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Rosetta Reitz, 84, jazz historian, feminist, writer

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By Mary Reinholz

Rosetta Reitz, a feminist jazz historian, author and entrepreneur who owned a Greenwich Village bookstore, died at St. Vincent's Hospital on Nov. 1. The chief cause of death was cardiopulmonary disease, family members said. She was 84. Until her death, she was still writing and involved in Rosetta Records, the recording company she founded in 1980.

Reitz produced 13 albums of women jazz and blues singers, including Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, and "forgotten" female vocalists for her "Women's Heritage" and "Foremothers" Series. According to a family biography, Reitz pioneered in producing women's blues and jazz concerts at Avery Fisher Hall in 1980 and '81 and for the Newport Jazz Festival.

A short woman with strong feminist convictions, Reitz joined New York Radical Women in the early 1970s and was a co-founder of OWL (Older Women's Liberation). She was a recipient of the Wonder Woman Award in 1982 and a Grandmother Winifred grant recipient in 1994.

"Rosetta was indeed a wonder woman — powerful and creative, who accomplished many things in her life and made many contributions to women," said Dell Williams, founder of Eve's Garden, a women's sexuality boutique on W. 57th St., and a longtime friend of Reitz. "She was the author of a book on menopause and she created the first recording company exclusively dedicated to the incredible jazz and blues singers of the 1920s and '30s."

She also taught a course called "Women in Jazz" at The New School.

Vivien Leone, a former editor at Aphra, a feminist literary quarterly, recalled she met Reitz at a W. 10th St. meeting of OWL in 1970. She called Reitz's 1977 book on menopause "the first" of its kind.

A first-person account called "Menopause: A Positive Approach," the book warned of the dangers of hormone replacement therapy using estrogen, which was then widely prescribed to menopausal women. Published by Penguin, the book remained in print for 20 years. In 2002, the Veteran Feminists of America named Reitz and her menopause book in its "Roll of Honor" saluting feminist authors at Barnard College.

A former food columnist for The Village Voice, Reitz published several other books, including one in 1965 called "Mushroom Cookery." Her 1971 essay for The Village Voice "The Liberation of the Yiddishe Mama" appeared in several 1970s feminist anthologies, according to a post by the Feminist Majority Foundation on Facebook.

She grew up Rosetta Goldman in Utica, N.Y., the youngest of six children of Jewish immigrants from Poland. Her parents operated Goldman's Bakery, where young Rosetta worked behind the counter as a child.

“She was such a valued helper that the family had a special box built for her so she reached the cash register to make change,” wrote Rebecca Gribetz, one of Reitz’s three daughters, in an e-mail. “She lived with her family above the bakery. Her love of food stemmed from this childhood.”

Cynthia Navaretta, publisher of Midmarch Arts Press, on Riverside Drive, who knew Reitz when she was a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, remembered her as “one of the few radicals on campus.” She said Reitz left college after three years — one at the University of Buffalo — because of her desire to come New York City.

“She wanted to come to New York where the bright lights were,” Navaretta said. “She had literary aspirations, and she got a job almost immediately at the Gotham Book Mart” in 1945. In 1947, she opened The Four Seasons bookstore in the Village, at W. 10th and Christopher Sts., which Navaretta described as a “hangout for the literary lions” of the era.

“She had an open house until 11 p.m., and everyone came in, famous authors and poets visiting from out of town,” Navaretta recalled. “She had book parties for people like Saul Bellow and E.E. Cummings, who lived only a half a block away on Patchin Place,” said Navaretta, who was one of the store’s initial investors. “Everyone stopped by daily. She had a talent for design and also opened a greeting-card business.” She said Reitz sold her store in 1956 “because she wanted to live in the country,” and for a time lived in rural New Jersey with her husband, Robert Reitz, then returned to New York City. Her marriage ended in 1963.

Rosetta Reitz lived the rest of her life in a Chelsea apartment on W. 16th St.

“She was a consummate businesswoman,” said Navaretta. She remembers Reitz as a determined and feisty woman, who struggled against difficult circumstances, working variously as a New York stockbroker and manager of classified advertising at The Village Voice to support herself and her children. “She made it on her own,” Navaretta said. “And she created her own identity. Her daughters were devoted to her.”

She is survived by her daughters, Robin, of Tucson, Ariz.; Rainbow and Rebecca, both of Manhattan; Rebecca’s husband, her son-in-law Sidney Gribetz, and a granddaughter, Hannah Rose Gribetz. Her family asks that people who wish to honor her memory should send a donation to Planned Parenthood, a women’s shelter or the organization Women in Need, Inc.

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