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Aging Well on the Jazz-and-Constitution Diet Nat Hentoff Is the Subject of David Lewis's New Documentary

By: Larry Rohter
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Early in “The Pleasures of Being Out of Step,” a documentary about the writer, critic and record producer Nat Hentoff that opens on Wednesday, Mr. Hentoff declares that “the Constitution and jazz are my main reasons for being.” That may seem an odd pairing to anyone unfamiliar with the man or his work, but Mr. Hentoff has nurtured those twin passions since the 1940s.

“Duke Ellington used to tell me that ‘we gave the world the freest expression ever in the arts,’ so I always thought there was a natural tie there,” Mr. Hentoff said in an interview last week at his Greenwich Village apartment. “The whole idea of the Bill of Rights and jazz,” he added, is “freedom of expression that nobody, not even the government, can squelch.”

Mr. Hentoff, who turned 89 this month, is the author of books like “Living the Bill of Rights: How to Be an Authentic American” and “The First Freedom: The Tumultuous History of Free Speech in America.” Initially, though, he built a reputation in the jazz world, interviewing artists like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie and turning the writing of liner notes for albums into something approaching an art form.

Mr. Hentoff in his office in Greenwich Village in 2010. Credit David L. Lewis/First Run Features

When the director David L. Lewis first approached him six years ago, Mr. Hentoff was surprised anyone would want to make a film about him: “I am not exactly a household name,” he said. But Mr. Lewis, a former producer at “60 Minutes,” regarded him as an exemplary civil libertarian, and knew little about his jazz roots or that a decade ago he was the first nonmusician to be named a “jazz master” by the National Endowment for the Arts.

“I went to high school in Westchester in the 1970s, reading Hentoff at the time,” Mr. Lewis said. “His voice always stood out in what was such an awful period in public life — Watergate, post-Vietnam, the Church Commission, F.B.I. abuses, malaise — and he was writing about all of it, so I always knew who he was.”

One of the joys of making “The Pleasures of Being Out of Step,” Mr. Lewis said, was “the chance to learn more about the music” and Mr. Hentoff’s role in documenting and popularizing

it. So the film mixes and matches, with footage showing Mr. Hentoff's friendships with the bassist Charles Mingus and the writer Amiri Baraka (who got his start writing for a jazz magazine Mr. Hentoff edited), as well as his cordial relationships with the First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams and the Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan Jr.

Born in Boston, Mr. Hentoff came to New York in 1953 to be a writer and editor for the jazz magazine *Downbeat*. He was also involved in projects to bring jazz to television and wrote essays that were thoughtful, even erudite, for the backs of jazz and folk albums: the liner notes for both John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" and "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" are his.

In 1960, while editing *The Jazz Review*, notable for its scholarly bent and articles by musicians about their own work, Mr. Hentoff accepted an invitation to run the newly founded Candid Records label. That interlude lasted less than two years, but he recorded work by Mingus, Max Roach, Cecil Taylor, Steve Lacy, Eric Dolphy, Booker Ervin, Booker Little and others associated with an emerging avant-garde.

"Some of those records that came out on Candid are as good as any record made at any time by anyone," the writer and critic Stanley Crouch says in the documentary. He adds that while many critics might feel that they have the ability to make better records than professional producers, "Nat Hentoff proved that he could."

"I had a very simple way of doing a jazz session," Mr. Hentoff said. "Most of the musicians were pretty well relaxed because I never bothered them and rarely interfered in the music. I'd covered some sessions and got very angry" at the label executives "who tried to run them."

But Mr. Hentoff said he worried about being typecast, and when opportunities arose to write about other subjects for *The Village Voice* and *The New Yorker*, he leapt at those chances. In the 1960s, sensitized by his friendships with jazz musicians, he spoke out strongly in support of the civil rights movement — the film shows him squaring off against William F. Buckley Jr. — and the 1970s allowed him to focus on what he viewed as growing government encroachment on individual freedoms.

These days, Mr. Hentoff describes himself as "an imperfect libertarian." He became a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, in 2009 and lately has been promoting the presidential hopes of Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, who, he said, "knows the Constitution" and shares his position on civil liberties issues like surveillance and the use of drones.

In the film, Mr. Lewis tracks Mr. Hentoff's shift to what he regards as social conservatism to the early 1980s, when Mr. Hentoff broke with colleagues on the issues of abortion and responses to the AIDS epidemic. He has been particularly unyielding on abortion, "casting himself as the defender of the fetus and the rights of the fetus," Mr. Lewis said, and alienating many friends on the left.

“He thinks he has to follow things to an absolutist position,” his wife, the writer Margot Hentoff, says in the film, for which she was interviewed separately. “He loves conflict,” she also said. “It’s fun” for him. She added: “I love it too. It’s great.”

In the film, Ms. Hentoff talks about having had an abortion in the 1960s, with her husband acknowledging that he reluctantly acquiesced. “There is an inherent contradiction between his position and his actions that I tried to bring out in the film as best I could,” Mr. Lewis said.

On other issues related to civil liberties, Mr. Hentoff’s views remain where they always have been. Asked about the current Supreme Court, he replied with a single Yiddish word, “Oy.”

“This court, I get very worried when something very important is coming up to them,” he said. “We do not have a good court, and if this continues, we will be in more and more trouble.”

“The Pleasures of Being Out of Step,” whose title comes from a phrase in one of Mr. Hentoff’s memoirs, is accompanied by Mr. Lewis’s book of the same title, published by the CUNY Journalism Press. It is an oral history with Mr. Hentoff and many others in the style of Studs Terkel, and provides firsthand accounts of some of the main ideological and aesthetic battles that engaged New York intellectuals from the 1950s onward.

“Basically, the objective was that I wanted to get all the good stuff that was on the cutting room floor out into the public,” Mr. Lewis said. “It enables the speakers to go deep, with a lot of detail you obviously can’t put into a film.”

In both the film and the book, Mr. Hentoff comes across as an iconoclast. Mr. Lewis prefers to use the word “curmudgeon,” though Mr. Hentoff begs to differ.

“I’m not doing it to be a gadfly, I’m really serious about this stuff,” he said. He added: “Without intending to, I learned to be an outsider. I’ve been an outsider all my life, and what I’ve concluded is that you can learn a lot by being there.”