

PLAYBOY SWINGS

Patty Farmer

(Beaufort Books)

We all know *Playboy's* biggest claim to fame, but the magazine has of course long been respected for its journalism and high-quality fiction too. This book argues that something else is equally important: *Playboy*, as a magazine and as an empire, may be thought of for boobs first, but the very next thing that should come to mind is music. Indeed, Hugh Hefner's love of jazz inspired not just articles in the magazine, but festivals, concerts at the Playboy Clubs, and performances on his various television shows. Writer Patty Farmer (yes, an ex-model) claims that *Playboy* is a 'lifestyle', of which music is an essential element, and makes a solid case for the 50s and 60s music scene owing a lot to the magazine.

The book begins with a chapter detailing the magazine's early success. It's fascinating, and though not what the book is principally about, I would have liked to have heard more about it. Thankfully, when Farmer moves on to discuss *Playboy* and music, it remains a compelling read. It's stressed throughout that *Playboy* was intended to be about a lifestyle (and an upper-class one at that), and that from the very beginning this included plenty of articles about Hefner's own obsession: jazz. Indeed, in the late 50s, *Playboy* may well have been the best source of quality writing about the genre anywhere, and for several decades its reader poll concerning the best jazz records and artists was as much anticipated as which celebrity would be next to bare all.

Hefner and his partner Victor Lowmes came together in part because of a shared love of cabaret singer Mabel Mercer, whom Frank Sinatra (discussed at length as the ideal model for what a playboy should be, even surpassing James Bond) admitted was a huge influence. Many of the musicians who are profiled are people like Mercer, who had more of a cult following than mainstream success, which means the book covers ground that will be new for almost every reader. As you might expect, the book is full of anecdotes and stories about well-known musicians, and jazz ego runs rampant throughout. One story concerns a gig that specified 5-minute numbers. Dexter Gordon ignored the limit and soloed on and on, to the point where he was forcibly removed from the stage. His response: "When you ask someone to play five minutes, you really mean it? It's not a suggestion?"

Flashback readers will probably wonder about the early 70s *Playboy* record label. It's mostly mentioned as one of Hefner's only failures, because he had little interest in rock and didn't take it too seriously. As such, the book doesn't mention some of its more interesting acts (such as Blue Ash, Joey Stec, the Hudson Brothers, Brownstone, and Tim Rose). However, psych collectors will be interested to learn that Joan Rivers got her start as part of an odd trio (two folk singers and a comedian) named Jim, Jake & Joan. The Jake was none other than Jake Holmes, before his own recording career began. Another anecdote concerns John Coltrane taking music lessons from Ravi Shankar.

Generally, though, rock and folk are not in any way the focus of this book. Swinging times (even when a club opened in Swinging London) meant jazz. Yes, rock stars hung out in the clubs and are mentioned here and there, but if you're hoping to hear stories of rock star debauchery, this is the wrong book. Instead, much of it is taken up by more general history of the *Playboy* empire. You'll be surprised to hear Lowmes claim in his

introduction that the initial *Playboy* Club success was in part due to 'the novel idea of a place of entertainment and pleasure with charming, attractive girls in attendance, but free of the lewdness that easily could be found in the Chicago nightlife at the time'. If that's true in comparison to *Playboy*, I wonder whether I should read a book about late 50s Chicago nightlife! It's pretty clear that the clubs' massive success was as much due to professionalism as anything else. They were tightly run, the bunnies were exceptionally well trained, and the air of 'class' was every bit as palpable as the undercurrents of sexuality.

More than anything, what you learn is that the *Playboy* concept was completely of its time. Its peak in the late 50s and the 60s was very much a result of America struggling to reconcile its old-fashioned attitudes with newer, liberated ones. When times became more free overall (70s and 80s), the clubs fell apart, which is also chronicled in the book. Whatever people may think about Hefner and the sexual revolution of the era, he opened many doors. He deserves praise for his stances toward racial integration and equality, hiring black musicians, comedians and bunnies in his



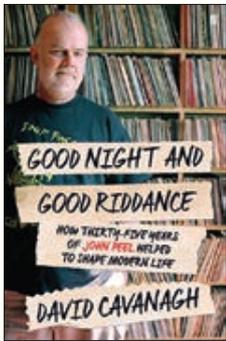
clubs and having them on his TV show. In particular, Dick Gregory (no fan of white America) has nothing for praise for Hefner's role in getting his career off the ground. The book details a number of situations where he flaunted segregation rules, and he was also ahead of his time in hiring women (who often were resented by other women) to run some of his clubs.

At about the halfway point, the book veers a tad off course and take a lot of time to detail the various Playboy clubs around the country and (eventually) the world. Musicians are interviewed in these sections, but also comedians, Bunnies and other employees. It's interesting, but eventually creates the impression that the material is being stretched out a bit. Admittedly, however, some of the best stories (mostly from comedians) are those that have nothing to do with music. There's some gossip, but anyone hoping to hear juicy smut will be

disappointed; the book is as 'wholesome' as the clubs. There is one creepy element, though: it was written before Bill Cosby's crimes against women had been exposed, and he's written about lovingly throughout, as one of Hefner's best buddies.

It's written as a narrative, but the book was put together via interviews with literally hundreds of people. This occasionally creates repetition (at least ten entertainers mention something along the lines of "There was a strict rule that we were not allowed to date Bunnies, but we all did"), but on balance it's a good way to tell the story, especially since the characters are so interesting. I'll admit that the subject matter didn't initially interest me, but I enjoyed *Playboy Swings* very much. If you're interested not just in *Playboy* or jazz, but American culture of the 50s and 60s, I suspect you will too.

(Aaron Milenski)



GOOD NIGHT & GOOD RIDDANCE: HOW 35 YEARS OF JOHN PEEL HELPED TO SHAPE MODERN LIFE

David Cavanagh
(Faber & Faber)

From 1967 until his death in 2003, John Peel was the most influential radio presenter in the UK, at least as measured by how many up-and-coming acts of all kinds and eras he helped expose to a national audience. This large (620-page) book is not so much a biography as a survey of 300 radio broadcasts he presented, including a few he did on the pirate station Radio London in 1967 before joining the BBC. Woven into the programme descriptions are details about both Peel's personal life and the rapidly changing music scene in general.

I had my doubts about whether the format could work, but Cavanagh does an excellent job of balancing the different facets of what he covers. It's neither an encyclopaedic reference of what Peel played when, or an account of his life (which Peel gave, rather unsatisfactorily, in the autobiography *Margrave Of The Marshes*). Instead, it's a highly readable volume that incorporates plenty of colourful anecdotes from his eccentric life, as well as documenting his eclectic tastes and avaricious hunger for new music.

That made him an unlikely icon of both the psychedelic / progressive era and the punk / new wave one, though his enthusiasm for the brand-new could be reckless and dismissive of music that wasn't up-to-the-moment, even music that he'd championed not too many years before. It also functions almost as a reflection of the many changes rock (particularly the underground variety) – and, to some extent, folk, world music, and hip-hop – went through between 1967 and 2003, Peel remaining keen all the while to find the new, even though his extreme ranges of taste guaranteed that no listener would enjoy everything he played.

Fans whose primary interest is pre-punk, of course, will be most interested in the first ten years of this span, which take up about the first 200 pages. Peel's eagerness to champion the obscure was evident from the time he began his show *The Perfumed Garden* on Radio London in 1967. He played artists like the Misunderstood (whom he'd mentored) and Captain Beefheart, as well as ones that (unlike the aforementioned) never got even a cult following, such as the Giant Sunflower. That legendary show lasted for just a bit before Radio London (and all UK pirate stations) were shut down, but Peel soon landed at BBC Radio One, though he had to tone

things down a bit. As Cavanagh notes: 'Whereas surviving tapes of *The Perfumed Garden* are a lot like stumbling on recordings of a lost civilisation, Peel on *Top Gear* sounds a lot more like a capable DJ from a world that looks quite similar to our own.'

He was still far further-out than his fellow presenters, and Cavanagh speculates that had he not been voted best DJ in 1968 *Melody Maker* poll, his career might have ended. That's something Peel almost managed to do by his own hand when he referred, on the air, to being 'quite amused' when he underwent treatment for VD. (Had the Beeb learned that he and his wife Sheila once had sex in the studio during a long Soft Machine track, that likely wouldn't have gone over well either.)

If he had been sacked, the careers of David Bowie and Marc Bolan might have ended (or least been curtailed and delayed) too, so fervently did Peel champion them in their pre-superstar days. This didn't go unnoticed by the BBC, one memo 'demanding to know why Peel persist[ed] in giving [T. Rex] valuable airtime,' including seven *Top Gear* sessions by early 1970. Peel was nonetheless not always accurate in his judgments of commercial potential; after playing Space