

Three Who Mattered

Three non musicians who played an outsized role on the New England jazz scene died in 2003: writer, photographer and mentor Vinny Haynes; Fr. Norman O'Connor, the "jazz priest;" and Eric Nisenson, a writer with five books to his credit. Here are the articles that originally appeared on this site.

Boston Jazz Presence C. Vincent (Vinnie) Haynes, 81

BOSTON -- It came as little surprise that hundreds and hundreds of friends and admirers attended the services for Vinnie Haynes Thursday, July 10, at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury. Virtually thousands of Bostonians have benefited from Vinnie's dedication to his many spheres of community interest -- neighborhood planning and development, local journalism and history, sports and, of course, jazz.

Vinnie was Boston's resident guru of jazz, one of the most knowledgeable and perhaps the hippest of those who observed, rather than played, the music. He was vice president of the Boston Jazz Society for three decades and was instrumental in helping the New England Jazz Alliance establish an authentic New England Jazz Hall of Fame as a member of the Hall of Fame nominations committee.

Vinnie also was a major source for others conducting jazz projects, including Ken Burns, who used some of Vinnie's "pictures" in his 10-part public television series, "JAZZ." Vinnie's jazz photos, along with those of the late Bernie Moss and Florence Lewis, were featured in the "Keeping Jazz Alive" exhibition at the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center late last year. Vinnie was often called upon to lecture on the subject, and he was one of those interviewed on WGBH television's award-winning documentary, "Boston Jazz Memoir;" but Vinnie's expertise in jazz went beyond New England.

"When I mentioned some of the musicians who were in my father's [Ernie Fields'] band in Oklahoma, Vinnie knew of them all," said Carmen Fields this week.

The Haynes family is certainly one of the most renowned in New England. Other than Jack, Bobby and Ted, which other three brothers require no more identification than Roy, Rev. Michael, and certainly not least, Vinnie?

—Brent Banulis

Rev. Norman J. O'Connor, 'Jazz Priest,' Dies at 81

(Fr. O'Connor died of a heart attack on June 29, 2003. This obituary by Peter Keepnews was originally published July 6, 2003.)

The Rev. Norman J. O'Connor, a Roman Catholic priest who was also a well-known authority on jazz, died last Sunday in Wayne, N.J., where he lived. He was 81.

The cause was a heart attack, the medical examiner's office said.

Father O'Connor, whose name was seldom mentioned in print without the words "the jazz priest" attached, began making a name for himself in the jazz world not long after being ordained as a Paulist priest in 1948.

In 1954, three years after becoming the Catholic chaplain at Boston University, he was named to the board of the first Newport Jazz Festival. In the ensuing years he was a familiar presence there, clerical collar and all, as the master of ceremonies



for concerts and the moderator of panel discussions.

During his decade at Boston University, Father O'Connor also became known as a jazz writer, contributing a weekly column to *The Boston Globe* and articles to *Down Beat*, *Metronome* and other magazines. In the 1960s, after moving to New York, he was the host of a local television show, *Dial M for Music*, and a syndicated radio show.

His association with the Newport Jazz Festival stemmed both from his lifelong love of jazz and from his friendship with the festival's producer, George Wein. Father O'Connor was a frequent patron of Storyville, the Boston nightclub Mr. Wein operated.

"In those days," Mr. Wein wrote in *Myself Among Others*, his autobiography, "it wasn't common for a Catholic priest to walk into a jazz club; in fact, it sounded like the beginning of a bad joke."

Norman James O'Connor was born in Detroit on Nov. 20, 1921. He became interested in jazz at an early age and began playing piano with local jazz bands while in high school. He continued to work occasionally as a musician into the 40's, but had abandoned any thought of music as a career by the time he enrolled at Catholic University in Washington.

He nonetheless remained passionately interested in the subject, and wrote his doctoral thesis on the aesthetics of popular music.

In 1962, Father O'Connor was named director of radio and television for the Paulist Fathers in New York. He became a fixture on the New York jazz scene, and remained one even after being named director of the Mount Paul Novitiate, a church training center in Oak Ridge, N.J., four years later.

In 1980, Father O'Connor was hired as the executive director of Straight and Narrow, a drug and alcohol treatment center in Paterson, N.J. He retired last year.

His profile in the jazz world became lower in his later years. But he remained the jazz priest to the end, producing benefit concerts by Marian McPartland and other musicians for Straight and Narrow with the help of Mr. Wein.

He is survived by two brothers, Patrick O'Connor of Detroit and James O'Connor of Sebastopol, Calif.

Over the years Father O'Connor encountered some criticism for his involvement in the jazz world - although he said most of it came from lay Catholics who viewed the music as disreputable, rather than from members of the clergy.

"Jazz has no morality," he said in 1962. "If a listener thinks jazz is immoral, it's because he brings to it remembered associations, such as a pretty girl in a slinky gown, undulating dancers or people overindulging in Prohibition-era speakeasies."

Father O'Connor also saw nothing wrong with using jazz in religious services. "I'm a 20th-century man," he told *The Daily News* in 1969. "I'm accustomed to the modern sounds of the piano, the drum, the trumpet and the saxophone."

—By *Peter Keepnews*. Originally published July 6, 2003

Writer Eric Nisenson, 57

Eric Nisenson, 57, the prolific author of *Round Midnight: A Portrait of Miles Davis*, *Open Sky: Sonny Rollins and His World of Improvisation*, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, *Blue: The Murder of Jazz*, and *The Making of Kind of Blue: Miles Davis and His Masterpiece*, died August 15, 2003 of kidney failure in Malden, Massachusetts, the Boston suburb where he lived. He had been ill for some time with a relatively mild form of leukemia and complications from treatment for it.

Nisenson was working on a biography of Dave Brubeck, and researching Brazilian jazz for a book funded by a Guggenheim foundation fellowship he received in 2002. He carried on much jazz-related correspondence with many music aficionados through e-mail, and was a member of the Jazz Journalists Association.