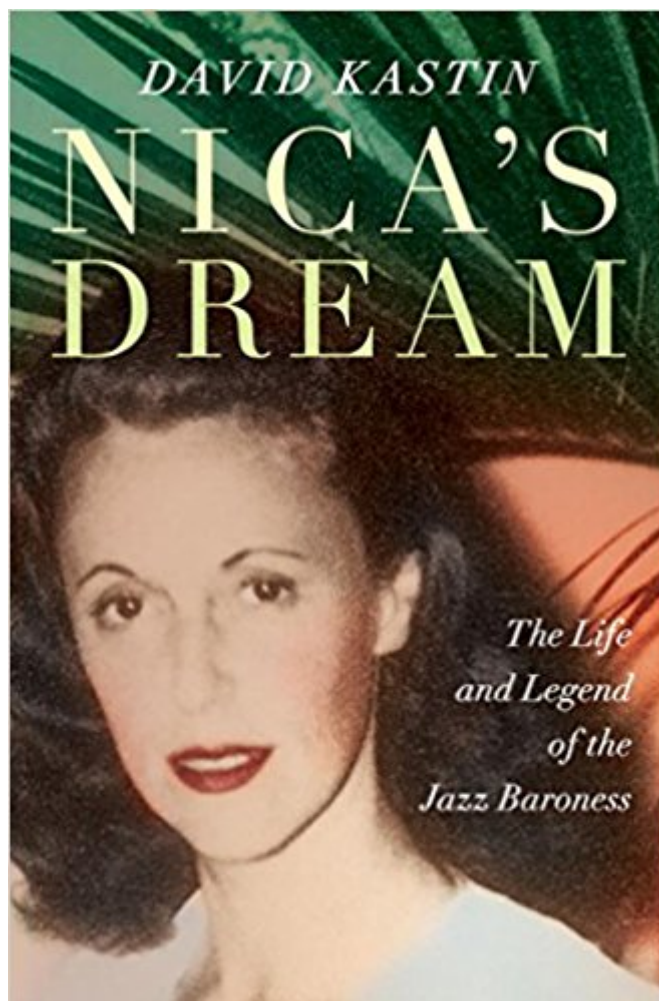


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Nica's Dream: The Life And Legend Of The Jazz Baroness



Synopsis

The first biography of the legendary Rothschild heiress who reigned as New York's Jazz Baroness. It's a misty night in 1950s New York. A silver Rolls-Royce screeches to a stop at the neon-lit doorway of a 52nd Street jazz club. Behind the wheel is a glamorous brunette, a chinchilla stole draped over her shoulder and a long cigarette holder clinched in her teeth. After taking a pull from a small silver flask, she glides past the bouncer into the murky depths of the Three Deuces. The Jazz Baroness has arrived. Raised in fairy-tale splendor, Kathleen Annie Pannonica Rothschild de Koenigswarter (known as "Nica") piloted her own plane across the English Channel, married a French baron, fought in the French Resistance, and had five children. Then she heard a recording of Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight." Inspired by the liberating spirit of jazz, Nica left her family, moved to Manhattan, and began haunting the city's nightclubs. The tabloids first splashed her name across the headlines after Charlie Parker died in her hotel suite—a scandal that cast a dark shadow over the rest of her life. She retreated from the public eye, but through her ongoing ministrations to Monk and dozens of other musicians she became a legend. Nearly a score of jazz compositions have been written in her honor, including two of the most beloved classics of the genre: Horace Silver's "Nica" and Monk's "Dream." "Nica" traces the story of a fascinating woman across her thirty-year reign as the Jazz Baroness, but it also explores a transformative era in twentieth-century American culture. Based on interviews with musicians, family members, historians, and artists, David Kestin's probing biography unwraps the life of this enigmatic figure and evokes the vibrancy of New York during the birth of bebop, the first stirrings of the Beat Generation, and the advent of abstract expressionism. 8 pages of black-and-white illustrations

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Customer Reviews

The Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter was a cultural bridge, and source of understanding for an enormously important generation of jazz musicians. This book is a must read. --T. S.

Monk"Starred Review. This is an essential read for jazz enthusiasts and strongly suggested for those interested in new perspectives on jazz culture and its historical framework. Kastin is an exceptionally fine writer who compellingly blends rare interviews, in-depth research, and masterful storytelling in this first biography of a legendary individual. "David Kastin has written the definitive biography of one of the most elusive, beguiling and pivotal personalities in 20th Century music. The story of Pannonica is essential reading for all fans of art, culture and jazz. --Robert Kraft, President, Fox Music Inc."Nica's Dream is a brilliant and incisive addition to the history of jazz. The Baroness Nica is portrayed in such a truthful fashion that those of us blessed to have known her now can introduce her to anyone by giving them a copy of this outstanding biography. Nica's Dream reads like a picaresque novel. But it's all true. --David Amram, American composer, musician, author"A stunning biography of Monk's patron. What a story! --Phil Schaap, curator and jazz historian, WKCR-FM, New York City"With a journalist's dedication to research and a storyteller's passion for historical context, Kastin relates the most unusual life of Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswater the woman who left behind a family and a fortune to dedicate herself to the maestri of modern jazz. --Ashley Kahn, author of The House that Trane Built"Finally! Nica's story told in Technicolor, with the grandeur to match her own. David Kastin penetrates the myths and legends about the Jazz Baroness. In doing so, he gives us a stunning cultural biography of New York City and a riveting portrait of one of the most fascinating figures of the 20th century. Bravo! --Robin D. G. Kelley, author of Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original"

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When I ordered *Nica's Dream*, I really hoped it would clear up many of the questions that I had when I would often see the Baroness pick up Thelonious Monk in her silver Bentley outside either the Five Spot or the Jazz Gallery. I knew Monk was devoted to his wife Nellie, so who was this white peeress? Harry Columby had said she was one of Monk's mainstays. Still there were the sexual innuendo questions. Kastin spends a lot of effort banishing the contemporary expectations of a sexual relationship. Hence the 3 stars. However, he then implies the same for the Baroness and Art Blakey, without any back-up. Hence the 3 stars. Additionally, Kastin devotes more to jazz figures of the period than to the Baroness' life prior to Monk. Most of his readers know the former and very few the latter. For example, I would love to know more of her involvement in WWII. Just what did she do to assist Turing in solving the enigma? This biography is more of a tease than an explanatory biography. Considering what it could have been, it is a disappointment,

As a young man and solidly-dedicated jazz buff, I had often wondered what had prompted such profound love, respect, and near Goddess-like worship of this woman by some, if not most of the jazz world's most influential and immortal jazz artists. The Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter is the most fascinating personality of whom I have ever had the fortune to read. This book and two

others have allowed me a captivating glimpse of her fortune-filled, adventurous and fantastic life. I sincerely feel that, not ever having had the fortune to meet her, or merely to have basked in her aura, that I have missed something truly precious and irreplaceable in my life. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested not only in jazz history, but in human psychology, and human history, period.

A must read for jazz lovers of music developed from the 40,s to the present. For Nica has contributed to its development as much as the luminaries who created and played it--Monk, Miles, Trane, Rollins, Harris, and the countless other musicians she helped over her 30 plus year tenure as the Jazz Baroness!! If there's a heaven she's there in all her majesty raising hell!!!!

Fascinating, especially if you are into jazz. Nica was a giant help to so many jazz greats of the 40s,50s and early 60s. Well-written and chock full of stories about that time in NYC.

I so much wanted David Kastin to succeed at a high level with his book, "Nica's Dream," because I grew up (and old) with bebop music from the night I first heard Dizzy Gillespie play Buffalo's Zanzibar Club in the mid-Fifties. But you can't review the book not written, only what's at hand. "Nica's Dream" is studded with historic bebop moments played in counterpoint to the dizzying downward spiral of Theolonius Monk's drugs- and mania-stunted life. Monk occupies the heart of the book. For all his demons, he left a brilliant jazz legacy, but his discography turns in on itself through repetition, his innovation sapped by idleness, whether imposed by debilitating illness or unconscionable cabaret license laws. One can argue that Monk never reached full potential. But the book is billed as "The Life and Legend of the Jazz Baroness," the mysterious Kathleen Annie Pannonica Rothschild de Koenigswarter, trust fund heir with a gold-plated European heritage and an English accent. Legend there is, but her life remains elusive. Kastin's compressed take on her early years is riveting: her World War II exploits--flying aircraft and driving jeeps in wartime North Africa, and raising five kids on the run--is every bit the equal of the military, spycraft and political adventures of her dashing husband, Jules. Excise the mostly extraneous jazz and cultural history by rote--the interconnection of the Big Bands, Abstract Expressionism, the Beat Movement, and so on--and the residual tale yields gleaming nuggets about the Rothschild family that could well become a Masterpiece Theater series. Then Nica experiences her St.-Paul-on-the-Road-to-Damascus conversion on hearing Monk's "Round Midnight" in 1951, and her Patron Saint of Jazz persona emerges fully blown. Willingly sucked into the jazz demi-monde,

she flamboyantly drives her Silver Rolls and Bentleys flat out, ferrying jazzmen everywhere, and learns to out-cuss the saltiest stoned out sidemen. How did this sophisticated European lady's personality undergo such a rapid sea-change? Thankfully, Kastin only touches on Bird's inevitable expiration in Nica's Stanhope Hotel boudoir, for she knew him only briefly, to her detriment, as red-baiters like Walter Winchell and racists attacked her unfairly for nurturing the musician, a life-long drug addict who elevated bebop to a rarefied art. Whether she had sex with any of the jazz artists she championed is immaterial; she protected many and took the fall for a few who were busted for drug-use. More important, I wanted to learn something about the depth of her knowledge of the jazz idiom and how she came to appreciate music she clearly loved and supported, inspiring a number of jazz tune homages written in her honor. You don't quite get this in Kastin's book and it's not his fault. The overweeningly private Rothschild family embargoed Nica's papers, her collection of unreleased jazz recordings and candid photos--and that's a damned shame. It's hard enough to write a biography of a living, accessible individual. It's nearly impossible to re-create a life when primary source material is hermetically sealed.

This book is a definite read for all the jazz fans of the early bop/bebop. It has been a long time coming. It is also interesting reading if you are interested in the Rothschilds. I would also recommend Roland Perry's *The Fifth Man*, which is about Nica's brother Victor.

Finally, someone took the time to do an in-depth expose on an intriguing and unique member of one of the global elite who's heart was stolen from the establishment by the power of America's premier home-grown music--Jazz. I was transported to that magic era where the fission products of jazz were being conjured up on the ground floor of Harlem and this strange symbiotic relationship transcending class borders between that grand lady and the grand musicians who she adopted. That's some history I can use.

If you're interested in modern jazz and the people who made it, you will enjoy this book. If you're not...well, not so much.

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