

Freedom Fighter

Norman Granz, who died 10 years ago, was one of the most influential non-musicians in the history of jazz. He created a touring jam group of musical titans that helped usher in an era of concertized jazz; he formed two record companies, Verve and Pablo, with which he released some of the most lasting artifacts of the genre; and he propelled Ella Fitzgerald to stardom.

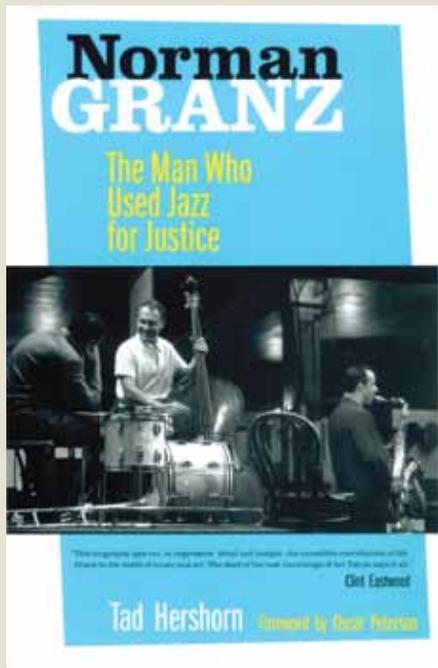
These accomplishments and the stories behind Granz's controversial success form the meat of Tad Hershorn's exhaustively researched comprehensive biography *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz For Justice* (University of California Press). Granz's life—from his schooldays in Los Angeles to his retirement in Europe—is all there, but instead of framing the book on how Granz changed jazz, Hershorn widens the lens; he bases the work on how Granz became an unintentional crusader in the struggle for equal rights.

Hershorn writes that Granz first experienced racism as a child of immigrants in Los Angeles, where he was confronted with anti-Semitism. As he grew older, equality may have been in the back of his mind when he flouted conventions of the day by hanging out with black musicians. But Granz's fight, Hershorn writes, wasn't born of righteous indignation or empathy, he just wanted black musicians and jazz listeners to be afforded the same privileges as their white counterparts.

When the impresario formed Jazz at the Philharmonic in the early 1940s and started bringing organized jam sessions to Los Angeles clubs, he inserted non-discrimination clauses in performance contracts. Venue owners looking to host JATP had to effectively desegregate their club every night of the week to appease Granz. Even the most steadfast segregationists tended to give in to the promoter's demands once they saw how much business his concerts brought in the doors.

This early quest for equality extended east once Granz began taking JATP on the road and booking the band in concert halls. He eventually suggested that Duke Ellington and other bandleaders include non-discrimination provisions in their contracts, but they were squeamish at the idea of alienating customers. Equality, for the time being, was a fight he fought alone.

Bringing jazz to concert halls presented a non-racial problem for Granz as well. The music, some owners said, was not proper for these hallowed auditoriums—especially with the raucous crowd these concerts attracted. But even if Granz was excluded from a few



symphonic venues, he still played in these spaces more often than not, helping pave the way for touring bands like the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

By choosing to turn on his recording equipment during these early shows, he opened a door to an aspect of his career that would come to define him. His work with Fitzgerald's songbook albums at Verve and Ellington's late-in-life recordings for Pablo Records are cemented into the essential jazz cannon.

While Granz eventually became known as a record producer, he didn't stress perfection in the studio. In the book, Granz talks about his recording technique, saying, "I don't hold with people that review in the 83rd bar the third trumpet player made a mistake. I don't accept that. That's ridiculous! You can keep recording forever until you get a perfectly sterile record. I wasn't selling perfection."

The story is told through a combination of personal interviews with Granz, never-published ephemera from his estate and interviews with musicians, historians and friends. Hershorn explains his difficulty in producing this work and how reticent Granz was to tell his life story. There are times this is obvious. The book provides a few glimpses of Granz's well-known rage and stubbornness, but he never fully comes to the page. His frequent spats with artists and critics are sometimes given cursory explication.

Even with a few pulled punches, Hershorn has come up with a thorough case study of a man who changed jazz forever. The music and many of its most treasured musicians are forever indebted to the work of Norman Granz. **BB**

Ordering info: ucpress.edu



Oscar Peñas *From Now On*

BROOKLYN JAZZ UNDERGROUND 027

★★★★½

Based in Brooklyn by way of Barcelona and Boston (where he studied at Berklee and the New England Conservatory), Peñas is a guitarist with a classy, mahogany hued aesthetic. Aptly called "Continuum" the opening track runs ten minutes long and floats without resolution—save for occasional pauses—perhaps a soundtrack for the ever present hum and bustle of NYC, as depicted in cover and booklet photos.

Whirlpool-like and hypnotic, the track features smoldering, tasteful tenor from Dan Blake, percussion flavors from Richie Barshay and virtuosic runs from six string bassist Moto Fukushima (a name that springs to the lips readily since unfortunate recent events in Japan).

The two lilting choros reveal Peñas' enthusiasm for Brazilian traditions and it is clear the nylon strings are his default. Barshay lightens the mix on "Choro n.1 (Corpo)" with pandeiro. The title track features accordionist Gil Goldstein, his instrument resonating like a sitar and adding a hint of mystery. Flamenco rhythms and a Pat Metheny riff underpin the leader's solo, everything kept on simmer, before the Three Blind Mice bass riff vamps to fade. Is "Samuel Smith" a paen to my favorite beer?

It's tango fusion may be a bit exotic for the Northern English origins of the Sam Smith brewery, but the dark strains in the music are decidedly oatmeal stout and various effects conjured before the tango returns suggest wind over the bleak Yorkshire moors. The plaintive "Encuentro" features lovely, driving soprano from Blake. The guitarist's eight originals hang together well, bathed in a warm resonance and dusky intensity, the musicians impeccably groomed for the session.

—Michael Jackson

From Now On: Continuum, Choro n.1 (Guinga), From Now On, Samuel Smith, Encuentro, Choro n.2 (Corpo), Julia, Adéu. (45.53)
Personnel: Oscar Peñas, nylon string guitar, electric guitar; Dan Blake, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone; Moto Fukushima, six string electric bass; Richie Barshay, drums and percussion, pandeiro; Gil Goldstein, accordion, piano; Franco Pinna, bombo legüero.
Ordering info: bjurecords.com