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The Man Who Made Jazz Sexy

How Hugh Hefner and Playboy staked a lasting claim to musical hipness.

By **TERRY TEACHOUT**

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Contrary to popular belief, jazz wasn't really born in the whorehouses of New Orleans. It was played there, though, and ever since then it's been associated in the minds of many of its fans with the joys of sex. I found that out when I hosted a late-night jazz show on my college radio station years ago, and was informed by my listeners that the brooding ballads I liked to play after midnight were—shall we say—aphrodisiacal.

No less noteworthy is the frequency with which jazz is now used in films and on TV as a musical signifier of world-weary hipness. It's something I first noticed in 1993 when the Secret Service agent played by Clint Eastwood in "In the Line of Fire" turned out to be (like Mr. Eastwood himself) an amateur jazz pianist who listens to Miles Davis to unwind after spending the day chasing down assassins. What was true then is true today: Davis's cooler-than-cool music is heard on the soundtrack of a recent series of car commercials in which Matthew McConaughey plays a super-suave gambler who drives to the big game in a Lincoln MKX.

Exactly how did jazz acquire this curious cultural cachet? I commend your attention to "Playboy Swings!: How Hugh Hefner and Playboy Changed the Face of Music," a well-researched, fascinatingly detailed new book by Patty Farmer that comes out next month. Written with the assistance of Will Friedwald, a frequent contributor to the Journal, "Playboy Swings!" goes a long way toward answering that question.

In our libertine age of hookup apps like Tinder, Playboy has become an arthritic artifact, something your grandpa perused when your grandma wasn't looking. But in 1953, the year of its founding, it was a genuinely revolutionary idea. Mr. Hefner himself has



Etta James at the Playboy Jazz Festival. PHOTO: EARL GIBSON III/AP

described Playboy as “a lifestyle magazine that defined what it meant to be a [single] guy,” a slick monthly that published middle-to-highbrow essays and stories by writers like William F. Buckley Jr., Norman Mailer and Vladimir Nabokov (hence the once-ubiquitous catchphrase “I read it for the articles”) interspersed with pictures of naked women. Just as essential to its success, though, were the accompanying features that told its readers how to impress women as a preliminary step to bedding them. As the first issue proclaimed, “We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d’oeuvre or two, putting a

little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.”

Note the strategic position of jazz in that list of topics. According to one of the magazine’s early editors, Playboy was designed to educate its naïve founder in the arcane ways of the swinging bachelor hipster: “It told guys like him what movies to see, what books to read, how to dress...all the stuff that Hef himself didn’t know.” But Mr. Hefner did know one thing going in: He loved jazz, and he insisted that his magazine publish plenty of articles about the men who played it.

Louis Armstrong and Dave Brubeck were among the first musicians to receive extensive coverage in Playboy, which soon became so closely identified with jazz that Art Pepper and Chet Baker recorded an album in 1956 called “Playboys.” An annual Playboy Jazz Poll was launched the following year, and in 1962 the magazine inaugurated its once-celebrated monthly interview with a piece in which Miles Davis sounded off on racism:

“You can hardly meet a white person, especially a white man, that don’t think he’s qualified to tell you all about Negroes.” Jazz was also a major part of the talent on tap at the Playboy Clubs that opened throughout America starting in 1960. To this day, a Playboy Jazz Festival is held each year in the Hollywood Bowl.

A lesser-known but identically revealing document of Mr. Hefner’s lifelong passion for jazz is “Playboy’s Penthouse,” the TV variety series that he hosted from 1959 to 1961. Purportedly taped in his own apartment (it was actually shot on a soundstage), the show featured such guests as Count Basie, Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie and Mabel Mercer. Yes, its self-consciously casual air of “sophistication” looks creaky today—but the music is as fresh as ever.

“I would hope my championing of jazz will be remembered in a connective way with what’s unique about Playboy and my own legacy,” Mr. Hefner told L.A. Weekly in 2013. “As a musical form, jazz represents the same liberation and freedom that America represents in its most ideal form.” While I incline to doubt that he ranks with Abraham Lincoln as one of our great liberators, he certainly rates a footnote in the history of jazz. No matter what you think of Playboy, its founder deserves his fair share of credit for helping to make jazz stylish.

—*Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, writes “Sightings” every other Friday. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.*

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