CHAPTER 2

"'I've got Billie Holiday. . . .' 'Who is she?' I asked."

When I came to New York, I had been introduced to Sam Shaw, an artist and photographer who had a feel for show biz. Sammy was a young man about town who turned out to be my guardian angel. When I told him my ideas for my cabaret, he was very enthusiastic.

"There's a guy around named John Hammond. You should meet him because he feels the way you do about the Negro people. And he knows more about jazz than anybody in the world." One of John's first jobs was writing for a newspaper, the *Brooklyn Eagle.* Sam and John had met when John had been a delegate to the first Newspaper Guild convention in 1935.

Sam didn't waste any time. "We're going to see John Hammond." In those days John was supporting and publishing something called the *Labor Press,* a newspaper of sorts. This was his interest then, among other things. He had a little broken-down office somewhere Midtown Manhattan. John was tall, with a dazzling smile.

"Sam tells me you're going to open a nightclub. What kind of a place is it going to be?"

"Well, first it's going to be a nightclub that has something to say, and we're going to have Negro and white talent working together. The talent and

musicians will be integrated. I want fresh, unknown talent. In addition to that, I will invite the Negro public in as patrons."

John shook my hand. "I can help you. Leave it to me. I've got Billie Holiday. I'll bring her in for you as your first singer."

"Who is she?" I asked.

This was the time when John was producing a concert at the venerable Carnegie Hall, From Spirituals to Swing, with backing by the *New Masses,* a left-wing, highly esteemed cultural magazine. John had gotten talent he discovered traveling all over the country, from North Carolina, from Chicago, from Arkansas, from Kansas City, all kinds of places.

"Barney, why don't you come up to Carnegie Hall and take a look at some of the rehearsals?" I went up and was bowled over by the talent John was presenting. "Well John, I don't have to look any further. This is it. It's all here."

From Spirituals to Swing opened December 23, 1938, five days before my own opening. John's concert was a huge success, knocked the music critics off their seats. Nothing like this had ever been done before. His program notes referred to the southern spirituals, blues, boogie-woogie, and jazz being performed as "the music nobody knows." Billie Holiday wasn't in John's concert.

> **John Hammond:** *I wanted to present a concert in New York which would bring together for the first time, before a musically sophisticated audience, Negro music from its raw beginnings to the latest jazz. The concert should include primitive and sophisticated performers. I wanted to include gospel music as well as country blues singers and shouters . . . artists whose music had never been heard by most of the New York public.*[1]

It was an education for this Trenton boy. John had turned over the hallowed Carnegie stage to three boogie-woogie piano players to open the program. It was quite a moment when the lights went up on an old upright boardinghouse piano with Albert Ammons seated at it. John told me he had searched to find this particular one, a Wing and Son make. Meade Lux Lewis and Pete Johnson were on a Steinway, the three playing together this unknown jazz form, boogie-woogie, which swept the country in the forties.

In his teens, John had in his record collection Clarence "Pinetop" Smith, the original boogie-woogie pianist. A few years later when he heard Meade Lux Lewis on a record playing boogie-woogie blues, he tried to locate him but couldn't find him. He was in the Club De Lisa in Chicago in 1935 where

Albert Ammons was playing and asked him if he happened to know Meade Lux Lewis.

"Sure I know him. He's around the corner working in a car wash."

John discovered Pete Johnson playing at the Sunset Club on the main drag in Kansas City, with Joe Turner working bar and shouting the blues.

> **Mary Lou Williams:** *While Joe was serving drinks he would suddenly pick up a cue for a blues and sing it right where he stood, with Pete playing piano for him. I don't think I'll ever forget the thrill of listening to Big Joe Turner shouting and sending everybody night after night while mixing drinks.*[2]

At its height, Kansas City had some five hundred nightclubs with live music, gambling, numbers, and whorehouses. The city's political machine was controlled by a notorious bootlegger, Tom Pendergast. Besides controlling the liquor trade, he controlled the city police, the courts, clubs like the Sunset Club. Pendergast was indicted for tax evasion in 1938, same as Al Capone, and so his reign ended.

Onstage that historic night at Carnegie Hall, "Big Joe Turner shoved the mike out of the way, as though flicking lint from a lapel and started shouting the blues in an open-throated tone that carried to the far reaches of the Hall."[3] The legendary gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe and her guitar and the gospel quartet Mitchell's Christian Brothers thrilled me to my bones. There were blues harmonica great Blind Sonny Terry and Count Basie's band with singers Helen Humes and Jimmy Rushing and James P. Johnson on piano with Sidney Bechet on soprano sax, jamming with Bill Basie. I heard for the first time Big Bill Broonzy, the blues singer and former farmhand from Arkansas, and the Kansas City Six with Buck Clayton and Lester Young. At one time or another most all of these artists played at Cafe Society.

I had already hired Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis to open Cafe Society. Just before our opening, John comes over to me. "Barney, I'd like you to put on Pete Johnson."

I protested. "John, I have two boogie-woogie piano players now. I've got a budget. I can't just put everybody to work. I've got seven men in the band. I've got a relief piano player in between. I've got Billie Holiday and Jack Gilford. Where am I going to get the money?"

"Well, I could take him to work any place on 52nd Street, but I want you to have him. I don't want him on 52nd Street. You should have them all, get

a monopoly on boogie-woogie pianists. You've got to have him. They'll all play together." I gave in. John gave me his broad smile.

A little while later he comes back. "By the way, there's a guy who sings the blues, Joe Turner. He goes with Pete." He gives me one at a time.

So I left the music to John Hammond. With his influence the emphasis in my cafe was on the music. I now had the greatest jazz connoisseur and talent scout at my elbow pushing me in that direction. I didn't need much pushing.

When I met John he was making his name as a discoverer and nurturer of unknown talent, and as a record producer. He had already produced blues legend Bessie Smith's final recordings in 1933. Three days later he made Billie Holiday's very first recording session with Benny Goodman and then again, in 1935, with Benny sitting in as sideman; Teddy Wilson, piano; Roy Eldridge, trumpet; Cozy Cole, drums; Ben Webster, tenor sax; John Kirby, bass; John Truehart, guitar.[4]

My original plan, before meeting John, had been to go around to the places where the musicians played and engage them there. I knew where to go for such talent from my days as a shoe buyer coming to New York. I certainly never could have found the unknown and remarkable talent John discovered traveling around this country. It was Sam Shaw's inspiration to introduce me to John Hammond. He recognized kindred souls.

John's upbringing gave no inkling to what was to become his all-abiding interest and life's work. He was a young millionaire whose father was a big corporation lawyer on Wall Street. His mother was Emily Vanderbilt Sloane. His maternal grandmother was a Vanderbilt who had married one of the Sloanes of the W. and J. Sloane's high-priced furniture store. He was born into a mansion at 9 East 91st Street, which had a ballroom seating 250 people, a household staff of sixteen servants. When he was twenty-one he inherited a lump sum of money in addition to an income of $12,000 a year from a trust, "ample but not princely," John's words.

He went to all the fancy schools, Hotchkiss, Yale, and yet he became a champion for Negro rights. This man, who played classical viola, was committed to jazz, to helping Negro musicians. He would scout out the talent, bring them to New York at his own expense, record them, and then have to send them back because he'd not been able to get them work—until I came along.

One time John had wanted to put the trombonist Benny Morton into Teddy Wilson's band at Cafe Society. Benny, at that time, was with Count Basie. "John, I can't afford to pay Benny what he's getting with Basie." "Bar-

ney, just pay him the usual salary and don't worry." I learned much later that John had been making up the rest out of his own pocket.

I had often wondered how John came to all this. One evening several years after Cafe Society had opened John came in with a very distinguished gray-haired gentleman. As I passed their table John reached out and stopped me.

"Barney, I'd like you to meet someone. I'd like you to meet John McChesney. Mr. McChesney was one of my teachers at Hotchkiss. He's the man who began to change my social and political opinions."

This gentleman was a socialist and an agnostic. His Sunday philosophy class would meet in his house after chapel "to undo the harm of the Sunday services" he would tell his students half-seriously.[5]

So here in this fancy boys' school, a Vanderbilt gets these ideas. I got them coming from a poverty-stricken family who had taken a boarder into their house who instilled one brother with these ideas which were handed down from brother to brother, ending up with me.