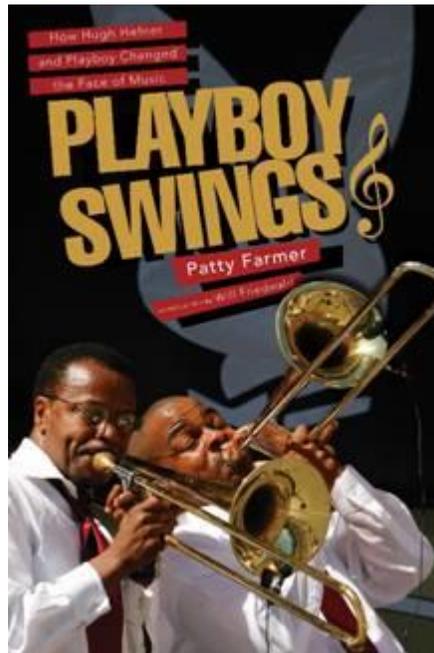




PLAYBOY SWINGS' PUTS SPOTLIGHT ON HUGH HEFNER AND THE BUSINESS OF MUSIC

CHICAGO SUN TIMES by Miriam Di Nunzio - October 7, 2015



Frank Sinatra may have famously intoned, “I’m for anything that gets you through the night, be it prayer, tranquilizers or a bottle of Jack Daniel’s,” in a now-iconic 1963 *Playboy* magazine interview, but it’s a sure bet that *jazz* got a whole lot of people through a whole lotta nights in Chicago’s Playboy Club when it opened on East Walton Street in 1960.

It’s Hugh Hefner’s penchant for jazz that serves as the narrative thread running through “*Playboy Swings: How Hugh Hefner and Playboy Changed the Face of Music*” (Beaufort Books), the new book by Patty Farmer (with Will Friedwald). In

the book, Farmer, a businesswoman and former model, recounts Hefner's legacy not just through his magazine, but through his club empire, which for two decades, from the 1960s through the 1970s, served as the biggest talent employer in the U.S.

Whether it was singers, musicians or comedians — famous or the up-and-comers — they all made their way to the Chicago Playboy club, or to one of Hef's 40 other establishments at one point or another in their careers. Everyone from Count Basie and Ramsey Lewis to Tony Bennett, Diahann Carroll and Mabel Mercer headlined the stylish clubs, including Chicago's.

"[Jazz] was the thread through most of the playboy organization and through [Hef's] life," said Farmer, of her book, which explores Playboy's influence on the music business, television and live entertainment. "He equated jazz with happy times. He liked jazz [and the Great American Songbook]. He liked the beat, the classic jazz. He had a passion for jazz since he was in his teens. In high school he wrote articles about jazz for the school paper. Even in his first [Playboy magazine] issue with Marilyn Monroe on the cover, he could have included an article on any politician of the day, or any movie star or sports celebrity of the day. Yet the first story was about the Dorsey Brothers [bandleaders Tommy and Jimmy]. In 1962, when the Playboy Interviews started, once again, instead of a celebrity or sports figure, the interview featured [legendary jazz trumpeter] Miles Davis."

As jazz became the soundtrack for the Playboy empire, nowhere was that more powerfully articulated than the 1959 Playboy Jazz Festival, held at the Chicago Stadium. (The festival was originally slated for Soldier Field until the city caved to the pressure from church groups about the fest's affiliation with Playboy magazine; use of the outdoor venue was repealed).

"To celebrate five years of the magazine, Hefner wanted to throw a huge party. ... Eventually he and [longtime Playboy executive and Hefner confidant] Victor Lownes decided to have the event last more than just a few hours, and decided to create a jazz festival." For three days in August, 1959, 68,000 ticketholders were treated to some of the biggest names in jazz

indoors at the Chicago Stadium. “Up until that point, jazz was a music form that you danced to. I give [Hef] credit for making it a concert music; people could sit down and just listen to it.”

Farmer also writes of Hefner’s contributions to other facets of America’s pop culture and political arena, via the Playboy clubs.

“There was so much more to Hef than the magazine,” Farmer said. “He was one of the first club owners to integrate not only the stages but the audiences of his establishments. The good that Hef did for Civil Rights, gay rights, first amendment rights and women’s rights is not necessarily [well-known]. Dick Gregory, for example, in 1961 got in front of white audiences thanks to [a gig] at the Playboy Club in Chicago. To this day he told me he credits Hef with integrating show business. Maurice Hines, Sonny Rollins all give Hef credit for helping advance civil rights.”

How does one equate the iconic Playboy Bunny with advancing women’s rights?

“He gave a lot of jobs to women,” Farmer said. “He had women managing important jobs when it wasn’t popular to do so, in the ’50s and ’60s. [His daughter Christi Hefner would eventually head up his company.] I interviewed a lot of the bunnies for this book. They lined up for blocks and blocks for these jobs, because they were good-paying jobs with great benefits. The women were well-protected. Many were wives and mothers. Many of them went through college on the Playboy tuition assistance program. The clubs gave women the opportunity to travel the country as more clubs opened, so you could get work in Miami, New York, L.A., Chicago.” In addition to live club performances by jazz greats, Playboy magazine, in its first five years of publication, also featured annual jazz polls through which readers could submit their “dream jazz team” lineup. “People voted for their favorite drummer, their favorite saxophone player. It was a great promotion for the magazine.” The polls also lead to an “All-Star Jazz” album on Hefner’s Playboy Records label.

While Chicago boasted blocks of late-night jazz clubs, Farmer said she did not uncover any form of less-than-amicable competition between those establishments (including the heavyweights Mr. Kelly's and the Cloister Inn) and the Playboy club when it came to booking talent.

"The performers I spoke to [for the book] were just happy to have another place to play," Farmer said. "As more and more Playboy clubs opened, it became a circuit. You had different levels of entertainers. You had folks who started in the clubs and went on to become household names. Jerry Van Dyke, for example, said that for many years he could play the Playboy circuit, which guaranteed him 40 weeks a year of employment, and the [venues] in which to fine-tune his skills with a live audience. For two decades, Playboy was the largest employer of entertainment in the country, with 40 clubs, the TV shows ["Playboy After Dark," "Playboy's Penthouse"], the jazz festival. On an annual basis they gave more work to musicians, comics, singers than anybody. Each club had four showrooms and little lounges. You had trios, headliners. I would love readers of this book to gain an understanding of all of that, of the contributions Hef made to the world of live entertainment."