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Jazz was Nat Hentoff's teacher as well as his chief pleasure, while he gave it both shape and importance

Robert Fulford

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Among the art forms of the western world, jazz in the 1950s was still an unruly child, its position highly questionable. It lived most of the time in saloons, rarely in concert halls. That was when Nat Hentoff began to write about it, and by his own efforts, change its status. His recent death left some of his admirers considering what a skilful and imaginative critic can accomplish in half a century of committed work.

Hentoff gave shape and importance to the art he covered, as reviewer, biographer and prophet. He did more than any other writer to define jazz and give its artists the stature they deserve. He wrote a column for *Down Beat*, the jazz magazine, and then moved to the *Village Voice* in New York, where his work appeared every week for decades.

He wrote dozens of books about jazz. The most notable was a collaboration with Nat Shapiro on an oral history, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It*. In various editions and translations, it gave an international voice not only to the great figures, but to artists who were otherwise little known.

When Hentoff died, Andreas Koenig wrote online: "As a young man in Germany in the 1970s, it was reading the translation of *Hear Me Talkin To Ya* that opened not only my ears but also my mind to Jazz. I am forever grateful for that." Among other books were several introducing the subject to children. In 1986, he wrote about his youth in a graceful, touching memoir, *Boston Boy*, perhaps the best of his books.

As with many of us, jazz became his teacher as well as his chief pleasure. The hatred he saw surrounding many black musicians awakened him to racism, which he opposed with great vigour. He went from there to civil rights, on which he wrote books and gave lectures for many years. Politics, education and capital punishment became important subjects. The U.S. constitution became his obsession.

He was born in Boston, the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia. The district of Roxbury, where his family lived, had many anti-Semites; he recalled being attacked in the streets as a "Christ-killer." At Northeastern University, when he was editor of the student newspaper, it carried a story about university trustees supporting anti-Semitic publications. As a result the university closed the paper and Hentoff acquired a personal reason for being a passionate enemy of censorship.

His views tended to be liberal: I recall furious articles about the Vietnam war in the 1960s. But he was no standardbred lefty and he often annoyed people who found his opinions unpredictable. He joined the conservative Cato Institute as a senior fellow. He was an opponent of abortion, always eager to defend vigorously any pro-life writer who was in danger of being censored. In 1977, out of his absolutist belief in free speech, he even defended the right of American Nazis to march through downtown Skokie, Illinois.

His close connection with jazz began when he was a teenager and became a friend of Duke Ellington, whom he often called “my mentor.” He called two notable members of the Ellington band, Ben Webster and Rex Stewart, “my itinerant foster fathers.” Back in the classroom, he hid jazz magazines inside his textbooks. His first full-time job was as a Boston radio station’s jazz DJ, which made him a candidate for Down Beat.

Hentoff became part of the first important program about jazz on American network television. He and Whitney Balliett, as music consultants, chose the performers for *The Sound of Jazz*, a live hour that appeared on CBS on a Sunday afternoon in 1957.

They gathered Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Thelonius Monk, Lester Young and many others. The musicians rose to the occasion and played beautifully, obviously aware that they were part of something new. As I watched in Toronto it seemed to me a miracle, a recognition at last of the true value of jazz in all its depth and power.

It entirely lacked the condescension with which jazz was often treated by mass media in those days. The camera moved fluidly among the musicians like a visitor who had dropped in to see what was happening – it was the first taste of a style that became popular a few years later in festival films. The *New York Times* critic said, “It was the art of video improvisation wedded to the art of musical improvisation ... an hour of creative and fresh TV.” It appeared later on a music CD and a DVD, a precious moment in jazz history.

Wherever his taste or some urgent issue took him, he was never far from jazz. In the 1950s, he wrote a magazine piece about Mort Sahl, the first comedian of his generation to wrap his monologues around current politics. When I was speaking to Hentoff that week, he was eager to explain why Sahl was like a jazzman. “He starts with a theme, and then improvises on it, as long as he can. It’s like a jazz solo.” As Hentoff spoke, his excitement made it clear he was delighted that one more world, the world of comedy, was incorporating the methods of the art form at the centre of his life.

He died on Saturday, January 7, aged 91, with his family gathered around him and Billie Holiday’s recorded voice filling the air.