



Men, Women, Girl Singers

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By Tony Gieske

By John Levy with Devra Hall
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327 pages

John Levy is a well-placed figure in the days and nights of big-time jazz.

A former bass player for Billie Holiday and George Shearing, he became a talent manager for such singing legends as Joe Williams, Nancy Wilson, Sarah Vaughan, Betty Carter, Abbey Lincoln, Etta Jones, Dianne Reeves, Marlena Shaw, Roberta Flack and Shirley Horn.

He didn't skip the instrumentalists, either, handling such prominent names as Herbie Hancock, Yusef Lateef, Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, Eddie Harris, Herbie Mann, Wes Montgomery, Billy Taylor, Stanley Turrentine, Freddie Hubbard and Les McCann.

His autobiography, "Men, Women and Girl Singers: My Life as a Musician Turned Talent Manager," is brimming with anecdotes and insight because this is a guy who was there.

He was there the night Ben Webster walked into Joe Louis' place in Harlem carrying a gold-headed cane with which he cleared the drinks from the long bar, threatening to swing at anyone who tried to stop him. Levy put his arm around the brawny star of the Duke Ellington saxophone section and eased him into the street, around the corner and into a little cellar bar where he fed him a couple of drinks and calmed him down.

For a gent like that, handling a temperamental jazz diva held no terrors. He tells how he avoided process servers who were trying to break his contract with Wilson. He has a few choice words for Flack, some candid ones about Lincoln and tales of a few previously unpublicized misadventures of Hubbard.

Levy relays the sartorial advice he took from pioneer R&B saxophonist King Curtis: Always wear blue shoes with a blue suit.

Toward the end of the book, Levy recounts the details of the deaths of his good friends Cannonball Adderley and Williams. Adderley was being rushed to a hospital when the car he was in got wrecked. Williams fled his hospital bed and took a mysterious last walk in Las Vegas in 1999. He collapsed in the street and died. Several friends had died in hospitals, Levy recounts, and Williams thought the hospital he was in was going to kill him.

This event-filled book is something of a story in itself because Levy, now 88, was stricken with cancer as it neared completion, and his writing associate and companion, Devra Hall, the daughter of guitarist Jim Hall, fell ill with multiple sclerosis. But they got the job done -- and well done.

Author's Correction: Levy had cancer in the 1970s, and has not been recently stricken. Hall, who had cancer in 1996 and is currently cancer-free, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1998.