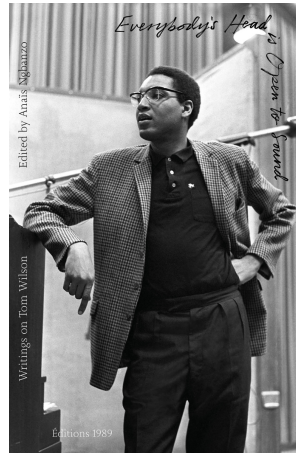


Everybody's Head Is Open to Sound

Sasha Frere-Jones

A new book on the late Tom Wilson, the uncelebrated producer of John Coltrane, Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, the Velvet Underground, and more.



Everybody's Head Is Open to Sound: Writings on Tom Wilson, edited by Anaïs Ngbanzo, Éditions 1989, 220 pages, \$36

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There are artists in the history of American pop music who are like sunken ships: embodied instances of creativity and repression whose stories end up being told, or not, depending on the fluctuations of a legacy stock market tied to an algorithm of brutality. Some have stayed submerged while alive, like the great Martha Wash—the voice of “It’s Raining Men” and Black Box’s “Everybody Everybody” and “Gonna Make You Sweat” by C+C Music Factory—possibly the most important house music singer ever. If Wash is unknown to you, that’s the algorithm. And then there is Tom Wilson, a producer whose credits feel like the *Titanic* of pop, too dramatic and catholic to be real: he produced John Coltrane, the Soft Machine, Donald Byrd, Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, the Animals, the Velvet Underground, and other preposterously canonical artists before dying in 1978 at the age of forty-seven. A new book, *Everybody's Head Is Open to Sound: Writings on Tom Wilson*, edited by Anaïs Ngbanzo, works hard to bring him out of the depths, despite the limited number of interviews he gave during his brief lifetime. For this volume, Ngbanzo collected five essays, a 1968 *New York Times* profile of Wilson, and a new transcription of a radio appearance taped in 1967.

Wilson was a young Black Republican from Waco, Texas, a jazz fan passable on trombone who thought folk music was “dumb,” a solid take in the early ’50s. In 1953, while studying economics at Harvard, Wilson started the New Jazz Society, and in 1955, with a \$940 loan from the girlfriend of a friend, founded Transition Records. (Wilson also apparently planned something called Jazz for Harvard Squares, which he said was “angled at students who dislike jazz.”) In two very thorough, wiki-like essays, music historian Wolfram Knauer traces the specifics of Transition. Though the label is generally discussed as a jazz imprint, Knauer reports that Wilson “initially envisioned Transition Records as spanning multiple genres, using catalog codes: J (Jazz), F (Folk), M (Mood), C (Classical).”

But jazz is where Wilson began a streak that feels unreal from the distance of almost seventy years. In 1957, Transition released *Jazz Advance* by the Cecil Taylor Quartet, the pianist’s first album under his own name. Whitney Balliett’s debut *New Yorker* column (cited but not reproduced in full here) was about this album and the Transition label, which he called “a small and apparently fearless firm in Cambridge.” Balliett wrote that Taylor’s record might “have the same revolutionary impact upon modern jazz as the recordings of Charlie Parker.” For those who don’t know where jazz was in 1957, Taylor’s approach to piano was like Evel Knievel riding the motorcycle Thelonious Monk had built for him: all of Monk’s dissonant clusters and flappy hammering becoming a world for Taylor, who threw consonance at the wall and let it shatter. (Taylor didn’t end up being as important to the punters as Parker, though he was to other musicians.) Wilson, in the same year, also put out *Jazz by Sun Ra*, the first full album of melting big-band jazz from bandleader and visionary Sun Ra. Transition only lasted three years, but releasing these two albums alone made it improbably forward-thinking.

Wilson went on to do both scouting and production for Columbia and then Verve, with the same ability to unerringly see



things before anyone else. In one of the interviews oddly not included in *Everybody's Head Is Open to Sound*, Michael Watts's 1976 profile for *Melody Maker*, Wilson claims that Dylan's decision to go electric "came from me," an assertion that Dylan himself obliquely cosigned by telling Jann Wenner in 1969 that Wilson "had a sound in mind."

There isn't nearly enough detail out in the world about what Wilson was like in person. Here, we learn that he was tall (six foot four), fond of the phone and also "ladies of the night," per the Velvet Underground's John Cale. He seemed to have kept things "light," according to more than one account, which doesn't entirely align with the gravity of the recordings he made. His addition of a backing band to Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" made the song a hit for the unknown duo, whose names he insisted should not be changed (an actual strike against actual anti-Semitism). That move was about getting the act a hit, though—Wilson's art happened within a system he had only intermittent complaints about (see his nostalgia for the early days of Columbia, before they "occupied the great black Saarinen monolith that they live in today," as he put it).

This is part of Wilson's puzzle—that he could enable music that snubbed the status quo while also working as a company man trying to deliver hits. Wilson bought the first Velvet Underground album from Lou Reed, only half-finished, for \$3,000. "And it sold. That surprised everyone, too," he told Watts. At the same time, he managed to protect his artists. The Velvet Underground's Sterling Morrison said they started talking to Wilson when he was still at Columbia. "He told us to wait and come and sign with him when he moved to Verve," Morrison said. "He swore that at Verve we could do anything we wanted. And he was right." You can hear that commitment, even now. Their work with Wilson on their second album, *White Light / White Heat*, made in only seven sessions, is still a horizon point for what rock bands can do: The title track, which was covered by David Bowie before the Velvet's version was officially released? "The Gift," a short story about someone who mails himself to his girlfriend, only to be accidentally murdered by that same girlfriend? "Sister Ray," which has a kind of noisiness to it that feels both more brutal and innocent than all the rock that followed?

Listening to all of Wilson's productions together, Dylan and Coltrane and the Velvets flowing into one story, a quality I hadn't noticed before makes itself more clear. Wilson gravitated toward recordings that feel raw and alive, years later. Something vital and rude and unprocessed was flowing through popular music, and Wilson could track it. So how did he keep doing it, in real time? This collection ends with an edited version of Ann Geracimos's September 29, 1968 *New York Times Magazine* cover story, "A Record Producer Is a Psychoanalyst with Rhythm." Geracimos quotes a "girl who does a lot of public relations for rock groups," who tells her that "the thing about Tom is his pose as such an easygoing guy," which concealed the fact that "he's the sharpest guy around." Geracimos witnesses a scene that sums up Wilson's profile: fearless, and ahead of his time, even decades later. He hops out of his car on Sixth Avenue to berate a cabbie who didn't stop for a "colored fellow." He yells at the driver, "What's wrong with you? These guys are fighting and dying in Vietnam. What for? So that back home they can get passed up by jerks like you?" He ends up smacking the cabbie and concludes by saying, "That'll shake him a little." You could barely do that in 1968. Now? He'd be deported.

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