



October 19, 2008

MUSIC

The Baroness of Jazz

By BARRY SINGER

Correction Appended

IF the mysterious Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter is at all remembered today, it is for her proximity to the deaths of two legendary jazz musicians. In 1955 [Charlie Parker](#) died on a sofa in her Fifth Avenue home; 27 years later [Thelonious Monk](#) died after secluding himself for years in her New Jersey house.

Both deaths made the baroness an immediate target of tabloid headlines and a long-term subject for scurrilous gossip. Almost no one, though, beyond the insular jazz world, could possibly know her whole story: how, until her death in 1988, she championed jazz as both a friend and a generous, if rather unlikely, benefactor.

A [Rothschild](#) heiress, she offered her home to countless jazzmen as a place to work and even live, while quietly paying their bills when they couldn't find work. She chauffeured them to gigs around New York, toured with them as a kind of racial chaperon, and was even known to confront anyone she felt was taking advantage of her friends because they were black.

"I always likened her to the great royal patrons of [Mozart](#) or Wagner's day," the saxophonist [Sonny Rollins](#) said in a telephone interview. "Yet she never put the spotlight on herself. I try not to talk publicly about people I knew in jazz. But I have to say something about the baroness. She really loved our music."

The baroness first materialized in New York jazz clubs in the early 1950s like some film noir siren, right down to the raven hair and long cigarette holder. She seduced the music's greatest figures with her friendship, the revolutionists of the bebop era: Charlie Parker, [Dizzy Gillespie](#), [Miles Davis](#), Thelonious Monk and many others. Her illustrious family has long refused to discuss her. But now a new book, "Three Wishes: An Intimate Look at Jazz Greats" (Abrams Image), offers a window into her personal life, providing details even her jazz intimates were probably unaware of.

The book is primarily a collection of candid photographs of the musicians taken by the baroness, and a compilation of their varied responses to a favorite question: "What are your three wishes?" On Oct. 30 an exhibition of her original notebooks collecting these snapshots and wish lists will open at the Gallery at Hermès in New York.

"Three Wishes" arrives with the implicit sanction of the Rothschild family, including a six-page introduction by a granddaughter, Nadine de Koenigswarter. The book offers more concrete information about the baroness than has ever before appeared between covers. But the source of her extraordinarily deep bond

with jazz musicians remains elusive.

She was born, her granddaughter writes, in London on Dec. 10, 1913. Her full name was Kathleen Annie Pannonica Rothschild, according to her 1935 wedding announcement in *The New York Times*. She was the granddaughter of Nathan Mayer, the first Lord Rothschild, and the great-granddaughter of Mayer Amschel, the Rothschild patriarch who, from the Frankfurt ghetto, orchestrated his family's rise. Her father was Nathaniel Charles Rothschild, a partner in the family bank, whose greater passion was entomology, a hobby at which he was both gifted and exceedingly accomplished. According to a great-niece, Hannah Rothschild, who is completing a documentary about her for the BBC, the baroness's father was plagued by clinical depression that sometimes led the family to hospitalize him. He killed himself in 1923, at 46.

Nica Rothschild, as she was known, became an aviation enthusiast and an accomplished pilot. At 21 she met a kindred spirit at Le Touquet airfield in France. Baron Jules de Koenigswarter, 31, was a French mining engineer, banker and pilot. He was also a widower with a young son, and like Nica, he was Jewish. The baron quickly proposed after just three months; her response was flight to New York. They were married at City Hall in October 1935.

The couple took up residence in Abondant, a 17th-century chateau not far from Normandy. Their first-born child, Patrick de Koenigswarter, recalled in May in an interview published in *The National*, an Abu Dhabi newspaper, that when the Nazis invaded France, the baron, a lieutenant in the reserves, was called up. His father "left my mother a map, with instructions: If the Germans get to this point, take the children and escape any way you can to your family in England." Shortly thereafter, his mother did, accompanied by a nanny and a maid, on what proved to be the last train out of Paris. The baron's mother dismissed her son's entreaties and instructions. She died at Auschwitz.

The baron joined de Gaulle's Free French forces and was assigned to the Congo. At his instigation his wife next moved their two children to the United States, placing Patrick de Koenigswarter and his younger sister, Janka, with the Guggenheim family on Long Island. The baroness then somehow rejoined her husband in Africa with the Free French, serving in various capacities including ambulance driver and ending the war as a decorated lieutenant.

One little-known wartime detail lends a different sense to her later arrival in the New York jazz world. Her husband's extended family, as well as her Hungarian-born mother's, were nearly all killed in the Holocaust. The baroness's adoption of New York's predominantly black jazz family in the war's aftermath thus seems less the act of a louche dilettante than of a survivor bent on resurrection and rebirth.

"I believe that she could no longer live in any ivory tower after what she saw in the war," Hannah Rothschild said in a telephone interview. "Privilege offered no protection. The fate of her own mother-in-law proved that. She had experienced the very depths of prejudice herself firsthand."

The baron entered the French diplomatic service after the war, settling his wife and children first in Norway and then in Mexico. "My father was a very controlling person," Patrick de Koenigswarter said. "He was adamant about punctuality, while Nica was notorious for being late. She missed appointments, sometimes by days." He continued, "It didn't help that my father had no particular interest in the subjects that fascinated her: art and music."

The baroness always credited her brother, Victor, a jazz fan and amateur pianist who studied with [Art Tatum](#) and Teddy Wilson, with introducing her to jazz. Shortly before her death, though, she revealed in a rare interview for the Monk documentary "Straight, No Chaser" the moment when her interest in jazz music escalated into something more.

"I was in the throes of the diplomatic life in Mexico," she remembered of the years 1949 to 1952, "and I had a friend who got hold of records for me. I used to go to his pad to hear them. I couldn't have listened to them in my own house, with that atmosphere. I heard them and really got the message. I belonged where that music was. This was something I was supposed to be involved in in some way. It wasn't long afterwards that I cut out."

It is well known in jazz circles that the great project of the baroness's life was the torturously unstable Monk, whom she served as a surrogate wife right alongside Monk's equally devoted actual wife, Nellie. The baroness paid Monk's bills, dragged him to an endless array of doctors, put him and his family up in her own home and, when necessary, helped Nellie institutionalize him. In 1958 Monk and the baroness were stopped by the police in Delaware. When a small amount of marijuana was discovered, she took the rap for her friend and even served a few nights in jail.

People have always asked why. What drew her to him so intensely? Was it sex, drugs or groupie-esque infatuation? Clearly her steadfast devotion to Monk's music propelled their relationship, which both maintained was platonic. In light of her father's history, though, it seems possible that the underlying bond was love and childhood loss. In Monk, she may have been drawn to the same anguished brilliance that had consumed her father, whom she could not save.

The introduction to "Three Wishes" still leaves unanswered many questions that pursued the baroness throughout her life. Did she abandon her children in her headlong embrace of the jazz life, or were they taken from her? Did she enable addiction in the musicians she loved? Did she buy them drugs? Did she use drugs herself?

These questions once loomed large in her mystique. As her back story deepens, however, their sense of enormity recedes. The baron divorced his wife in 1956 after the scandalous publicity surrounding Charlie Parker's death in her home. Shaun de Koenigswarter, the couple's youngest son, recently confirmed that the baron also got custody of the three younger children, Berit (born in 1946), Kari (1950) and himself (1948). "I am the only child who never lived with my mother after she settled in New York in 1953," he said in an e-mail message, adding that his four siblings lived with her during different periods.

That the baroness in fact lost custody of her three youngest children as a consequence of her love of jazz further illuminates the maternal quality of her presence on the scene. Is it any wonder that she clung to her musicians like family?

"She realized that jazz needed any kind of help it could get," Mr. Rollins said, "especially the musicians. She was monetarily helpful to a lot who were struggling. But more than that, she was with us. By being with the baroness, we could go places and feel like human beings. It certainly made us feel good. I don't know how you could measure it. But it was a palpable thing. I think she was a heroic woman."

It has taken the actual family she left behind a long time to arrive at a similar conclusion. “Not all members of our family were enthused about the life she chose to lead (especially our father!),” Shaun de Koenigswarter wrote. “But over the years, many of those who had initially disapproved — particularly in light of the many viciously biased and racist press reports about her — came to understand and appreciate what she was all about.”

Correction: October 26, 2008

An article in some editions last Sunday about the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter misidentified the film in which she revealed the source of her interest in jazz music. It was “Straight No Chaser,” not “’Round Midnight.”

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
