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Siegfried Loch

DEVELOPING EUROPE'S PASSION FOR JAZZ

By Ammar Kalia Photo by Steven Haberland

On the eve of his 85th birthday, Siegfried "Siggi" Loch is reflecting on six decades spent defining the world of European jazz.

"It's a very personal affair," Loch says from his Berlin apartment. "I have only ever wanted to record artists who make music I love and that touches people. I never want to release a record I wouldn't buy myself. That's always been my ethos."

Since founding his record label ACT in 1992, Loch has honed his personal sense of taste into a distinct modern jazz genre in and of itself. ACT's debut release, 1993's *Jazzpaña*, earned two Grammy nominations for its jazz-flamenco crossover, riffing on Miles Davis' *Sketches Of Spain* and enlisting Spanish and American musicians alongside the Cologne-based WDR Big Band to deliver fiery rhythmic fusions. Loch went on to sign and champion artists like Swedish funk trombonist Nils Landgren and influential pianist Esbjörn Svensson, while the current ACT roster includes everyone from rising British saxophonist Emma Rawicz to Snarky Puppy pianist Bill Laurance and bassist Michael League, Moroccan oud player Majid Bekkas and, most recently, the American duo Theo Croker & Sullivan Fortner.

"All my life I've been more interested in discov-

ering and developing talent than buying market share, and that's how ACT was built," Loch says. "It's all based on trust and a very personal relationship between ourselves and the artists. As long as that trust is intact, the work is wonderful."

Prior to setting up ACT, Loch was equally influential in the jazz industry and beyond. He worked as a producer for German jazz star Klaus Doldinger as well as American artists like Jerry Lee Lewis, Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond. During the 1970s and '80s he was the founder of WEA, which later would become Warner Music Europe. Alongside working with artists like Prince, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones, he was instrumental in signing singer Al Jarreau. To top it off, Loch and his wife, Sissy, are passionate collectors of modern European art and were early champions of painter Gerhard Richter. Their collection adorns the covers of ACT releases, lending a distinct visual language to the label roster's equally personal sound.

Celebrating this storied career, Loch has been named as DownBeat's recipient of the 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award for Recording,

joining the likes of previous honorees Bruce Lundvall, Manfred Eicher and Michael Cuscuna. It's a personal honor as much as a career milestone, Loch explains.

"When I first heard jazz, I was 15 and a friend of mine had convinced me to go and watch Sidney Bechet in concert," he says. "That show changed my life. It made me want to play that music myself and also made me want a DownBeat subscription, so I could keep up with the latest happenings in the music. It wasn't until I started working for EMI in the '60s that I finally got one. I've kept it up ever since."

Loch began working his way in the record industry, initially for EMI, then at Philips Records. It was during this time that he came across saxophonist Klaus Doldinger and went on to produce the first internationally released German jazz record, 1963's *Jazz Made In Germany*. In demand as a producer from then on, Loch was enlisted to capture a raw-edged live sound from pop, rock and jazz acts, including American rock pioneer Jerry Lee Lewis' 1964 turn at Hamburg's Star Club, where Loch had seen the Beatles honing their own sound two years previously, as well as French jazz artist Jean-Luc Ponty and Swiss jazz pianist George Gruntz.

Going on to work alongside Atlantic Records producer Nesuhi Ertegun, Loch veered further into the pop music industry and was ultimately named president of Warner Europe, until in the late 1980s he finally decided to pursue his dream in earnest. "I had to go back to my roots and fulfill my dream of making jazz and making no concessions," he says. "That's when I left Warner to go independent and start searching again for talented jazz acts who could make the audience enjoy what they were doing as much as they themselves were onstage."

On one of his usual European jazz festival jaunts to scout out new acts, he came across the artist who is perhaps associated with ACT more than any other: Esbjörn Svensson. "I saw the trombonist Nils Landgren playing, and he had the crowd in the palm of his hand, he was so captivating. I offered him a deal then and there," Loch says. "When he came to Hamburg to record, he brought a keyboard player with him who hadn't been onstage. Once he started playing he blew me away — and that was Esbjörn."

A decade and five albums later, Svensson tragically died during a diving accident and Loch considered ending ACT altogether, but he had just signed pianist Michael Wollny and was looking into young German artists. He kept going.

It proved to be a wise decision. In 2015 he did step back from the day-to-day, handing those responsibilities over to CEO, producer and partner Andreas Brandis. Since then, ACT has become a 360-degree label, artist management, publishing, booking and concert company. "We knew we needed to change our business if we wanted to keep nurturing talent," he said. And ACT continues to do so.

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