



Tom Wilson – Forgotten Architect of Popular Music



A friend of mine that I've known for almost 40 years has gotten the green light and the funding to make a documentary movie. He's a great guy who has written a book on music in films, has released several well-received records, has acted in a couple well-known movies and in TV shows, has a weekly radio show, and on and on. Me? Oh, well, I allowed a mark for pub earlier today. We all make choices in life; I stand by mine.

My friend told me that he wants to make a documentary film about Tom Wilson. Tom Wilson? Um, who's that? I had never heard of Tom Wilson. But I wasn't alone; it seems that very few people have heard of him.



Turns out Tom Wilson was a music producer in the 1960's who had a huge impact on the music that I came of age listening to – the sound track of my misspent youth. It was Tom Wilson who signed The Velvet Underground to Verve/MGM Records and produced their first two albums; who signed Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention and produced their first three albums; who became Bob Dylan's record producer in 1962, halfway through "The Freewheeling Bob Dylan" album, continuing through 1965 and "Like a Rolling Stone," the period during which Dylan gradually "went electric." Tom Wilson produced the first album by an acoustic folk group called

Simon and Garfunkel and then launched their career by, without even telling them, adding electric instruments to the acoustic "The Sound of Silence." Wilson "discovered" Sun Ra and The Arkestra, producing and releasing their first two albums on Transition Records, a label that Wilson established right out of college in 1955. Wilson "discovered" Cecil Taylor and produced his

first album.

These are just a few of the bullet points of Wilson's artistic legacy; to put it in a nutshell, he was a visionary, someone who moved the culture, saw a future and set about helping to create it. He was one of the architects of popular music as we've known it since the 1960s and still know it today. And up until just recently he was pretty much a forgotten figure.

In 1955, after graduating *cum laude* from Harvard in his early 20's, Wilson started a jazz label, Transition Records, signing among others, jazz greats Cecil Taylor and John Coltrane. But the label went bankrupt



in 1957, because, you know, jazz, and the catalog was sold off to the Blue Note, and the Delmark labels. Wilson eventually took a job in the A&R department at Columbia Records where he became the label's first black producer.

Despite his jazz background and his initial indifference to folk, Wilson was assigned the task of finishing up Dylan's second album that had been a year-in-the-making, "The Free-wheelin' Bob Dylan." At first Wilson wasn't thrilled with the prospect of working with someone like Dylan. "I didn't even particularly like folk music," he later told the magazine "Melody Maker." "I'd been recording Sun Ra and John Coltrane, and I thought folk music was for the dumb guys. This guy played like the dumb guys. But then these words came out." He told Albert Grossman, Dylan's manager, that they should put a band behind him, "you might have a white Ray Charles."

Remarkably, the 20-year-old proto-hippy Dylan clicked with the well-dressed 30-year-old, and they developed a good working relationship, recording two more acoustic albums ("The Times They Are a-Changin'" and "Another Side of Bob Dylan"). Then in 1965 Wilson caused a tectonic shift in popular music with the "Bringing It All Back Home" album, Dylan's half-electric, half-acoustic *tour de force*. Wilson put together a band of electric guitar players, a couple of bass players (including Bill Lee, director Spike Lee's father), and a drummer to back up the electric half of the album. The result was Dylan's first modern masterpiece, "Subterranean Homesick Blues." You can

actually hear Wilson at the beginning of another song on the album, "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," in which Dylan makes a false start, stops, starts laughing, and is joined by a laughing Wilson. After a few seconds you can hear Wilson say, "Wait a minute now. Okay, take two." Then the band kicks in. As a high school kid listening to this, it sounded as if I were being let in on the secrets of a mystery cult – The Recording Industry!

Wilson only did one more song with Dylan, and it was his biggest hit ever: "Like a Rolling Stone," considered the number one rock song of all time by Rolling Stone magazine. Again Wilson recruited the band, and also invited a friend of his, Al Kooper, to watch. At some point, Kooper, a guitar player, slipped behind the organ during recording and began to play a simple line, ultimately giving the song its signature riff. At the start of one of the alternate takes, you can hear Wilson say, "Okay, Bob, we got everybody here, let's do one." This sums up Wilson's production style: bring the right people together, give them a vision, and see what happens.

When Rolling Stone's founder Jann Wenner interviewed Dylan in 1969 and asked him about Wilson's claims to have brought Dylan to rock 'n' roll, Dylan laughed but added, "He did to a certain extent. That is true. He did. He had a sound in mind."

Wilson signed or produced others at Columbia, including Tim Hardin, Pete Seeger, and Dion. But his biggest success was with Simon and Garfunkel. At first, the album, "Wednesday Morning at 3 am," sold terribly

(although I bought it). As a result, Simon and Garfunkel broke up, Art went back to school, and Paul moved to England. Wilson brought in some of the musicians he used on Dylan's records and some others, and overdubbed a rock rhythm track to the acoustic version of "The Sound of Silence." Columbia released



the new version as a single and it went to #1 in 1965. Simon and Garfunkel reunited as folk rockers.

In early 1966 Wilson left Columbia and took a job as head of A&R at Verve/MGM records. One of the first groups he signed was the Mothers of Invention, led by Frank Zappa. "Tom Wilson was a great guy," Zappa later said. "He had vision, you know? And he really stood by us." At Verve/MGM, Wilson also signed the Velvet Underground with Lou Reed, John Cale, and Nico. John Cale later said to the authors of "Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story," "The band never again had as good a producer as Tom Wilson." Also at MGM, he produced Hugh Masekela, The Animals, The Blues Project, and Soft Machine, along with Nico's first album, as well as many others.

As the '60's ended, Wilson slowed down and moved from producing to other areas of the music business. Wilson rarely gave interviews and wasn't in the public eye very much in his final years. On September 6, 1978, Wilson died of a heart attack in Los Angeles. He was only 47. He was buried at the Doris Miller Memorial Park in McLennan County, Texas.

Despite his legacy, Wilson hasn't become a widely known figure in popular music history. Tragically, Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall



of Fame makes no mention of him. And so, my friend hopes to right this wrong by making a documentary on Tom Wilson in order to help get the word out.

So here's an amazing guy, Tom Wilson, who changed the course of modern music, and my friend, along with

all of his other accomplishments, is going to make a film about all this. It causes a person to reflect on one's own legacy. Sure, my revolutionary discovery of a new nap time between dinner and bed should solidify my place in the history books. But is it enough? I just don't know. I'll leave it to history to decide.

Read more about Tom Wilson on the extensively researched website www.producertomwilson.com 

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