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Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice. By Tad Hershorn.
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Jazz has no dearth of big egos. But for every Miles Davis, Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, or Wynton Marsalis—soloists who dominate the headlines—most musicians conduct their business quietly on the stage, transforming the language of jazz through their musical utterances. Few have changed the way jazz is heard or thought about by people who are not musicians. Thus it's refreshing to read Tad Hershorn's *Norman Granz*, which celebrates the life of a man who made a difference.

In some ways, Granz is like the impresario and activist John Hammond. Both made their claim on jazz without being musicians; both yoked their passionate love for music with a burning desire to right social wrongs, especially those of race. But while Hammond began his life with the stellar position affixed from birth (his mother was a Vanderbilt), Granz, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, relied on his wits and audacity to overcome life's obstacles. By the end of his career, Granz was a multi-millionaire, comfortably retired in Europe, one of the few people to ever accumulate such a fortune from jazz.

Yet, as Hershorn's biography makes clear, this is no simple success story. Granz's career is intertwined with his insistence, often forcefully expressed, to do things right. He was, by multiple testimonies, a difficult man to deal with: a "benign bully" (387) who refused to tolerate the fools in his way. But his work was good work, committed from the beginning to furthering the cause of racial equality, and with it, a better life for people on this earth. Hershorn's subtitle has it right: Granz is "the man who used jazz for justice."

From the outset, Granz was a self-assured man. As a youth he was tall and handsome, an athletic tennis player who dressed casually in what pianist Nat Cole called a "sloppy Harvard look" of sweaters and brown-and-white shoes. He was jolted into awareness of the singular artistry of jazz by Coleman Hawkins's 1939 recording of "Body and Soul." At the same time, the horrors of segregation aroused him to take on a social mission. His first act was, as he put it, "sociological" (42). For Los Angeles club owners, he offered a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. In exchange for a series of jam sessions, which he

would manage, he required the clubs to open their doors to all races. He also insisted that musicians receive union scale, thus sparing the jam session from the grudging animus of the musicians' union. The policy worked, prompting him two years later to move jazz from the nightclub to the concert hall. Advertisements for his premiere 1944 event condensed the phrase "a jazz concert at Philharmonic Auditorium" to "Jazz at the Philharmonic"—a label he happily appropriated for the next forty years.

For the next fifteen years, Granz was at the center of the jazz world. His *Jazz at the Philharmonic* tours (known by the acronym JATP) took handpicked all-star combos across the country and, eventually, across the world. These concerts were, at first, loud and rowdy, climaxing in shrieking one-on-one competitions that gave Jean Bach what she described as her "Jazz at the Philharmonic' headache" (64). Yet they did important work. By shepherding jazz into the concert hall, they crossed a powerful barrier preventing mainstream audiences from taking jazz seriously as concert music. Moreover, this work was done on jazz's own terms. If the likes of Alan Lomax and John Hammond preferred to focus on the authentic "roots" of jazz, Granz was perfectly comfortable with its contemporary commerciality. He profited by it, but didn't devalue the music. Over time, the audiences quieted down. "Isn't that great?" exulted Granz after a 1955 concert. "Not a peep out of them. They're *listening*" (246). Under Granz's aegis, jazz became an alternative chamber music, a regular feature on the concert circuit.

Granz's role in the record business also pushed him into the spotlight. From his premiere concert he produced *Jazz at the Philharmonic, Vol. 1*, one of the first recordings to document a live performance. Slowly gathering his capital, he founded Clef Records, then Norgran, and finally consolidated his business under the Verve label. For most of the 1950s, he was inseparable from the recording studio. The amount was staggering: in the six years from 1950 to 1955, he produced three hundred and fifty-seven sessions, routinely advertised as "under the personal supervision of Norman Granz." "His philosophy was to catch the guys while they were hot, and not just live, but in studio packages," remembered George Avakian. "And he worked very fast...which kept the hula-hoop going, you might say" (185).

Not all of these recordings were carefully planned: Granz was fond of putting musicians together in a kind of musical blind date, without much preparation or supervision. Yet many of these recordings were historical. Thanks to Granz's passion for jazz, we have the titanic *Masterpieces* recordings of Art Tatum, who was encouraged to play his entire repertory in the recording studio. And we have the *Songbook* recordings, using Ella Fitzgerald to elevate the pop song writing of Gershwin, Arlen, Berlin, and Ellington.

Hershorn warns us from the outset that his book provides “few surprises or unreported scandals” (7). That’s because Granz made a point of placing his activities in the public eye, for good or ill. His musical tastes were middle-of-the road. He certainly can be credited with acknowledging bebop in the late 1940s (and signing Charlie Parker to an exclusive contract in the 1950s), but many of his artists were underutilized Swing Era soloists. It didn’t take long for jazz to pass him by. On one occasion, he botched an attempt to lure cool jazz composer and pianist Dave Brubeck to his label by letting him know that he had no love for his music. By the end of his career, when he formed Pablo Records, Granz surrounded himself with familiar faces: Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, Joe Pass, and Duke Ellington. His commitment to Fitzgerald took up much of his life. After becoming her personal manager in 1955 (when her contract with Decca expired), he worked to make her life as easy as possible. “I want Ella to make enough bread so she can afford to take a couple of months off every year,” Granz explained. If she can make 200 grand a year, why should she knock her brains out? That’s what I’m looking for—that and her dignity, which I don’t think has been respected enough” (233).

Hershorn’s account is thoroughly professional and personal. Affected by hearing about Granz’s life, Hershorn first approached the man in 1981, hoping to write his biography. Granz firmly rebuffed him. It took a master’s thesis, finished in 1996, to finally catch the attention of the now-aged impresario. After calling him to tell him that he “pretty much had the story straight” (11), Granz invited Hershorn to interview him at his home in Switzerland during the last years of his life. After his death in 2001, Granz’s widow, Grete, gave Hershorn access to his personal documents, providing a unique insider documentation of Granz’s complicated business.

Hershorn’s portrait is supported by interviews with numerous eyewitnesses, musicians and co-workers, as well as by archival research. In particular, he follows the upwardly mobile blacks whose attention Granz routinely made sure to court. Granz’s push for integration came early, preceding the better-known integration of baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947 and the armed forces in 1948. Black audiences responded in style. “People dressed like they were going to the opera,” remembered one black eyewitness to JATP concerts in Detroit in the late 1940s. “There wore top hats, gold-headed canes, and capes. Capes!” (121).

The rough spots in Granz’s life do not escape Hershorn’s attention. In his opinion, JATP often featured a “caricature” (188) of the jam session, pitting soloists against one another in highly staged, formulaic encounters. “Norman had a weird sense of competition,” reflected Dizzy Gillespie. “[He] got his nuts off by sending two or three trumpet players out there to battle one another’s

brains out on the stage.” Yet Gillespie also credits him with “first class’ treatment for jazz musicians...no segregation” (193). The same double-sided assessment is the worst anyone could muster against Granz: critiques of his idiosyncratic behavior land side by side with testimony to his inherent goodness. He was well known for his manic behavior backstage, “screaming every five minutes at stagehands or anyone else in the way” (195), but musician after musician credits him as generous, kind, and “vengefully honest” (391). The end result is a complex portrait in which the noble and the foolish are thoroughly integrated. Leonard Feather summed up the mixture best: Granz was “an irascible, slangy, expensively-casually-dressed, impulsive, epicurean, much-hated and much-loved man” (234).

We learn a good deal about Granz’s private side, especially his enthusiastic pleasures in the finer things in life. His tastes in food and art were epicurean: he would scour the countryside in France for fine cuisine, mentally cataloguing the best restaurants to recommend to close friends. He loved and collected art, and cajoled a friendship with the difficult Pablo Picasso (the namesake of Pablo Records). As he aged, his opinions grew firmer and his willingness to tolerate what he saw in others declined. To put it more bluntly, he became cranky. Yet this is the natural end result of such a powerful personality. Granz once complained of Duke Ellington, whom he served as personal manager for almost a decade, as someone who blithely insisted on having things his way. “If anything disturbed his equanimity, then it was a great drag to him. He was incredibly *égoïste* in the French sense” (156). Obviously, much the same can be said of Granz. But that’s what it takes to shape the course of jazz over half a century.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

SCOTT DEVEAUX is Professor in the McIntire Department of Music at the University of Virginia. His recent book, *Jazz*, with Gary Giddins (Norton, 2009) will soon appear in its second edition. He is series editor for *Readers on American Musicians* for Oxford University Press, and is currently working on a *Stevie Wonder Reader*.