

# *Victor Lownes, 88, Playboy Executive Who Shaped Company's Libertine Ethic*

By JOHN SCHWARTZ JAN. 12, 2017



Mr. Lownes at a party with Playboy bunnies in London. As a company executive, he helped develop the Playboy Clubs chain.  
Rex Features, via Associated Press

Victor Lownes, a professed rake whose close friendship with Hugh Hefner helped shape Playboy magazine, its libertine ethic and the Playboy empire's business success, died on Wednesday in London. He was 88.

Mr. Lownes had a heart attack at his New Year's Eve celebration and died in the hospital after a second heart attack, Glenn Young, a book publisher and longtime friend, said.

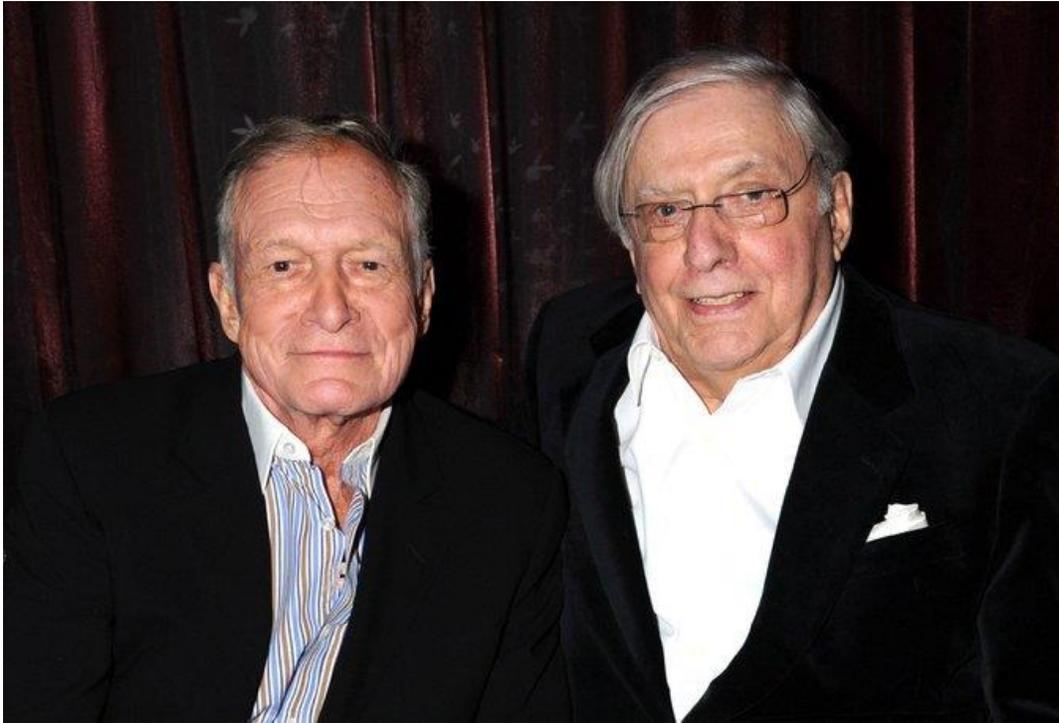
In 1954, not long after Mr. Hefner founded Playboy in Chicago, he met Mr. Lownes, "a dapper and sophisticated man-about-Chicago," Frank Brady wrote in the 1974 biography "Hefner."

Mr. Brady described Mr. Lownes as a swashbuckler "who, it was said, discovered Brooks Brothers when he was still in diapers."

Mr. Hefner, in contrast, could be awkward and ill dressed; Mr. Lownes, two years younger, was startled by Mr. Hefner's white socks.

The two men shared an interest in libertine pursuits and became inseparable, with Mr. Lownes signing on as promotions director for the Playboy Company. Mr. Hefner was the boss, but Mr. Lownes was the charismatic avatar of fun; "the essence of the true playboy image," according to Mr. Brady, who quoted a former executive as saying, "Wherever Lownes sat became the head of the table."

As a Playboy executive, Mr. Lownes helped convince advertisers that their reputations could survive proximity to naked flesh. He would later help to develop the chain of private Playboy Clubs.



Hugh Hefner, left, Playboy's founder, with Victor Lownes in 2011. They met in 1954, not long after the magazine was started. Rex Features, via Associated Press

According to some versions of the story, it was a Latvian girlfriend of Mr. Lownes who suggested the scanty bunny costumes, modeled on the magazine's worldly rabbit symbol. Mr. Hefner took some convincing.

“He said he’s always thought of the rabbits as male” and had envisioned the employees wearing short nightgowns, Mr. Lownes told Patty Farmer, the author of “Playboy Swings” (2015). But Mr. Lownes’s friend got her mother, a seamstress, to mock up a prototype, and Mr. Hefner liked it.

The costumes became symbols of the club and the “Playboy lifestyle” — and of the leering sexism that pervaded the culture, a point made by Gloria Steinem when she worked undercover as a bunny and wrote about it.

Russell Miller, in his book “Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy” (1984), said Mr. Lownes was a “conspicuous philanderer” who “loved parties, girls and sex and was never happier than when enjoying all three simultaneously.”

In 1966, Mr. Lownes opened the Playboy Club in London, where casino gambling was allowed. The club, at 45 Park Lane, near Hyde Park, became a powerful generator of cash for the company, and Mr. Lownes was its sybaritic

frontman, dating the bunnies (they weren't allowed to consort with the guests, but the proprietor was, by official decree, a different matter) and hosting wild parties that made swinging London swing a little harder. Visitors included Warren Beatty, Michael Caine, Judy Garland, the Beatles, Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate.

On the night that Ms. Tate was killed by members of Charles Manson's cult, Mr. Polanski was with Mr. Lownes.

He became one of the most highly paid executives in England, and called himself "the Bunny King of Britain."

Victor Aubrey Lownes III was born in Buffalo on April 17, 1928. At 12, he accidentally killed a friend with a rifle, not knowing it was loaded. Soon after, his family sent him to the New Mexico Military Institute.

He attended the University of Chicago, where he met and married a fellow student, Judith Downs. That marriage ended in divorce. He later married Marilyn Cole, a former London bunny and the 1973 Playmate of the Year. Ms. Cole's affections had been vied for by both Mr. Hefner and Mr. Lownes.

In an interview on Thursday, Ms. Cole acknowledged that there were occasional tensions, but said there was equanimity as well. "We were all promiscuous," she said. "Nobody really belonged to anybody."

In addition to Ms. Cole, Mr. Lownes is survived by two children from his first marriage, Meredith Lownes and Victor Aubrey Lownes IV, known as Val, and two grandchildren.

Mr. Lownes was a collector of modern art and a lover of jazz (he helped develop the Playboy Jazz Festival) and the theater, and an investor in the arts. He and Mr. Young produced the play "Other People's Money," and he backed the wildly successful percussion spectacle "Stomp." He was also executive producer of the first Monty Python film, "And Now for Something Completely Different" (1971).

His relationship with Playboy came to an end in 1981, when authorities in London inquired about allegations of improprieties concerning the company's two British casinos. Mr. Hefner fired Mr. Lownes, who insisted that the allegations were false; he was never prosecuted. Playboy lost its license for the casinos, which by then were the company's biggest profit center.

Mr. Hefner and Mr. Lownes did not speak for nine years. Then one day, Ms. Cole said, Mr. Hefner called to ask, "Can we be friends?"

Mr. Lownes, she recalled, "said, 'Of course.'"

Mr. Young said Mr. Lownes's sense of humor included a propensity for competitive needling. "When I would see him," he said, "he would feel inside his breast pocket. He would pick out a check for \$30,000 and say, 'Oh, gosh! This is my latest royalty check from 'Stomp.' Did you invest in that?"

Mr. Young had not, as Mr. Lownes well knew.

Throughout his life, Mr. Lownes enjoyed his reputation as a rake, even as his wedding to Ms. Cole approached in 1984. According to The Times of London, when asked about his plans for a prenuptial celebration, he said:

"Why would I need a stag party? I've been having one for the past 40 years."

A version of this article appears in print on January 13, 2017, on Page B13 of the New York edition with the headline: Victor Lownes, 88, Rake and Colleague of Hefner.