

Nowlin, Bill. 2021. *Vinyl Ventures: My Fifty Years at Rounder Records*. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 320 pp.

ROB BOWMAN
York University

There are very few record companies that are still active a half century after they were founded. There are even fewer that remained independent for their first four decades. Only a handful of independent labels have consistently recorded vital new music while also engaging in historical reissues and probably no independent record label has been active in such an extraordinary array of genres as Cambridge's Rounder Records.

Music aficionados in general, and musicologists in particular, have much to thank Rounder for. Over the course of approximately 3,500 albums (an extraordinary number by any yardstick), Rounder assiduously documented bluegrass music, New Orleans brass bands, a wide range of folk music, zydeco, Cajun, acoustic and electric blues, country music, contemporary singer songwriters, early jazz, a number of rock-based ensembles, both Black and white gospel music, the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, Maritime fiddlers, the Georgia Sea Island Singers, world music from an array of cultures and countries as well as a number of albums that do not easily fit into any category. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Rounder's vast catalogue led directly to the founding of the Americana genre. In fact, the company's founders were instrumental in setting up the Americana Music Association.

Over its 50-year history, the label produced several ground-breaking, historically important reissue series, including

complete runs of the original recordings by Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, significant releases by pre-war iconoclasts, such as Blind Alfred Reed, Fiddlin' John Carson, and Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers, and important multiple disc sets of recordings from the collection of the Library of Congress by pivotal "folk" musicians such as Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie as well as early jazz great Jelly Roll Morton. Perhaps the label's greatest achievement was the reissue of over 50 CDs containing much of the seminal documentary recordings made by Alan Lomax in the United States, the Caribbean, and Europe. Without attempting to count, I would guess I have at least 500, perhaps more, Rounder albums in my personal collection.

Author Bill Nowlin, along with Ken Irwin and Marian Leighton Levy, founded Rounder as a collective (literally all three lived in the same apartment out of which they ran the company) back in 1970. The label was initially a labour of love as none of the founders paid themselves. They earned their individual livings via other means; all three initially worked as adjunct faculty at Boston area universities.

None of the founders had any experience or knowledge of the record industry. Learning the ins and outs bit-by-bit, they partially survived in their earliest years by establishing a complementary distribution company that not only handled their own releases but also serviced eventually a few hundred other small labels, many of them important unto themselves as either reissue labels, such as Yazoo, Arhoolie, Biograph, Origin Jazz Library and County, or labels that were recording new albums that covered various underserved niche musics, such as Takoma, Alligator and Spivey. I am

sure that my collection contains at least another two hundred albums issued by labels that Rounder distributed. Clearly, for my own music education and pleasure, Rounder has been important. I have used many examples from Rounder and Rounder-distributed releases in my teaching and I have to assume that the same is true for most other ethnomusicologists and folklorists.

Not only were Nowlin, Irwin, and Leighton Levy interested in musics that were generally ignored by major labels, they saw themselves as being on a mission to both preserve various styles and genres and provide an educational vehicle for those interested in the music. To that end, from their first release forward, their albums always featured liner notes, many being several thousand words in length. Their liner notes were always the result of extensive research. In many ways, the three founders, as well as the many people who recorded and/or wrote liner notes for albums they released, were engaged in the kinds of fieldwork and archival research that is part and parcel of being an ethnomusicologist or folklorist.

There was also a sense of social justice and political activism in both the practices of the company and in the content of many of their releases. With regard to the former, for many years Rounder signed artists on an album-at-a-time basis, meaning that any artist could release subsequent records with whatever label they wished, rather than being obligated to Rounder through onerous multi-album options. The company also paid their artists double the normal royalty rates in the industry and they did not cross collateralize royalties, meaning they did not use royalties

from a successful release to clear an artist's debt on an earlier release.

With regard to engaging in political activism, there are numerous examples in Rounder's vast catalogue. Two of my favourites are *Mountain Moving Day* and *Radio Freedom: Voices of the African National Congress and the People's Army Umkhonto We Sizwe*. The former was released in 1973 and featured the feminist work of the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band and the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band. The latter came out in 1985 and was comprised of programming from the anti-apartheid Radio Freedom collective broadcasting into South Africa from the ANC base in Zambia. Merely listening to Radio Freedom in South Africa could lead to a five-year jail sentence.

Nowlin's book attempts to tell the long and incredibly complicated tale of the label's releases, business practices, their struggles with the idea of being a collective while eventually employing over one hundred individuals, and the company's survival over a half century in an industry that saw the advent of the CD, the rise of the music video, digital piracy, the death of retail record/CD stores and the current world where streaming is king. It is a remarkable story that Nowlin unfolds with an admirable level of self-reflection. Although the narrative is at times self-serving (as are most autobiographies to some degree), Nowlin routinely admits that at various times he and his partners were naïve or at least not as aware as they might have been in terms of workplace politics and relationships with others in the business.

Along the way, the reader learns how and why Rounder got involved with vari-

ous genres of music, who the other key players were, what they contributed, and, at various points, something about the musicians and the styles of music they worked with. It is in the latter area that I was most disappointed. While an incredible number of artist and album names are referred to in the book and the context in which they were recorded is often explained, very little is actually said about the music on any of these albums other than it was “wonderful” or it would have been lost if it had not been recorded and released by Rounder. Perhaps understandably, the book is, at root, a *history* of a company that mainly *dealt with music* (Rounder also had a book division). It is not a history that tells us much about any of the *actual music* that the company recorded.

That aside, Nowlin is a good writer who not only has written the history of Rounder based on his own memories but has interviewed (often by email) and quotes at length many of the other major protagonists in the company’s story. He also quotes from numerous press releases, articles and interviews printed in newspapers, music magazines, and industry trade papers published over the 50-year history of the company.

There has been one earlier book on Rounder. In 2008, Michael Scully published his doctoral thesis, *The Never-Ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance*. While Scully’s manuscript contained much important information, it was not a very engaging read. Nowlin’s *Vinyl Ventures: My Fifty Years of Rounder Records* has superseded Scully’s work if one is interested in the history and impact that Rounder Records has had on our sense and knowledge of a variety of roots musics. ❁

REFERENCES

Scully, Michael F. 2008. *The Never-Ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Brennan, Matt. 2020. *Kick It: A Social History of the Drum Kit*. New York: Oxford University Press. 371 pp.

Brennan, Matt, Joseph Michael Pignato, and Daniel Akira Stadnicki, eds. 2021. *The Cambridge Companion to the Drum Kit*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 264 pp.

THEO CATEFORIS
Syracuse University

The past decade has seen a tremendous growth in scholarship about the drum kit. From Gareth Dylan Smith’s *I Drum, Therefore I Am* (2013) and Bill Bruford’s *Uncharted: Creativity and the Expert Drummer* (2018) to Mandy Smith’s dissertation “‘Primitive’ Bodies, Virtuosoic Bodies: Narrative, Affect, and Meaning in Rock Drumming” (2020) and now these two books, *Kick It* and *The Cambridge Companion to the Drum Kit*, a remarkable body of literature has arisen in a relatively short amount of time around one of the most central components of popular music. To say that this attention is long overdue is a vast understatement. But why has it taken so long?

For starters, drummers have long been visually, if not audibly, obscured. Hidden behind the frontline instruments of the jazz ensemble and placed at the rear