

Nat Hentoff, journalist who wrote on jazz and civil liberties, dies at 91

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Nat Hentoff, a journalist, author, champion of jazz music and passionate defender of civil liberties in columns he wrote for The Washington Post and Village Voice, among other publications, died Saturday in Manhattan. He was 91.

His son, Nick Hentoff, announced the death on Twitter, saying his father died while listening to jazz singer Billie Holiday.

Over a long and admired career — he was twice a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize — Mr. Hentoff was a writer and editor for the jazz magazine Down Beat, co-founded the publication Jazz Review, was immersed in efforts to bring jazz to television, briefly ran a record label for which he oversaw the recording of major jazz musicians including Max Roach and Cecil Taylor, and wrote liner notes for John Coltrane’s landmark album “Giant Steps” (1960).

In 2003, he was one of the first nonmusicians to be recognized as a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts. Yet his interests went far beyond the realm of jazz. He wrote for print publications including the New Yorker magazine, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Times and Legal Times. Late in his career, he was a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Through years of turmoil and turbulence, through times of political divisions evoked by the Vietnam War, in eras of social discord and widespread concerns about crime as well as attempts to suppress dissenting voices, Mr. Hentoff was regarded as among the country’s staunchest public advocates of American constitutional guarantees.

In his columns on civil liberties, published in the Voice for a half-century and in The Post in the 1980s and 1990s, Mr. Hentoff sometimes aroused the ire of many of who might have seemed to be his natural allies in the progressive camp. At the same time, he unabashedly shared, in print, views that were dear to many who might not have expected to find him congenial. For such reasons, a 2013 documentary about his life was plausibly titled “The Pleasures of Being Out of Step.” On-screen he declared, “the Constitution and jazz are my main reasons for being.”

“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 told the New York Times. “The whole idea of the Bill of Rights and jazz [is] freedom of expression that nobody, not even the government, can squelch.”

Of the 10 amendments in the Bill of Rights, Mr. Hentoff was most closely identified with the First, the one that guarantees freedom of speech and of the press as he derided and denounced what he perceived as efforts at censorship by the left and the right.

Atop his column in *The Post* were the words “Sweet Land of Liberty.” Mr. Hentoff believed in applying the words of the Constitution in the most difficult of circumstances. Nor was the word “Sweet” to be overlooked. As he saw it, it was the Constitution that created American life as he knew it and as others enjoyed it.

It was also said of him that he freely made use of the freedom that he cherished to promote causes that might have seemed inconsistent in someone whose ideas so often seemed to reflect those of American liberalism, or progressivism.

One of those for which he was well known was his determined opposition to abortion, leading him to call himself a member of the antiabortion left. It did not concern him that many whose views on abortion he shared might have held diametrically opposed positions on a broad range of issues also dear to Mr. Hentoff’s heart. He supported the state of Israel and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

He was described in the *American Conservative* magazine, in recognition of his individuality, as “the only Jewish atheist pro-life libertarian hawk in America.”

One of his *Post* columns from 1985 looked askance at opposition that led to the withdrawal of the proposed commencement speaker at Cornell University’s medical school. Noam Chomsky, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had become known, among other things, for anti-Zionist views. Chomsky’s views on the Middle East were far more nuanced than that, and his speech was going to address the arms race. But when Cornell’s president was chosen as Chomsky’s replacement, Mr. Hentoff wrote, with obvious irony, that the graduates who had opposed Chomsky could rejoice in “having been rescued from the possibly infectious presence of a heretic.”

In recent years, he supported the presidential prospects of Sen. Rand Paul, the Kentucky Republican who, he told the *Times*, “knows the Constitution” and is sympathetic with his views on civil liberties issues, including surveillance and the use of drones. And he noted that President Obama, for all the admiration he elicited from liberals, “needs watching — like everybody.”

Nathan Irving Hentoff was born in Boston on June 10, 1925, to Jewish immigrants from Russia, and his father supported the family as a haberdasher and a traveling salesman. Raised in a Jewish neighborhood, Mr. Hentoff said he showed signs of rebellion from a young age, often pointing to the time, at age 12, when he sat on his front porch and ate a huge salami sandwich very slowly on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Jews are expected to fast.

Mr. Hentoff displayed a precocious interest in journalism. At 15, he became an unsalaried reporter for Frances Sweeney, who ran the muckraking and short-lived *Boston City Reporter*. Mr. Hentoff covered anti-Semitism as a beat.

Meanwhile, he graduated from the prestigious Boston Latin School, and from Northeastern University in 1946. He worked for a series of radio stations, mostly as a jazz broadcaster.

He said he was fired from Down Beat in 1957 after pushing too aggressively for the publication to hire black writers. He then joined the nascent Village Voice, where he said he lobbied to write about anything but jazz and began to immerse himself in issues including education, race and, eventually, civil liberties.

He wrote and edited books on jazz, and he also wrote novels and essay collections, among other works.

Mr. Hentoff is survived by his wife, Margot; four children, Jessica, Miranda, Nick and Thomas; a sister, Janet Krauss of Connecticut; and 10 grandchildren.

Mr. Hentoff acknowledged to the Times that he sometimes came across as a “gadfly” but that his passions were quite serious. “Without intending to,” he said, “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.”