



## The Real Jazz Is on Transition

### Tom Wilson and the Transition Records Story

by Richard Vacca

I first wrote about record producer Tom Wilson in *The Boston Jazz Chronicles*, but not in any detail. In 2013, I wrote five blog posts about Wilson, starting with a short summary to mark his birthday and then four snapshots of his company, Transition Records, on the anniversary dates of notable recordings. Those writings are combined here. Wilson was a major talent, and man, he sure had big ears.

#### Mar 25, 1931: Tom Wilson of Transition Records Born

Record producer and studio wizard Tom Wilson was born Waco, Texas on March 25, 1931. As much as anybody in the music business, Wilson had a feel for how music should sound in the fifties and sixties, and he proved it, first with his Boston-based company, Transition Records, and later with United Artists, Savoy, Columbia, and Verve.

Thomas Blanchard Wilson was a 1954 *cum laude* graduate of Harvard, where in his spare time he worked at radio station WHRB and founded the Harvard New Jazz Society. He was also president of the Harvard Young Republicans Club.



Wilson started Transition in 1955, stating that “We plan to specialize in folk songs, jazz, and American classical music. One of our main objectives is to record neglected American compositions which we feel deserve recognition.” He made his first recording in March of that year, of Boston’s Jazz Workshop Quintet. In all, he released about 15 albums but recorded twice that many. Releases featured folksinger Sam Gary and classical artists Fran Thorne and Russell Woollen, but mainly the catalog was about jazz. There were LPs by trumpeter Johnny Windhurst, saxophonist Lucky Thompson, bassist Doug Watkins, and pianists Cecil Taylor (his first), and Sun Ra (also his first). There were three LPs by trumpeter Donald Byrd, including his first as a leader.

Other projects were recorded but never released. There was a Boston quintet co-led by tenor saxophonist Jay Migliori and trumpeter Tommy Ball; one track was issued on a sampler LP and the rest has yet to emerge. One track survives from a Dave Coleman date featuring baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams and violinist Dick Wetmore. There was a Paul Chambers session that included Adams, John Coltrane, and trombonist Curtis Fuller. Complete session tapes have never surfaced.

Wilson ran out of money in 1957 and closed up shop. A job with United Artists took him to New York. He sold much of his recorded output to Blue Note and eventually auctioned the remainder. He continued recording jazz at UA, Savoy and Audio Fidelity. Then in 1963 he was hired as a staff producer by Columbia Records, where he began a 15-year career as a prolific and influential producer of rock music. Wilson was responsible the first recordings of Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, the Velvet Under-

ground, Soft Machine, and others. It is for these recordings, and not his jazz work, that Wilson is best known, and with good reason.

Sadly, Wilson never returned to jazz, his first love. He was only 47 when he died in 1978.

## Mar 13, 1955: Jazz Workshop Quintet Records for Transition

The Stable was at 20 Huntington Ave in Boston, and already in 1955 it was one of the places to go if you wanted to hear modern jazz in the Hub. Tom Wilson knew that, he was a regular there, and he decided to record the house band live at the club as the inaugural release on his new label, Transition. March 13 is the anniversary of that session.

If that house band, the Jazz Workshop Quintet, had a leader, it was tenor saxophonist Varty Haroutunian, but over time people have associated the group and the recording with Herb Pomeroy because the trumpet star became the best-known of the quintet. The others were pianist Ray Santisi, bassist John Neves, and drummer Jimmy Zitano.

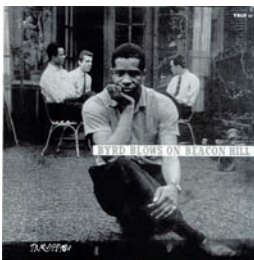
The tunes are mostly standards (“Dear Old Stockholm,” “Off Minor,” “One Bass Hit,” “Moten Swing,”) and the record was favorably reviewed. *Metronome* in February 1956 wrote: “Trumpeter Pomeroy is certainly the standout, but the other four are also good, among Boston’s best and indicative of what you can hear there on the modern kick; mostly familiar and nicely turned and almost always exuberant.”



Nat Hentoff, in his five-star review in *Down Beat* (Dec 28, 1955) wrote: “The musicianship is of a very high level. Pomeroy indicates again that he is one of the best young trumpeters in the country. Haroutunian blows with a full sound, flowing ideas, and guts. Santisi has never sounded as consistently and richly inventive before on records...These men are thinking musicians, but they haven’t forgotten the essential emotional elements that all good jazz must communicate. The set is thoroughly recommended.”

## May 7, 1956: Donald Byrd Records His Third for Transition

Tom Wilson produced three LPs for trumpeter Donald Byrd on Transition Records: *Byrd-Jazz* (TRLP-5, recorded in Detroit in August 1955), which was Byrd’s first album as a leader; *Byrd’s Eye View* (TRLP-4, recorded in Cambridge in December 1955); and *Byrd Blows On Beacon Hill* (TRLP-17, recorded in Boston on May 7, 1956).



*Byrd Blows On Beacon Hill* was a quartet date, with bassist Doug Watkins, pianist Ray Santisi, and drummer Jimmy Zitano. Watkins, like Byrd, was a product of the rich Detroit postwar jazz scene, and like Byrd, moved to New York in 1954. Watkins was the original bass player in the Jazz Messengers, and Byrd joined that group when he replaced the original trumpeter, Kenny Dorham.

Santisi and Zitano were part of the Jazz Workshop Quintet at the Stable, and they had recorded for Wilson on Transition’s first release, *Jazz in a Stable*. Santisi told me Byrd heard them there and wanted them on his album.

This recording came at a pivotal point for Byrd and Watkins. Both were about to leave the Jazz Messengers to form a new group under Horace Silver’s leadership, so the May/June period was an opportune time for Wilson to approach Byrd for a recording date.

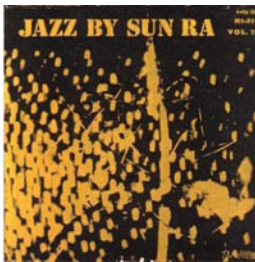
The LP was made at the Fassett Recording Studio, in Stephen Fassett's home on Beacon Hill. Fassett himself was a fascinating character. He was a serious student of opera with his own show on WQXR in New York for many years, and his wife Agatha was a well-known Bartók scholar. Fassett was a self-taught recording engineer, and he recorded concerts at MIT's Kresge Hall and Harvard's Sanders Theatre. He built his own studio on in his Chestnut Street home, and jazz was just one part of his activity there. He recorded Joan Baez and Tom Lehrer, Sylvia Plath reciting poetry, and background music for film, among other things. Fassett died in 1980.

Byrd made many hard bop sessions in the fifties and sixties, with *Byrd's Eye View* among that number. This quartet date swings more gently than some other Byrd sessions, and perhaps with less imagination. The word at the time was that Boston jazz did not burn as hot as the hard bop fashioned in New York, that it was cooled a bit by West Coast breezes. Perhaps Byrd on this day went with those prevailing winds.

## Jul 12, 1956: Tom Wilson Records Sun Ra

Tom Wilson, the man of many firsts in the recording industry, started Transition Records in Cambridge in 1955 with two goals. First, he wanted to record leading-edge jazz, folk, and classical musicians who were undiscovered or being ignored by the major labels. Second, he wanted to record them live, in the club or concert hall, or before a studio audience. That's where Wilson saw the best opportunities for capturing creative, spontaneous performances.

Wilson wasn't restricting his search for talented musicians to Boston. Transition recorded three albums by the Detroit trumpeter Donald Byrd and one by Detroit bassist Doug Watkins. He also recorded bassist Paul Chambers, trombonist Curtis Fuller and saxophonist Pepper Adams, all from Detroit. And he traveled to Chicago to record Sun Ra.



No major labels were looking at Sun Ra. He had released 45s on his own Saturn label, but no LPs, and the Transition session would be his first for any label other than his own. As it turned out, Transition was his only label besides Saturn on which he recorded in the 1950s.

Wilson took the musicians into Chicago's Universal Recording Studio on July 12 and recorded ten songs, with titles rather subdued by later Sun Ra standards: "Lullaby for Realville," "Street Named Hell," "Transition," and "Call for All Demons," which the Arkestra recorded several times. Some of the Arkestra's familiar faces were already on board, including John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, and Julian Priester. The result was *Jazz By Sun Ra* (TRLP-10), released in 1957.

The record didn't receive much attention; Nat Hentoff awarded it three stars in his *Down Beat* review (April 4, 1957), and his criticism implied Sun Ra wasn't the kind of leading-edge figure that Transition claimed to seek: "What emerges is a composer of limited ability and a surprisingly small quantity of personal, fresh ideas in view of all the talk herein of "new horizons."

Wilson actually recorded enough music for two albums, but Transition ceased operations before the second one could be released. Chicago's Delmark Records purchased all of Transition's Sun Ra masters, and reissued *Jazz By Sun Ra* in 1967 under the title *Sun Song*, and released the follow-up in 1968 as *Sound of Joy*.

## Sep 14, 1956: Transition Records Cecil Taylor's First LP

“Transition, a small and apparently fearless firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has issued a brilliant, uncompromising record on which the principle performer is a twenty-three-year-old pianist named Cecil Taylor.”



Thus begins the very first column Whitney Balliett wrote for *The New Yorker*, on April 13, 1957. And he pretty much sums up Tom Wilson's dream. Wilson saw Transition filling an important niche. Large record companies were reluctant to sign unknown or emerging artists because they couldn't sell records. The majors had no interest in developing artists, they only wanted developed ones. Transition could be different, recording emerging talents and helping them to become famous on their own merits. Earlier in 1956, Transition recorded Donald Byrd, and then Sun Ra. Two months after that date in Chicago, Wilson recorded Taylor in Boston. *Jazz Advance* was Taylor's first LP, as *Jazz by Sun Ra* was Sun Ra's.

I don't know if Wilson (who graduated from Harvard in 1954) heard Taylor (who completed the New England Conservatory's Diploma Program in 1951) while Taylor still lived in the Boston area, or if that encounter came later. Perhaps Wilson only knew Taylor by reputation. Regardless, Taylor was on to something, and Wilson wanted to record him.

The album featured musicians who would work often with Taylor in coming years: bassist Buell Neidlinger, drummer Denis Charles, and saxophonist Steve Lacy. It was Neidlinger's second session for Transition, and the other was quite different—Johnny Windhurst's trad-leaning *Jazz at Columbus Avenue* (TRLP-2).

The band recorded seven tunes, with six, including three Taylor originals, released on *Jazz Advance*. The seventh was released on *Jazz in Transition* (TRLP-30), the label's 1956 sampler LP.

Balliett called Taylor's musical imagination “astonishing,” his improvisations “daring,” and the music “exhausting...In addition to its demanding harmonic and rhythmic complexities, it has considerable power and emotion.” All of that is true, and *Jazz Advance* was an apt name for Taylor's record. The hallmarks of his playing are all there in an early state—the physical energy, the percussiveness, the dense clusters of notes, the dissonant chords. It was a radical statement at the time, but Wilson didn't want it any other way. As the advertising slogan said: The Real Jazz is on Transition.



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