM reunion was New York-based Sarah Humphries, head of the label's U.S. operations, who was wowed by the duo and determined to release it on the label. "She's like an angel," Frisell effused, "a true, incredible mediator, in this world of men trying to be the tough guy. She's the last person who would ever draw attention to herself."

Frisell, strongly influenced by '70s ECM albums, yearns to correct a misconception, explaining, "I have trouble when people say 'the ECM sound.' There is something about just being in a big room and there's space. To me, the ECM sound is also like Columbia records from the early '60s, or early Paul Bley records. ... Or when Miles played one note and then he waits for five minutes, then hits another one. Or Monk. It's about waiting for a second [rather than] running your mouth off. It's not 'the ECM sound.' It's a sensib-

JACK DEJOHNETTE IN MOVEMENT  
RAVI COLTRANE MATTHEW GARRISON ECM



## Distinct Visuals

The cover art for *In Movement*—the 2016 ECM album featuring dynamic interplay among drummer Jack DeJohnette, saxophonist Ravi Coltrane and bassist Matthew Garrison—is a photograph depicting brushed-on smudges of glue left by workers on a wall at an Edinburgh, Scotland, construction site. The image was shot on a whim in 2015 by Korean photographer Woong Chul An as he passed the site. Only later, he commented in a recent text message, did he realize what he had captured: a "free-spirited, unfettered, wild and totally improvised image."

But when Manfred Eicher, the producer and head of ECM, saw the image, he knew what he had: a shot that would reflect the improvisatory soul of *In Movement*, and he moved quickly to collect it. "The photo was just waiting in the archive, not too long, before it was used for Jack's cover, after we recorded the music in New York," Eicher wrote in a recent email. The recording took place in October 2015 and, the following May, the album was released, adorned by the photo; both are sublimely textured expressions of free-spiritedness.

An's photo so powerfully evokes the music while retaining an air of mystery—that one might think a lengthy analysis had preceded its choice. Not so, Eicher said. Nor is that the case generally regarding ECM's half-century of cover art: "There is no guiding principle, beyond trying to make covers that we like. Intuition is paramount." And where does intuition lead him? "The idea is never to illustrate (if possible), but to offer a layer that parallels or counter-points in some way."

In addition to the evocative covers, much care is devoted to the packaging of ECM albums—a prime example being *The Art Ensemble Of Chicago And Associated Ensembles*, a 2018 box set that houses 21 CDs and an elegant, 300-page booklet.

For ECM's visual elements, Eicher has maintained the unity of vision that helped earn him singular status among producers. Economic concerns are not much of a factor: "The costs have never held us back from what we wanted to do." —Phillip Lutz

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Louis Sclavis has a long history with ECM Records.

# 50 ECM Gems

The word “touchstone” dates back to the 15th century, denoting a special black quartz used to test the quality of gold alloys via the streaks left behind on its surface. While the term has retained its metaphorical use as a criterion by which the quality of something—in this case, music—is measured, it feels especially apt in the context of ECM Records.

In 2008, ECM released its first album in the Touchstones series. Numbering 40 in total, each album was a world unto itself. It only feels appropriate that ECM should revisit the idea this year in celebration of half a century of creative operation with a Touchstones series called “50 for the 50th.”

Like its predecessor, this new set provides opportunities for avid listeners to revisit old friends and a platform for novices to discover new ones. Label stalwarts, such as pianist Keith Jarrett and bassist Arild Andersen, rest comfortably alongside such outliers as pianist Mike Nock.

One distinctive album in the set is David Darling’s *Cello* (1992), which features the titular instrument in both its acoustic and custom 8-string electric forms. Floating blissfully between jazz and classical, *Cello* treats the border around either genre as permeable, as so many other artists under producer Manfred Eicher’s purview have.

Among those gleefully blurring genres is reedist Louis Sclavis, whose quintet effort *Rouge* is included in the new Touchstones series. Released in 1992, it was his first album for ECM.

“It was my doorway into this famous label,” Sclavis said, “and the beginning of a very long story. Over the years, it has become more and more important for Manfred and I to work together. It’s vital for an artist to have a label that follows all your iterations. In addition to helping me and so many other artists find their musical paths, recording for ECM has the added advantage of placing your music into hands all around the world. [Eicher] fights to keep [titles in print], so something you recorded 30 years ago is still available. This means the world to me, as I consider every album I’ve done to be equally important on a personal level.” —Tyran Grillo



Eicher with Arvo Pärt in Rouen, France

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ity about space. Manfred is definitely sensitive to that.

“When you’re on the same wavelength, it’s so amazing to have [Eicher] in the studio, because it’s like his life is on the line. When I’m playing, with every note, I feel like my life is on the line. That’s where he’s at. It’s that intense. You can’t say that about everybody. His commitment to it is really about the music.”

Backstage at July’s Montreal Jazz Festival, Swedish pianist Bobo Stenson, 75, took time before a dazzling, poetic solo concert to reflect on his long ECM connection, dating back to 1971.

Of Eicher, Stenson, who has released several trio albums on ECM, including 2018’s *Contra La Indecisión*, said: “I would call him a *real* producer. He really wants to be a part of the process and what is happening. His main thing is to get the creative things out of the musicians. He might come running out into the studio saying, ‘Yeah, keep that. Go on.’ He is very much involved in every production.

“Normally,” Stenson continued, “you record for two days and then you make the whole thing ready on the third day. Everything should be ready by then. On mixing day, [Eicher is] really busy with the sound and also the order [of tracks in the program].”

Another artist deeply connected to ECM and Eicher is influential keyboardist-composer Carla Bley. A stubbornly resourceful artist who launched her own label, WATT, along with a model DIY project, the New Music Distribution Service, Bley recently recalled her pre-DIY days. “I remember asking Manfred, ‘Me and Mike [Mantler] just made this album. Would you like to put it out on your label?’ He wrote back and said, ‘No.’ I remember *that*,” she said with a chuckle.

According to Bley, in the mid-’70s,

NMDS “ended up having to distribute Manfred’s records.” She added, “In those days, I guess none of us had any money. Manfred would sleep on our couch when he was in New York. Everything was pretty relaxed.”

Today, Bley’s WATT releases are part of the ECM catalog. Lately, she has opted to focus on making music—away from the music *business* aspect—releasing trio albums on ECM, proper, with Eicher as producer. (Her trio bandmates are her life partner, bassist Steve Swallow, and saxophonist Andy Sheppard.) “We figure [Eicher has] got some kind of a magic formula,” she said, “and if we just shut up, he’ll do it for us. ... Manfred is absolutely sure of himself and sure of his reasoning. He knows how he feels about something and he makes sure that’s what he does.”

While ECM’s massive, diverse catalog defies easy description, one recurring thread has been an inward, meditative and even spiritual quality. In some cases, the musical contexts have dealt directly with liturgical music, religious traditions and matters of spirituality, especially in the music of Pärt, Bach and various treatments of Norwegian hymns—and Armenian hymns on pianist/vocalist Areni Agbabian’s latest album, *Bloom*.

Is ECM, in ways implicit or otherwise, an inherently more spiritually charged enterprise than other record labels of note? Eicher clarified, “It’s ‘spiritual’ in that music addresses matters of the spirit—but it also addresses every other aspect of existence. The ‘mission’ is simply to release music that matters, or what I think matters. Music that has meaning for us and, we hope, for others.”

A final, open-ended question: What’s next?

“Tomorrow,” Eicher said.

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