



Nesuhi Ertegun

BY MICHAEL HILL



ESUHI ERTEGUN HAD PERHAPS the most well-traveled ears in the music business. The son of a Turkish diplomat, Nesuhi left his native country at an early age and began, as he put it, "moving around the world" to wherever his father's assignments took him: Switzerland, Paris, London, and eventually to Washington, D.C., where the elder Ertegun served as Turkey's ambassador to the United States. Everywhere he went, Nesuhi found the music. In England, he discovered the big bands who broadcast over the BBC; in France, he became an admirer of Django Reinhardt; Stephane Grappelli, Coleman Hawkins, and Benny Carter in America; finally, he familiarized himself with modern jazz. All the while, he built an impressive record collection that included the works of Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Fats Waller.

In Washington, Nesuhi and his brother, Ahmet, haunted the Howard Theater, home of black entertainment in the Capitol, and searched the black community for records of their favorite musicians. In the 1940s, Nesuhi began promoting concerts at the National Press Club, and frequently visited New York to see, hear, and meet such jazz greats as Billie Holiday and Lester Young. In 1944, he moved to Los Angeles to run the Jazzman Record Shop, and later put together the band for Orson Welles' "Mercury Theater Presents" radio show. Nesuhi persuaded New Orleans jazzman Kid Ory to come out of retirement and assemble a new band; when no one else would record the group, he created his first label, Crescent (later Jazzman) Records, on which he also recorded Jelly Roll Morton and Jimmy Noone. Nesuhi served as editor of *Record Changer* magazine and later taught, at UCLA, the first accredited course in jazz to be offered in the U.S.

By the mid-1950s, Atlantic Records partners Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler realized they had to find someone to develop an album department. Nesuhi had just spent three fruitful years at Contemporary Records in Los Angeles, supervising albums from studio production through packaging; at his brother's urging, he moved to New York and joined Atlantic, where he began to build the label's extensive jazz LP catalogue. "Jazz is an important musical form," he once commented. "Whether there is a big public demand for it or not, I will always sign new artists and continue to work with established ones." Over the years, Nesuhi was responsible for producing innumerable classic albums by John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Herbie Mann, Carmen McRae, Bobby Short, Mabel Mercer and more. He also produced several R&B and rock & roll hits with Ray Charles, the Drifters, Bobby Darin, and Roberta Flack (whom he had originally signed to Atlantic).

At Atlantic, Nesuhi also found a dynamic place in the new international market. Combining his knowledge of

music and its business with his personal background and gift for languages, Nesuhi spearheaded Atlantic's international operations. American record companies of the period were content with a little import-export activity. Nesuhi plunged head-on into the international expansion of the business, making many trips overseas, studying individual markets, and making contacts and contracts. His efforts paid off, and Atlantic Records soon rose to the forefront of American companies in the competition an ever-expanding world trade.

When Warner Bros./Reprise, Elektra/Asylum, and Atlantic/Atco all came under the Warner Communications umbrella, the need for a strong international division became clearer than ever. Nesuhi Ertegun was the logical choice to head that company. In 1971, Nesuhi created WEA International, building it into one of the world's most powerful distribution networks of home entertainment.

On June 30, 1987, Nesuhi resigned his position as chairman and co-CEO of WEA International to join Warner Communications, Inc. as president/special projects of the WCI Record Group. The following year, he founded a new Atlantic-distributed label, EAST/WEST Records, and returned to the studio as a producer of albums by the Modern Jazz Quartet and Milt Jackson. "EAST/WEST is a small label," he said at the time, "very selective, extremely particular on quality, presentation. We're in no rush—we're not after Top Forty hits."

In memory of Nesuhi, Warner Music International has named its newly created branches in Great Britain and Germany EAST/WEST, and Atlantic Records has named its new company EAST/WEST AMERICA.

An indefatigable businessman, Nesuhi Ertegun averaged about four of every seven days on the road somewhere outside the United States. He remained true to his nature and to the way his life had begun: "moving around the world," searching for and listening to new music wherever it might be found or given a chance to be heard.