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New Book Recounts Hugh Hefner's Jazz, Civil Rights History

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LOS ANGELES — Hugh Hefner, centerfolds and Playboy bunnies are an obvious match. But writer Patty Farmer wants to stretch Hefner's legacy to include his devotion to music, especially jazz, and colorblind entertainment.

"Playboy Swings," Farmer's nonfiction book out Monday, makes the case by recounting Hefner's efforts to popularize jazz and help its African-American artists get a place on the national stage despite mid-20th-century discrimination.

"You mention Hugh Hefner and you get snickers," said Farmer, but "he was a big proponent of civil rights, human rights, gay rights and, yes, women's rights."

Incorporating nearly three years of interviews and research, including access to Hefner's personal archive, Farmer's detail-rich book focuses on the music that's long been part of Hefner's life. It was a topic of choice when he wrote for his Chicago high school newspaper.

"His whole life, he loved jazz," Farmer said. "His main contribution, and it may sound corny, but he made jazz cool."

Hefner's respect for the art form was on prominent display in Playboy

magazine, at the Playboy jazz festivals and at his nightclubs in America and around the world.

The inaugural 1953 issue of the magazine, graced by Marilyn Monroe on the cover, included a telling editorial.

"He could have written about any sports figure, any politician, any movie star, and yet he chose to write about the Dorsey brothers," musicians Tommy and Jimmy, said Farmer.

In 1962, when the first Playboy magazine interview appeared, the subject was jazz great Miles Davis.

The debut of the Playboy Jazz Festival in August 1959 featured a mind-boggling lineup including Count Basie's orchestra with singer Joe Williams; Dizzy Gillespie; the Dave Brubeck Quartet; and Davis with a quintet featuring Cannonball Adderley, according to "Playboy Swings."

The first day's gross receipts were donated to the NAACP, with the Chicago Urban League another recipient, Farmer said.

But it was arguably on television and in the Playboy clubs that Hefner made his most notable stands against racial discrimination.

As with the still-vibrant festival, he invited black and white musicians to appear onstage and on his TV shows when the civil rights battle was being fought and integration was an ideal, not reality.

The syndicated series "Playboy's Penthouse" (1959-61) and "Playboy After Dark" (1969-70) featured singers including Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat "King" Cole, and comedians Lenny Bruce, Phyllis Diller and George Kirby.

Because of the shows' refusal to make "racial distinctions," Hefner, now 89, is quoted as saying in the book, TV stations in the South refused to air them and commercial sales were hampered.

Hefner's policy of inclusion extended to his clubs. When he learned that the newly opened Miami and New Orleans franchisees were barring blacks, he moved quickly, and at significant financial cost, to regain control, Farmer said.

In a letter from Hefner to New Orleans club members, she said, Hefner explained "what his beliefs were on integration, and that he was working as hard as he could to get that accomplished."

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