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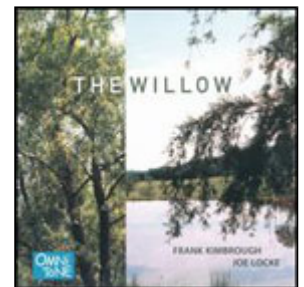
Omnitone Records

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By [Sean Patrick Fitzell](#)

At first glance, there doesn't seem to be much commonality between the titles on the OmniTone record label. From piano-vibraphone duets to 18-piece big bands, the diversity of the catalog reflects the growing experimentation in modern, creative, improvised music. Like its name implies, OmniTone seeks "all the sounds", reflecting founder and president Frank Tafuri's notion of "adventurous and listenable" music - jazz in the broadest possible sense.

The label is also an expression of Tafuri's belief in the need for what he calls "jazz ecumenism", a call for greater cooperation and fewer factions within the industry and between the various scenes. "If there was more coming together in the music," he explains, "the music would be in a lot better state."



With 26 titles in its catalog, new distribution in Europe, and financial self-sufficiency on the horizon, OmniTone has established a foothold in the niche market of creative music since its inception in 1999. And the forecast for 2004 looks promising, with imminent releases for flutist Jamie Baum's septet and trumpeter Russ Johnson's debut as a leader, and the launch of the label's sister imprint, Tone Science. But Tafuri, a veteran of the business, remains "guardedly optimistic".

First and foremost a jazz enthusiast, Tafuri started his music career as a disc jockey in Cincinnati, a gig he kept for 13 years. He had a



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Susan Getz



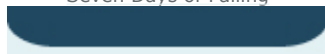
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weekly jazz program and developed specialty shows. He also founded a non profit organization that sponsored and organized an annual two-day jazz festival that ran for 10 years. Later, Tafuri was the top U.S. publicist for the legendary Italian Black Saint and Soul Note labels.

These experiences taught Tafuri what he liked and disliked about the business. Now with his own label, he is active in most aspects of the business, partly out of necessity, with only one full-time assistant, but also because he truly cares about the product he presents. He interviews all the artists and writes personal liner notes for each CD to “enhance and inform” the listening encounter.



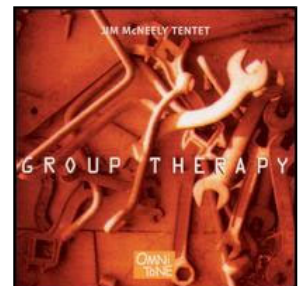
“It isn’t just about the music, it’s a whole sensory experience,” Tafuri says. He believes his audience still wants to own a CD with all its content - the art, packaging, and information - instead of just downloading music. Besides the liners, Tafuri also provides the photography for most of the sessions, another personal stamp.

As for the music: “It has to be engaging...it has to be sonically nutritious,” Tafuri says. Like a museum or park, he wants music to reward repeated visits, offering something different each time.

“I believe there is a contingent out there of enthusiastic music lovers that have just not been served.”

– Frank Tafuri, Founder, Omnitone Records

So far, the combination has had impressive results. Recent additions to the catalog include saxophonist Dave Liebman’s big band record Beyond the Line, a more focused and engaging effort than is sometimes the case with assembled allstar casts. The Grammy-nominated *Group Therapy*, by pianist Jim McNeely’s tentet, similarly expresses the creative possibilities of larger groups.

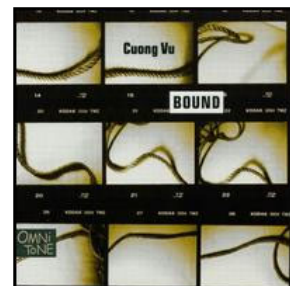


Omnitone has also produced many exquisite smaller groupings,

including diverse projects like pianist Frank Kimbrough's trio (Quickening); the Bartok-inspired improvisations between piano, reeds, and bass of *Change of Time*; and the organic fusing of genres on *Equal Interest* (with Myra Melford, Joseph Jarman and Leroy Jenkins). "His view of the music scene is very wide," says Kimbrough, whose duet with vibraphonist Joe Locke was the first OmniTone CD. "He searches out stuff that he wants to get a wider audience and he's to be applauded for that."

The number of artists debuting as leaders for OmniTone is significant and surprising. For instance, Here and How! was 40-year-veteran bassist Cameron Brown's first record as a leader. Trumpeter Ron Horton was on the scene for years before he recorded his debut as leader, *Genius Envy*, for OmniTone. Trumpeter Cuong Vu (*Bound*), multi-reedist Oscar Noriega (*Luciano's Dream*), and pianist Angelica Sanchez (*Mirror Me*) also debuted as leaders for the label. The breadth of the results exemplify Tafuri's ear for talent and his willingness to take a chances.

Even with the more established artists who have recorded for OmniTone, Tafuri likes to find something unique or to choose projects that haven't been over-recorded. For instance, there are plenty of Liebman records, but not with his big band. The String Trio of New York was around for decades before releasing *Gut Reaction* on OmniTone, but it was their first widely available live CD and their first with violinist Rob Thomas. Continuing that ethic, Tafuri launched Tone Science as a companion imprint with a CD from trumpeter Russ Johnson and pianist Mick Rossi, *New Math*. Artistically, the difference between the labels is a matter of degrees - OmniTone features composed works that promote improvisation, while Tone Science projects are improvised in the moment.



OmniTone and Tone Science occupy the fringes of jazz, and Tafuri knows it. But he is not above saying, "I want to sell records." This is not to say that he would dilute the artistic integrity of the label with commercial-sounding projects, but that he is not above focusing on selling the music and reaching an audience. "When you're not focused on sales, you're not really helping the music at all," he says. If no one is buying, then no one is hearing.

Tafuri has teamed up with other like-minded independent labels, such as Songlines, to approach foreign distributors, as an example of how collective efforts can be mutually beneficial. He also sells CDs from these other labels through the OmniTone website.

Not just a store, the website also acts as an archive of information

about each of the CDs, including full transcriptions of interviews with the artists. This helps to educate listeners who want to learn more, which is the best way for the audience to expand.

“I believe there is a contingent out there of enthusiastic music lovers that have just not been properly served,” Tafuri says. Are you one?

Visit OmniTone on the web at www.omnitone.com.

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