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Always in Trouble: ESP-Disk' and Free Jazz

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...we wanted to have a corner on this music. We wanted people to come after it.

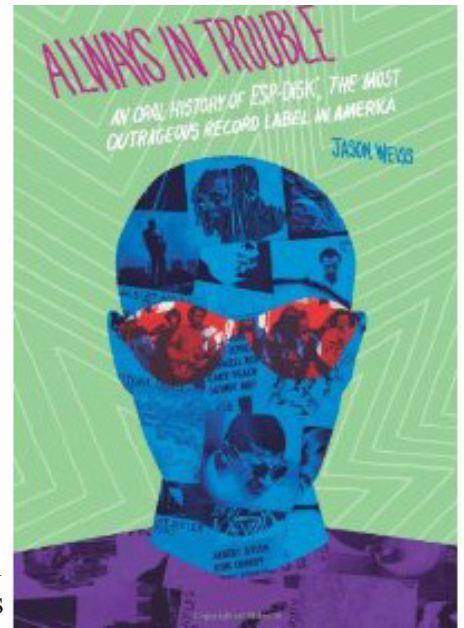
We figured: deprive them of it, and they'll come after it.

-Roswell Rudd (p. 161)

That was, to put it in legendary trombonist Rudd's term, the "psychology" of the musicians responsible for birthing the free jazz movement in the mid 1960s. Rudd was describing the policy of the New York-based Jazz Composer's Guild, who at that time had put a moratorium on releasing any recordings. Had this hermetic self-censorship remained in place, who knows what we as a culture might have lost. That is how close we came to never hearing some of the most crucial avant-garde music of the last century. That is how we almost had a sonic vacuum. But instead, we have the glorious, powerful music held within the discography of ESP-Disk', the first American label to document this distinctly American music. Though literature on this venture is not extensive, Jason Weiss's new book, *Always in Trouble: An Oral History of ESP-Disk', the Most Outrageous Record Label in America* (Wesleyan, 2012), examines ESP-Disk's chaotic approach to disseminating this chaotic music.

Free jazz—or, as it was called around the time of its advent, "the new thing"—was the revolutionary front of what was already the purest American art form. Musically, it was the sound of innovators reclaiming their own invention. At its outset, jazz emerged as the sound of danger and dance halls and the underclass. The music became accepted as entertainment for the wider culture before the performers became accepted as human beings. Watching this progression (or lack thereof) with alarm, many jazz players pushed back against the genre's limitations. If their government could write laws seeking to control the freedom of their movements, finances, and romances, it could not control the freedom in their music. Stripped of limitations placed on harmony, and given to emphatic cries straight from the soul's depths, free jazz made use of careful group dynamics, explosive performances, and the most extended of techniques. By the 1960s, this music was in full ecstatic force, and, as evidenced by Rudd's quote above, its progenitors were protective of it.

In 1965, music business lawyer Bernard Stollman decided to see who would "come after" this music. In a fit of both iconoclastic eccentricity and misguided opportunism, his label's leadoff release, *Ni Kantu En Esperanto* (*Let's Sing in Esperanto*), was apparently the first album recorded in that failed attempt at an international language. But by the second release—tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler's blistering *Spiritual Unity*—ESP had landed upon what would be its most significant calling card: free jazz. Over the next several years, ESP introduced the public to then-obscure, exceedingly innovative artists including Ayler, Pharaoh Sanders, Sunny Murray, Milford Graves, and many others. Stollman's role was simply to reach out to the players, get them into a studio, and



Always in Trouble: An Oral History of ESP-Disk', the Most Outrageous Record Label in America

Always in Trouble: ESP-Disk and Free Jazz (cont.)

issue the resulting wax. ESP's motto was: "The artist alone decides." (p. xvi)

Stollman quickly demonstrated a proclivity towards the divisive, releasing important albums by shock-folk act the Fugs, as well as hippie-baiting spoken word LPs from Timothy Leary and William S. Burroughs. Interviews with Stollman, published in Weiss's book, reveal a man whose stolid squareness belies an often startling weirdness. Describing a Sun Ra concert that ESP-Disk' staged on New York's South Street Seaport in 1968, Stollman talks about how the event attracted the attention of a nearby Portuguese military training vessel. "The captain of the ship allowed the cadets to join the crowd on the pier, and they danced with the local girls," Stollman recalls. "The captain saw our concert as a salute to Portugal, an observation shared by Portuguese journalists who were present, and ESP has since enjoyed a highly favorable reputation in that country." (p. 30)

So Stollman built the ESP-Disk' catalog, but did anyone actually "come after" this music? By 1974, the company was completely out of business. How the label came to fold is convoluted: Stollman blames overall poor sales, distrustful pressing and distribution partners, and government harassment (listed here in declining order of plausibility). This music was so unconventional that when John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy began to adapt much of the musical vocabulary pioneered by Albert Ayler (one of ESP's most important voices), *Down Beat* ran an article entitled "John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Jazz Critics" wherein the besieged geniuses were kindly asked to justify their genius. So slow sales were to be expected for this music. Moreover, many of the free jazz players were part of a larger Black Arts Movement of activists who were actually monitored, infiltrated, and psychologically brutalized by the U.S. government. For Stollman to also use such harassment (due in particular, he claims, to the Fugs' song "C.I.A. Man," among other countercultural inclinations) to excuse his label's inability to pay out royalties to his already-meagerly paid artists seems dubious at best, and perhaps a paranoid assumption. "My real sense is that he was abducted by aliens, and when he was probed it erased his memory of where all the money was," posits Tom Rapp, singer for another one of ESP's flagship folk

acts, *Pearls Before Swine*. (p. 129)

This complaint of owed royalties is a bitter refrain throughout the interviews, and alto saxophonist Sonny Simmons colorfully regales readers with an anecdote wherein he came very close to sending Stollman through a window. While much of his roster variously fled to the halls of academia to support themselves or became mired in poverty, it would be absurd to suggest that Stollman ever did anything with the money made from ESP records other than put it back into the label. (Following the label's closure, Stollman left the music business altogether to work as an assistant New York Attorney General throughout the 1980s.) Furthermore, many of the interviewees admit that without the limited exposure that ESP's recordings provided, the spirit of free jazz would have spread more slowly, if not had been lost forever to the dusty lofts of their origin. "Look, ESP publicized us all over the planet," says drummer Milford Graves. "Nobody was recording us in the '60s other than ESP! And the pay that maybe you didn't get from Bernard, it neutralizes itself because if you had to hire a public relations person, you were going to have to pay him. So you're still going to come out to zero." (p. 117) Graves nails it: ESP-Disk' is another example of the sad fact that in the realm of art, it rarely pays to be quite so ahead of the curve.