



AHMET ERTEGUN AWARD

# JAC HOLZMAN

[ BY ANTHONY DECURTIS ]



REALLY GREAT album is context, content, and a trace of magic fairy dust," Jac Holzman once said. "You know it when you hear it, and when you hear it, that's the excitement."

As the founder of Elektra Records and one of the sharpest minds in the history of the music industry, Holzman is one of the rare individuals with a deep, informed perspective on all three of the elements he mentioned. With such bands as Love and the Doors, Elektra not only helped define the sixties, it offered a vision of that seismic era that exploded the clichés that have come to be associated with it. Even more profoundly, if much less obviously, all the folk and international music that Elektra released in the fifties encouraged and shaped the cultural consciousness that allowed what we think of as the sixties to be born and to flourish. "Independence is a state of mind," Holzman has said. "You need to record something because you think it's worthwhile. The idea is not to be hobbled by the numbers, to take risks, and find things to believe in."

## ONE OF THE SHARPEST MINDS IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

Perhaps more than anything else, Holzman has been a believer. During the time of his association with the company, from 1950 to 1973, the stamp of the Elektra label on a record stood as a guarantee of quality, an infallible assurance that the music contained on it had been made in the spirit of adventure and love. "For just about all of the sixties, I would go down to my local record shop and buy whatever new Elektra records would come out, because I knew it would broaden my musical horizons," said Lenny Kaye, guitarist for the Patti Smith Group. "I learned just about everything I am today from Elektra."

That Kaye would go on to assemble the hugely influential anthology *Nuggets: Original Artyfacts From the First Psychedelic Era, 1965-1968* for Elektra provides a perfect example of how the label both documented its time and incited creativity in artists and audiences alike.

That's quite an impact for a company that Holzman launched at the age of 19 from his dorm room at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1950. The son of an affluent Manhattan family, Holzman was fascinated by technology.



**ELEKTRA  
RECORDS  
HELPED DEFINE  
THE SIXTIES**

He understood well before the rest of the world the revolutions just beginning in that realm—the invention of the LP, the greater availability of moderately priced recording gear—which would set the stage for the more convulsive social and political revolutions to follow. Encouraged by the response to his earliest releases—and, due to his lack of engagement, discouraged

by the administration at St. John's from continuing his studies there—Holzman moved to Greenwich Village (his first apartment there cost five dollars a week) and opened a record store, running Elektra out of the same space. After his Upper East Side upbringing, the Village was a blast of liberation. "Greenwich Village was a blast of liberation. "Greenwich Village was the symbol of free living and free loving," he said. "I longed to live there."

In the Village, Holzman was ideally positioned to hear and record an impressive range of first-rate folk singers like Jean Ritchie, Ed McCurdy, Cynthia Gooding, Bob Gibson, Frank Warner, Sonny Terry, Josh White, Oscar Brand, and, most famously, Theodore Bikel. The vast open-mindedness of the Village scene also encouraged his natural impulse to make and release whatever types of records moved him—from *Voices of Haiti* to the Jazz Messengers to flamenco to ten highly profitable volumes of ambient and environmental sound effects. (The sound effects albums—railroad-crossing bells, car crashes, shotgun blasts, avalanches, and the like—were particular favorites of Marlon Brando.)

It was an ethic of individual expression with a sensitivity to larger social trends that Holzman would hold to throughout his career. In addition, while sound quality was typically a secondary consideration, at best, in folk music, Holzman's love for the technical aspects of recording ensured that Elektra's releases regularly exceeded the standards of what labels with far more resources could achieve. Getting it right was an essential sign of respect to the music and the artist. Like so many Elektra releases, albums by Koerner, Ray and Glover; Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence; and Bulgarian folk singers had a cultural impact far greater than their sales. (When Holzman met the Beatles in 1965, John Lennon's first words to him were "Anyone who records Koerner, Ray and Glover is okay with me.")

In the early sixties, however, Holzman had begun to intuit a shift in the cultural climate. One essential element of that change became clear when John Sebastian, who would go on to form the Lovin' Spoonful, remarked to him, "We're running out of folk songs." That wasn't literally true, of course, but what Holzman heard confirmed what he was feeling: that the folk revival had peaked, and that the next musical movement would be led by artists who could either write their own songs or identify and interpret the work of a new coterie of provocative, highly literate songwriters, the "next generation of people talking to their own people," as he put it.

The artist who most helped Elektra make that transition as she made it herself was Judy Collins. Collins moved nimbly from plumbing the Anglo-Celtic folk tradition on her early albums



**ABOVE** Holzman in his home studio, New York City, 1955; with Judy Collins, early seventies; with Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler (from left), 1973.

to bringing forward the work of then-unknown songwriters like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Randy Newman to, finally, writing soon-to-be classic songs herself. On that journey, she found an ideal collaborator in Holzman. "There was no vagueness around him," Collins said about him. "He was very, very clear, always articulate, very determined about what he wanted to do. No ambivalence. And I need that and I want that from people. It was just a meeting of the minds."

Phil Ochs and Tim Buckley, two artists who, in true Elektra fashion, only continue to grow in importance as time passes, further helped solidify the label's standing as singer-songwriters came to the fore. And, in another bold move, Elektra helped introduce electric blues to white audiences when it signed the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, which featured the legendary guitarist Michael Bloomfield.

But by the mid-sixties, Elektra still had not made a significant impact in the world of rock & roll, by then the most potent force in popular music. Searching for inspiration, Holzman went to Los Angeles, where he believed a fresh, new energy was gaining momentum. There, intrigued by the simple eloquence of the band's name, he discovered Love. Holzman went to hear the band at Bido Lito's, a club he described as "the Black Hole of Calcutta with a door charge." He entered and found, in his words, "a scene from one of the more amiable rings of Dante's inferno. Bodies crushing into each other, silken-clad girls with ironed blond hair moving the kind of shapes you didn't see in New York, to a cadence part musical and all sexual. . . . And here were Arthur Lee and Love going at it with manic intensity. Five guys of all colors, black, white, and psychedelic—that was a real first. My heart skipped a beat. I had found my band!"

Later, at Arthur Lee's recommendation, Holzman went to see the Doors, who were opening for Love at the time. He signed the band, whose music and provocative theatrics remain a battleground in the culture wars to this day. With Love and the Doors, and Elektra's later signing of the MC5, the Incredible String Band, and the Stooges, it would be difficult to think of a label that pushed the limits of the sixties as hard, while simultaneously shaping what the future of popular music would be.

Such artists as Carly Simon, Harry Chapin, Lindisfarne, and Queen ("I have seen the future of pop music, and it is a band called Queen," Holzman told his staff) helped keep Elektra a force as the seventies rolled in. But the record business had grown considerably, and it was hard to maintain the intensely personal, hands-on approach to music making that had been the label's hallmark. Holzman sold Elektra to Warner Communications in 1970, and three years later resigned as its head. While keeping a promise he had made to himself to move to Hawaii, he continued to serve as Warner's chief technologist, working with the company on developments in cable television and home video. Since then, in positions with Panavision and other media and technology companies, including, once again, the Warner Music Group, Holzman has continued to explore and expand the connections between music, the visual arts, and technology.

It is a résumé that situates Holzman perfectly, as he nears 80, for the challenges confronting the music industry today, so similar, in his view, to the ones he faced as a teenager wanting to make his mark in the early fifties. He remains as he was back then: confident, characteristically optimistic, both wide-eyed and clear-eyed, and forever young. "I see a really bright future for music," he said last year. "I think that recorded music is due for a renaissance. . . . I think music companies are very, very viable for a new age. And I'm looking forward to the adventures that come." ❁

