



Remembering quintessential New Yorker Nat Hentoff

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In his final column for the Village Voice, 50 years after he started there, Nat Hentoff recalled, “I came here in 1958 because I wanted a place where I could write freely on anything I cared about.” He cited a tribute to lefty gadfly Izzy Stone, ““He never lost his sense of rage”” and added, “Neither have I.”

Boston-born, he moved here in the early '50s — and rapidly became a classic New Yorker: argumentative, erudite and happily “heretical.” In “The Pleasures of Being Out of Step,” a 2013 documentary on his life, he avowed, “The Constitution and jazz are my main reasons for being.”

By “the Constitution,” he mainly meant the First Amendment and free speech — causes on which he never stopped leading.

Music critic, proud atheist, ardently pro-life, Hentoff refused to be categorized, or to sacrifice principle for any party line. He would gleefully engage anyone, while damning censors of all kinds.

A friend of Dizzy Gillespie and Bob Dylan, a harsh critic of Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, he also wrote for The Wall Street Journal, Playboy, the New Yorker and others — publishing 30-plus books along the way, including “The Jazz Life,” “The New Equality” and “Free Speech for Me — But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other.”

The first non-musician to be named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment of the Arts, Hentoff wrote liner notes for “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan” and for albums by Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and others.

Laid off by the Voice in 2008, he became a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. Along the way, he racked up lifetime-achievement awards from the American Bar Association, the National Press Foundation and the Human Life Foundation.

Hentoff’s son Nick reports, he “died surrounded by family listening to Billie Holiday.”

RIP.