

MUSIC

# Rosetta Reitz, Champion of Jazz Women, Dies at 84

By DOUGLAS MARTIN NOV. 14, 2008

Rosetta Reitz, an ardent feminist who scavenged through the early history of jazz and the blues to resurrect the music of long-forgotten women and to create a record label dedicated to them, died on Nov. 1 in Manhattan. She was 84.

The cause was cardiopulmonary problems, her daughter Rebecca Reitz said.

Ms. Reitz (pronounced rights) came by her interest in jazz through her husband and male friends, but as the feminist movement gathered steam in the 1960s, she noticed something was missing: the music's women. So she started collecting old 78s of performers like the trumpeter Valaida Snow, the pianist-singer Georgia White and a bevy of blues singers who had faded from memory.

At the same time, she unearthed lost songs by more famous artists like Bessie Smith, Ida Cox and Ma Rainey.

“In that decade of the 1920s, when jazz was really being formulated and changing from an entertainment music to an art form,” Ms. Reitz said in an interview with The New York Times in 1980, “these women were

extraordinarily important and instrumental in accomplishing that.”

She continued: “Louis Armstrong was a sideman on records in the ’20s with singers like Sippie Wallace, Eva Taylor, Hociel Thomas, Virginia Liston and Margaret Johnson. These women’s records were made as *their* records. But when they come out now, they’re reissued as Louis Armstrong records, when actually he was not that important on them.”

These women “had the power,” she told *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1984. “They hired the musicians and the chorus line, a lot of them wrote the music themselves, and they produced their own shows. They were more than just singers; they were symbols of success.”

Music was at first just one element in a busy life. Ms. Reitz was at different times a stockbroker, a bookstore proprietor and the owner of a greeting card business. She was a food columnist for *The Village Voice*, a professor, a classified-advertising manager and author of a book on mushrooms. She was a founding member of *Older Women’s Liberation*. She reared three daughters as a single parent.

Ms. Reitz also wrote “*Menopause: A Positive Approach*” (1977), considered one of the first books to look at menopause from the viewpoint of women and not doctors. She listened to her recordings of women while she wrote the book, many of them celebrating the strength of women rather than treating them as victims.

“I was so alone and needed to be nurtured, and I found I was getting it from them,” she told *The Los Angeles Times* in 1992.

Ms. Reitz started Rosetta Records in 1979 with \$10,000 she had borrowed from friends. Her routine was to scout out lost music, usually through record collectors. She then supervised the remastering of records that were often severely damaged; researched and wrote detailed liner notes; and designed graphics and found period photographs for the album covers. She personally

wrapped each order and took it to the post office for shipment. (Around a dozen stores later carried the Rosetta label.)

Over the years Ms. Reitz went from vinyl recordings to tapes to CDs. She refused to give sales figures, but she did tell The Los Angeles Times that the four titles in her “independent women’s blues” series of compilations — including “Mean Mothers” — sold around 20,000 copies each. Some albums centered on themes like railroads or prisons.

Much of the music she recorded was in the public domain, but Ms. Reitz said she had devoted time and energy to tracking down the rights to some songs and to paying artists royalties when she could. Her label had not issued a recording in at least 13 years, but previous releases are sometimes sold on the Internet. And a number of mainstream labels have also reissued albums of the artists Ms. Reitz admired.

Rosetta Goldman was born in Utica, N.Y., on Sept. 28, 1924. She attended the University of Wisconsin for three years, moved to Manhattan and got a job at the Gotham Book Mart. She negotiated a loan to buy her own bookstore, the 4 Seasons, in Greenwich Village, where literary figures like Ralph Ellison were celebrated.

For years Ms. Reitz lobbied for a postage stamp honoring Bessie Smith, which was issued in 1994. She produced concerts by longtime female blues singers for the Newport Jazz Festival, Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl.

She married Robert Reitz when she was 23, and they divorced in the late 1960s. Besides her daughter Rebecca, of Manhattan, Ms. Reitz is survived by two other daughters, Robin Reitz of Tucson, and Rainbow Reitz of Manhattan; and a granddaughter.

Ms. Reitz did not always finish what she started. She had planned to make 26 albums, she said, but completed only 17. She never finished a book on women in jazz. And even her success with the Rosetta label had left her with a

conviction that more work still had to be done.

“My hope and dream,” she said, “is that there won’t be a need for a women’s record company.”

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