

# THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE

## **Playboy magazine's Hugh Hefner was a champion of jazz**

DAVE WALKER - NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE - *Jan. 11, 2016*

Playboy magazine stripped of nudity — a brand adjustment owed to Internet-delivered availability of nudity and so much more — signals the end of an era.

It was an era, a new book asserts, in which the magazine and its founder made pop-culture contributions well beyond Bunnies, Playmates and, of course, all those fascinating articles.

In “Playboy Swings: How Hugh Hefner and Playboy Changed the Face of Music,” a Beaufort Books release, author Patty Farmer tracks how Hefner’s personal taste for jazz helped shape a generation’s music-listening habits.

It’s a tale that leads through New Orleans, where the local Playboy Club, at 727 Iberville St., now the site of The Penthouse Club, helped integrate bandstands and audiences at a time when both were mostly monochromatic.

The club also offered safe harbor for modern-jazz musicians at a time when tourists fed primarily on traditional jazz as performed

at Preservation Hall, a chronological contemporary of Hefner's New Orleans Playboy Club.

"So many people are really surprised by Hefner, by Playboy," Farmer said during a recent telephone interview. "The first thing people think of when they think of Playboy, of course it's Bunnies and centerfolds. Music isn't the first thing."

As Farmer's book details, Hefner's aspirational empire spawned TV shows ("Playboy's Penthouse" and "Playboy After Dark") that featured pop and jazz greats mingling and swinging with attractive party guests on sets fashioned to resemble apartments that Hefner himself might've occupied had he not already been ensconced in Chicago or Los Angeles mansions. Both cities also hosted Playboy Jazz Festivals.

And there were the key-holder nightclubs, which launched to runaway success in Chicago (in February 1960) and quickly expanded, first to Miami (May 1961), then New Orleans (October 1961). There would eventually be dozens of the clubs around the world, and each featured entertainment — standup comedians (George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, Dick Gregory, Flip Wilson) and musicians who were nascent icons — that was probably better than it needed to be. All as an expression of Hefner's cosmopolitan music appreciation, which was formed early.

"(Hefner) wrote about jazz for his high school newspaper," Farmer said. "He loved jazz. That was his music of choice."

His interest continued into adulthood as his magazine was born and grew to an early 1970s circulation peak of more than 7 million copies.

The Dorsey brothers were profiled in Playboy's first issue in 1953, Farmer said, and Hefner launched the Q&A Playboy Interview in 1962 with Miles Davis, interviewed by Alex Haley, as the first subject.

Farmer spent three years on "Playboy Swings," eventually winning access to Hefner's personal archives for her research. Her New Orleans chapter includes interviews with pianist Ellis Marsalis and

drummer Johnny Vidacovich, both of whom performed at the New Orleans club, the late saxophonist Al Belletto, who booked the music there, and Bruce Boyd Raeburn, who played drums in a band at the club during its final months in the French Quarter in 1974 (a later attempt to restart the club in Fat City fell flat) and went on to become curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University.

“New Orleans really was my favorite chapter, and my favorite part to research,” Farmer said.

Raeburn, in a separate interview, credited Belletto with populating the New Orleans Playboy Club’s bandstands with cutting-edge modern musicians during an era when there wasn’t much other local work for them.

Imagine the quintessential key-holding traveling salesman popping in for a pop only to witness the volcanic polyrhythms of master drummer James Black backing Marsalis.

“To experience it had to just take the top of your head off,” Raeburn said.

The club “was a refuge for modern jazz in the early 1960s at the time when modern jazz was a very hard sell here,” Raeburn added. “The city was so invested in the traditional revival and the cultural tourism that was attached to the site of jazz’s origins.

“What it did was provide an alternate universe for jazz fans to inhabit. It was extremely important.”

Equally important was Hefner’s personal stake in desegregating the clubs where necessary, buying back the Miami and New Orleans franchises “at amazing speed, staggering cost and unprecedented profit” for the owners when he discovered the prevailing all-white hiring and membership practices in the clubs, Farmer writes.

“With Hefner, you always get a wink and a nod,” Farmer said. “Most people don’t realize what an activist he was in integration.”

Though the New Orleans Playboy Club long went the way of the nudie pictorials that are ending with the edition of the magazine now on newsstands, it remains a fond memory for the local musicians who played there.

Raeburn remembers playing for “sports figures, traveling businessmen and club members,” he said. “A lot of the Bunnies were college girls.”

Raeburn also recalled frequent visits by Allen Toussaint to cheer on Joan Harmon, a backup singer at Toussaint’s Gentilly Sea-Saint recording studio who performed at the club backed by Raeburn and others.

“He would arrive in these immaculate white leather outfits with fringe down to the floor, and a girlfriend attired exactly the same way,” Raeburn said. “He was spectacular as always.

“It was a great gig.”