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'Playboy Swings' emphasizes Playboy's role in promoting jazz artists



In this June 1986, Mel Torme & Hugh Hefner appear backstage at the Playboy Jazz Festival.

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"Playboy Swings" explores how Hugh Hefner introduced jazz to the mainstream.

When you hear Playboy magazine, what's the first thing that comes to mind? If you said "the articles," you're not fooling anybody. But a new book suggests that music, with an emphasis on jazz, should be at least third.

"Playboy Swings: How Hugh Hefner and Playboy Changed the Face of Music" by Patty Farmer assesses Playboy founder Hugh Hefner's legacy in introducing jazz to a mainstream audience on the page, on the stage, onscreen and even on Playboy's own record label.

The very first issue of Playboy featured a story about the Dorsey brothers, Tommy and Jimmy. The magazine's first branded interview was with Miles Davis (conducted in 1962 by "Roots" author Alex Haley). Its signature annual music polls began as jazz polls. To mark the magazine's fifth anniversary in 1959, Hefner staged the first Playboy Jazz Festival in Chicago. And on his TV show, "Playboy's Penthouse" (1959-1961) and in the Playboy Clubs and resorts, he showcased jazz musicians and provided black entertainers invaluable exposure in a defiance of segregationist laws and attitudes of the time.

This is a lesser known chapter of Hefner and Playboy's story, and Farmer tells it through interviews with those present at the revolution, including Hefner, Playboy insiders and myriad jazz artists, show business legends and journeymen (and women) entertainers who performed at the Playboy venues. She was also given access to Hefner's personal archives.

Farmer, an Austin, Texas, resident who works in real estate development, is a self-described "nerd" when it comes to being an amateur entertainment historian. Out of this hobby came "The Persian Room Presents," her 2012 book inspired by her fascination with New York's iconic Plaza Hotel and the heyday of its famous, now-closed, nightclub.

When it came to Playboy, she said, "many people don't realize that for almost 20 years, Playboy was the largest employer of entertainment in the country. But no one had shone the spotlight on Hugh Hefner's advancement of jazz or, collectively, on all the kinds of entertainment."

Chicago-based Ramsey Lewis, one of the jazz artists Farmer interviewed, agrees. "Hugh Hefner was very important to jazz when he was here in Chicago," he said in a phone interview. "The word was out in the jazz community that he not only liked jazz, but that he treated everybody equally, from the Dizzy Gillespies of the world to local jazz musicians whom he (booked) for his clubs, and that was me in 1959."

In his love of jazz, Hefner, a civil rights advocate, literally opened doors for black jazz artists. He invited Nat King Cole to guest on "Playboy Penthouse," not to perform but to converse with the other guests. Such bookings cost the show sponsors and advertisers, Farmer writes.

One chapter in "Playboy Swings" chronicles how in 1961, Hefner bought back, at a considerable loss, two franchised clubs in Miami and New Orleans because the club owners did not hire black women as Bunnies or book black performers, and discouraged black membership.

"Hefner just couldn't have it that way," Farmer said. "He gave many people of color one more venue to play and to make things better for the next generation."

"He supported human beings in general," Lewis affirmed. "He just hired whoever was best at whatever they did, no matter what (their) color."

As a book title, "Playboy Swings" does not fully encompass Farmer's sweeping view of the rise and fall (and possible rise again) of the Playboy clubs, and of the performers who played there. Joan Rivers, in an interview with Farmer conducted shortly before the comedian's death last year, recalled performing at the Lake Geneva Playboy Club Hotel in Wisconsin. Oddly enough, what made the biggest impression on Rivers was the corn. "Don't ask me why," she told Farmer, "but Lake Geneva had the best (expletive deleted) corn I've ever tasted in my life."

The book, then, can be enjoyed by those with no particular fondness for jazz, but who love a good show business anecdote. "I love the stories about beginnings, in which entertainers working on perfecting their craft are discovered," Farmer said. "Like Al Jarreau, who in his early Playboy days was part of a duo (with acoustic guitarist Julio Martinez), or Aretha Franklin, who played at the Chicago Playboy Club when she was 18 years old, and Keith Hefner (Hugh's brother) wasn't even sure he liked her as a performer."

One of the perks of writing the book, which took three years, was earning a spot on the guest list for Hefner's classic movie nights at the Playboy mansion in Los Angeles.

"At 89 1/2, he's a great host, I have to tell you," Farmer laughed. "I was so touched. (After a recent movie), the guests come out and there was this beautiful platter of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with the crusts cut off and sliced into four pieces so you could eat them comfortably in the car on the way home. He thinks of everything."