COURTESY ARKADIA RECORDS

A classic shot of Bob Karcy, left, with veteran saxophonist Benny Golson.

Arkadia Records' Re-inventive Spirit

IN THE OFTEN-FRAGILE DOMAIN OF record labels, technologies and means of production perpetually change — and sometimes in more than one direction. Take the ongoing saga of the respected Arkadia Records, a jazz label since 1996, with its latest development being a plunge into the vintage realm of vinyl. A company that began in an era when the CD was king has also become, by necessity, enmeshed in digital/streaming distribution models.

In 2024, the story circles back to the renascent realm of the LP, through audiophile reissues on 180-gram vinyl. Founding label head Bob Karcy explains that his latest venture "is interesting and retroactive, because here I am in digital age, an old guy who grew up on vinyl."

The leap into vinyl kicks off with prized titles from the catalogue, from longtime Arkadia artist Benny Golson, Ron Carter and Art Farmer, T.K. Blue and an Ellington tribute with the Arkadia Jazz All-Stars (Golson, Billy Taylor, Eric Reed, Joanne Brackeen, Randy Weston and Chris Potter) titled *Thank You, Duke!* Karcy points out that the first vinyl batch boasts the presence of 10 NEA Jazz Masters, a testament to the cultural import of label's deep catalogue.

A list of 44 more titles is in the wings for vinyl release, including sessions by David Liebman (whose album *The Elements: Water*, featuring Pat Metheny, is an Arkadia classic), label mainstay Brackeen and Freddie Hubbard. The 33-and-a-third re-revolution has landed in Arkadia.

Arkadia Records' backstory starts with Karcy's early life as a trumpeter who "made a nice little career in Europe a long, long time ago." He pivoted to the life of a music manager around 1980, managing Phoebe Snow and others, but admits, "I didn't quite care for that."

His next chapter found him honing his entrepreneur skills with a music video company called V.I.E.W. Video, producing concert footage by Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Art Farmer and many others. (Many of those titles, later released on DVD, are now available in video-on-demand form through Arkadia, under the rubric of "Arkadia Concerts"). A decade-and-a-half later, the prospect of running a jazz label logically emerged.

"Given my passion for jazz," says Karcy, "I thought, 'Why don't I get into the music end of it?' I was always going out to clubs and was associated with jazz. We decided to launch the audio label and looked at various artists like Billy Taylor and Dave Liebman and Benny. The people we signed really didn't have a home, so to speak. It was project-to-project and label-to-label. I, together with the artists, had the intention of having us become the home for their body of work."

Standard practices for running a jazz label were part of the Arkadia working equation, but so were more innovative educational and practical side projects, such as the newly dubbed "Jazz Secrets Initiative." Seeds of this multi-media project, involving essays, interactive guides, videos and other materials linked mostly to the vast store of music from the Arkadia catalogue, go back to 2000. Then, when the Saugerties, New York-based label was in Manhattan, its top floor of a brownstone was known as the Arkadia Music Center, with music events, master classes and guest speakers, as well as programs geared towards bettering the lives and careers of professional musicians.

"With the Jazz Secrets Initiative, we have two audiences that we're trying to focus on, Karcy says. "One is to proselytize the gospel of jazz, so to speak, to people who just love music in general but maybe they don't quite get jazz, or they're curious about it, or they've never listened to it. And we're now putting together a whole segment which will be a jazz education package. Overall, it's truly a jazz project because we're improvising part of that as we're going along."

Arkadia's catalogue is a growing, evolving entity, grounded in a voluminous archive of titles and venturing into new turf. Among the additions to the roster is inventive vocalist JD Walter, who recently completed a new album with pianist Taylor Eigsti. "I've been a fan of his for years and years," Karcy says. "And we just got out of the studio a while ago and finished editing a new album of songs that he wrote, which is really jazz, but crossover as well. It sounds cliché, but he really reinvents the tunes."

Looking back over a long career and the Arkadia saga so far, Karcy shows no sign of cutting back or entertaining retirement. He confesses, "I get both intellectually stimulated and enthused with new projects and new things. It's fun and keeps me busy and off the street, and I get to work with young people who are a lot smarter than me and can give me lessons in the technology and whatever have you. But maybe I can give them a couple of lessons about the music and about the business experience.

"I'm excited and enthused with it," he says, but adds a caveat, with a laugh: "Although I don't know if I would suggest to my grandkids to jump into the jazz music business."

—Josef Woodard