Eclectic and far-ranging, Compass points the way

By Scott Alarik, Globe Correspondent, 10/25/2002

With the credentials Alison Brown brings to her work, you might expect eccentric things. The Grammy-winning banjo picker and Compass Records mogul matriculated at Harvard Business School and became the first woman to win the International Bluegrass Music Association Instrumentalist of the Year Award in 1991. She has worked for Alison Krauss’s band Union Station and as a bond underwriter for Smith Barney.

But Compass, the Nashville record label she runs with her husband, Garry West (who is also bassist for the Alison Brown Quartet), is a good country walk beyond eccentric; in fact, it may be revolutionizing the way roots music thinks about itself.

In an industry dominated by corporate pop behemoths and speckled with highly specialized indie niche labels, Compass is unique: a generalist label offering a panoramic catalog of bluegrass, jazz, alt-pop, Celtic, British Isles, and singer-songwriter music.

"One of the underlying threads of this label," Brown says, "is viewing our consumer not as just a bluegrass or Celtic fan, but as kind of an NPR, white-collar, well-educated individual who likes to listen to music that has more depth than a lot of what’s being offered on the radio.

"I’d like to be able to say to those people that if you like a Compass bluegrass album, you’re going to like our Celtic albums, too. That’s a real challenge because the record business is geared around selling one thing to one consumer."

For all the free-range eclecticism of Compass (the company’s top sellers are jazz bassist Victor Wooten, the bluegrass-jazz fusion Alison Brown Quartet, and British Isles trad phenom Kate Rusby), the label has a distinct musical personality, one marked by pristine production and smart, melody-driven music set to elegant modern grooves and sophisticated instrumentation.

"We think of ourselves as a roots-music label, but we put out records that we think sound good in a contemporary way," Brown says. "We tend to work with artists whose sound we find really accessible, whatever the style - young artists like Kate Rusby and Bill Jones, who are doing traditional music but bringing a certain freshness to it."

Jones is an alluring British trad-pop singer who had good reason to doubt that she - Bill is short for Belinda - would ever find a label. Her music hauntingly melds ancient British balladry with bright splashes of jazz, ambient pop, and contemporary songwriting.

Folk labels in Britain, she says, are centered either on purely traditional music or on folk-rock. She was nearly resigned to remaining a self-released artist until Compass licensed her second CD, "Panchpuran," for North American release.

"They’re a great label, very proactive," says Jones, who is on her first American tour. "A lot of the smaller labels tend to almost wait for shops to approach them. Because Compass is run by musicians, they’ve got a view of what the life is like, and they’ve been great on the promotional side, getting CDs to the right people to help the tour."

Compass may be generalist in its consumer outreach, but it is highly specialized in its marketing. A working musician such as Brown understands the need to target specific radio shows and record stores in lock step with each artist’s tour schedule.

Compass also understands the need to work within its budget and with accurate expectations of
each recording artist’s potential. In an industry that treats debt the way a farmer treats fertilizer, that in itself is revolutionary. Compass turns a profit on a staggering 95 percent of its titles, selling a tidy average of 5,000 to 20,000 copies per release.

“’The trouble with those huge corporations is that they have to have enough sales volume on a release to feed this huge infrastructure,’’ Brown says. ’’And the sad thing is that the infrastructure keeps getting bigger and bigger, so the benchmarks for a successful record get higher and higher.

’’And yet something like 98 percent of all records sell less than 5,000 copies,’’ she says. ’’So if your benchmark is a million, or even 100,000, you’re obviously overlooking a lot of good music that sells well enough to deserve being out there.

’’The most satisfying thing we can hear - and we do hear it, from consumers and radio people alike - is that they know they’ll like a record if they see the Compass logo on it, regardless of the genre. That’s what we’re trying to build; we’re sort of conquering the world one person at a time.’’

**The Alison Brown Quartet performs at Merrimack College in North Andover Saturday, 8 p.m. (978-837-5355).**

**Bill Jones appears with Aoife Clancy and Anne Hills at First Parish Church in Arlington Saturday, 8 p.m. (781-862-7837)**

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