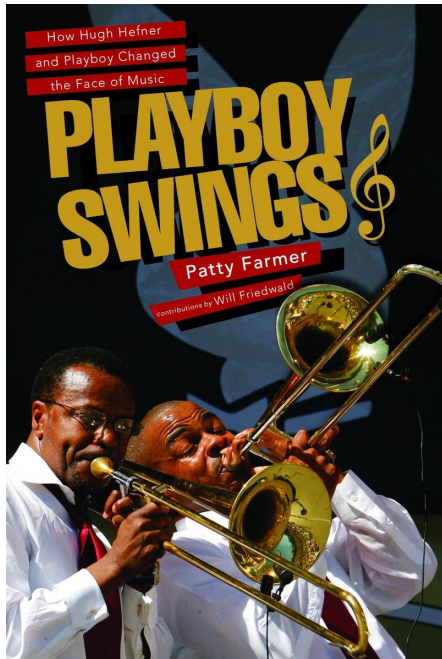


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'Playboy Swings': How Hugh Hefner made jazz cool

By [PETER LARSEN](#) & STAFF WRITER

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The debut issue of Playboy magazine arrived in December 1953, and if you knew that Marilyn Monroe was featured on the cover, well, we're not all that surprised.

But if you also knew that the first issue of Hugh Hefner's men's magazine included an article on Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey and the Dorsey Brothers jazz orchestra, well, either you really were reading Playboy for the articles, or perhaps you've been thumbing through "Playboy Swings," a new book by Patty Farmer that traces the six-decade relationship between Hef's empire and the jazz world.

"People have written about Hugh Hefner and the Bunnies and the magazine," says Farmer, who splits her time between San Clemente, New York City and France. "There are even books about the Playboy golf tournaments, but there had never been a book about Hef's passion for jazz."

Farmer admits she hadn't understood the depth of those ties until she had begun working on her previous book, "The Persian Room Presents: An Oral History of New York's Most Magical Nightspot."

"I really never associated Playboy with entertainment history, but so many people told me they got their start at Playboy, or learned how to work an audience," she says. "I started doing more and more research, and I was shocked to find that for almost 20 years Playboy was the largest employer of entertainers in the country."

Beginning with that article on the Dorsey Brothers, Playboy magazine has featured stories on jazz, Hefner's music of choice, Farmer says. In 1959, looking for a way to celebrate the first five years of his magazine, Hefner organized the first Playboy Jazz Festival.

"He wanted to throw a big party," Farmer says. "So he started making a list of people he'd like to invite, and ultimately it turned into a three-day extravaganza. Every single person they invited, from Ella Fitzgerald on down, all showed up. The only one who didn't was Frank Sinatra, and it was because he was making a movie."

The festival didn't become an annual event until 1979 when its long run at the Hollywood Bowl began, but jazz remained a constant. The first Playboy interview featured jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, Farmer says. And the chain of Playboy Clubs, where the cocktail waitresses wore the iconic Bunny outfits, became a circuit on which jazz artists and acts would go from one city to the next to play the club's cabaret rooms.

The relationship served both Playboy and the jazz world, Farmer says.

"Playboy was getting very known for covering jazz, so they drew a lot of readers to the magazine, and that benefited them," she says. "But they also contributed to jazz. They showcased it in the magazines as a sophisticated music to put on the record player when you're setting the mood, and for sure, the artists of the day, it gave them great places to work and ply their craft and get paid."

She researched the book for three years, and after the first year or so won the cooperation of Playboy and Hefner.

“About a year in, they kind of felt I was serious and I had credentials, and they warmed up to me,” Farmer says. “I got a phone call one day from Steve Martinez, who said, ‘I’m Mr. Hefner’s personal archivist and he wanted to extend you an invitation to do some research in his personal archives.’”

“But also, like I do with many other projects, I went to the source,” she says. “I went to Sonny Rollins and heard his story, and Ramsey Lewis and Jon Hendricks. People like Mitzi Gaynor. Al Jarreau. Joan Rivers, before she passed, I had the privilege of talking to her.”

The book is full of stories from those kinds of big names who many probably don’t know or remember got their start on the Playboy Club circuit or benefited from exposure, pardon the expression, in the magazine. One of Farmer’s favorite things learned in the research was how Hefner’s love of the music and its practitioners advanced the cause of civil rights in ways large and small.

“He was just really happy that it would be put down as a legacy,” Farmer says of Hefner’s reaction to the book. “And his contributions to breaking the color barrier on stage are really something that a lot of people don’t know. If you could swing an instrument, sing a song or tell a joke, that’s the only thing that mattered. I think Hefner was one of the few truly color blind people you’d meet.”

Farmer says she threw herself into her research and heard so many stories she loved that her publisher finally had to cut her off and tell her no more, that she’d hit her limit with this book. So already she’s thinking of how to follow “Playboy Swings.”

“I’m not done with Playboy,” she says. “There’s a lot more in the entertainment world to talk about. I think comedians could fill up a book on their own.”

Contact the writer: 714-796-7787 or plarsen@ocregister.com

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