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New Book Illuminates Playboy Magazine's Impact on Jazz History

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Known by many for its photo spreads—and respected by some for its historically significant interviews—Playboy played a significant role in the development of jazz during the latter half of the 20th century.

In the new book *Playboy Swings*, author Patty Farmer examines how the magazine and its namesake clubs and festival promoted jazz musicians and helped increase the genre's popularity. She makes a convincing case for the company's artistic contributions and offers numerous interesting anecdotes. And despite an audacious subtitle ("How Hugh Hefner and Playboy Changed the Face of Music"), Farmer usually avoids hyperbole, but leaves a few crucial questions unanswered.

As Newport Jazz Festival founder George Wein writes in his introduction to the book, Playboy's founder, Hugh Hefner, has always been a jazz fan. When he started the magazine in Chicago during the early 1950s, coverage of the music was a major part of his mission. And even if more people remember, say, the likes of Marilyn Monroe on the cover, Farmer reaffirms that Playboy published numerous significant, sometimes controversial, jazz features and criticism in its early years.

These important pieces include Bob Perlongo's "West Coast Jazz Is Nowhere" from 1955, which featured rare quotes from saxophonist Wardell Gray. In 1962 Alex Haley conducted a provocative interview with Miles Davis shortly before the author's own famous collaboration with Malcolm X. Still, Farmer sometimes wildly overstates her case, such as when she writes that Playboy's latter-'50s jazz poll "would become more influential than those of either Metronome or DownBeat."

Playboy would go on to present jazz in different media, including a couple of short-lived, yet influential, TV series and its festival, which continues to this day at California's Hollywood Bowl.

Among the vintage photos in the book are shots of Hefner with jazz icons Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Tony Bennett and Ella Fitzgerald. The photo of Bennett and Hefner was taken the set of the TV program *Playboy After Dark*, which aired in 1969–'70.

Farmer's liveliest chapters describe the rise of the Playboy Clubs, and an array of old-school musicians and comedians revel in their memories of the glamorous rooms. *Playboy Swings* also tells how Hefner remained insistent on combating segregation while opening clubs that carried his magazine's name. These battles became especially fierce when the brand expanded into Southern cities, including New Orleans.

While Farmer charts Playboy's progressive strides toward racial integration, she still passes along



Playboy magazine founder Hugh Hefner (left) with Louis Armstrong (Photo: Courtesy PEI)

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stereotypes regarding gender and the jazz audience. She writes that in the 1950s, “Something about tenor saxophonists with beards and berets spinning endless variations on a few chord changes appealed less to women than men.” How Farmer comes to this conclusion is not stated, although this distorted generality seems to have persisted over the decades. And several women jazz fans—from back then to today—would have a response that should be heard.

Farmer includes quotes from several waitresses (aka “Bunnies”) who worked in the clubs. They get the chance to tell their stories, but they don’t discuss the music played within the venues. Instead, much of their conversations are about the night-to-night work in the clubs and how the organization treated them with more kindness than some of the celebrity guests. With no counterarguments about the company’s benevolence, the reader is left to take them all at their word.

Strangely, the book does not mention the former Bunny who would go on to have the most musically successful post-Playboy career out of all of them: Blondie lead vocalist Debbie Harry.

But Farmer does go into detail about the interesting singer/actress Lainie Kazan, who showed enough strength within the organization to create Lainie’s Room, her own venue within the Los Angeles Playboy Club during the 1970s. Kazan’s musical taste matched her self-confidence: She booked the likes of Sarah Vaughan and Bill Evans, and her own story accentuates her discernment and assurance.

(Note: Patty Farmer will discuss Playboy Swings in a conversation with Richard Skipper, and sign copies of the book on Sept. 21 at Barnes & Noble, 2289 Broadway at 82nd Street in New York City. To read a DownBeat review of the 2015 Playboy Jazz Festival, click [here](#), and to read a review of the 2014 edition of the festival, click [here](#).)

—Aaron Cohen

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