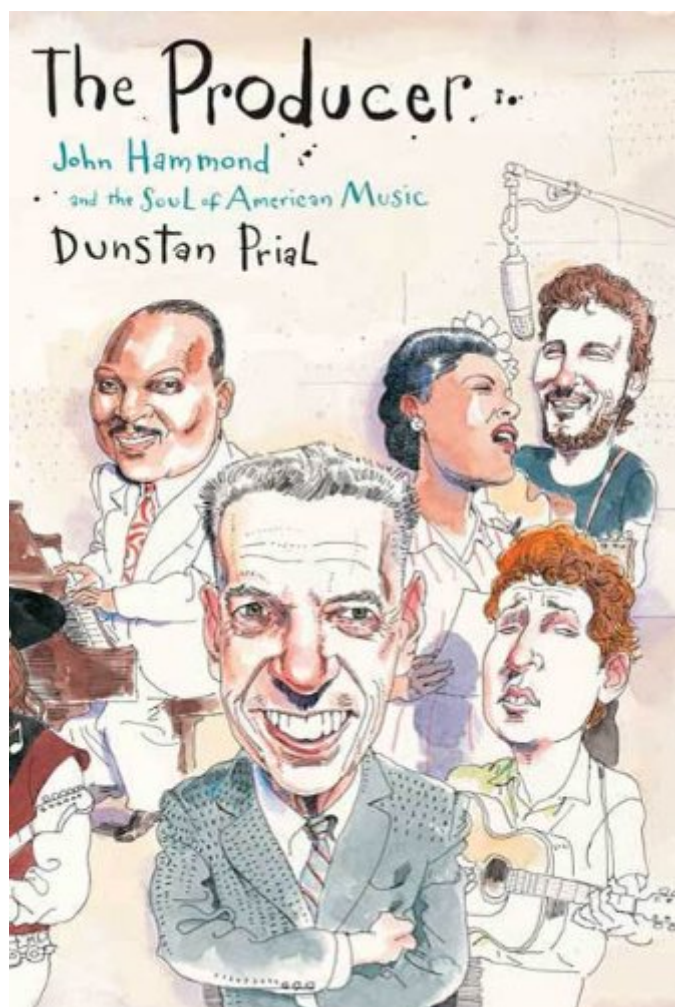


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The Producer: John Hammond And The Soul Of American Music



Synopsis

A "behind the music" story without parallel John Hammond is one of the most charismatic figures in American music, a man who put on record much of the music we cherish today. Dunstan Prial's biography presents Hammond's life as a gripping story of music, money, fame, and racial conflict, played out in the nightclubs and recording studios where the music was made. A pioneering producer and talent spotter, Hammond discovered and championed some of the most gifted musicians of early jazz—Billie Holliday, Count Basie, Charlie Christian, Benny Goodman--and staged the legendary "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall in 1939, which established jazz as America's indigenous music. Then as jazz gave way to pop and rock Hammond repeated the trick, discovering Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Bruce Springsteen, and Stevie Ray Vaughan in his life's extraordinary second act. Dunstan Prial shows Hammond's life to be an effort to push past his privileged upbringing and encounter American society in all its rough-edged vitality. A Vanderbilt on his mother's side, Hammond grew up in a mansion on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. As a boy, he would sneak out at night and go uptown to Harlem to hear jazz in speakeasies. As a young man, he crusaded for racial equality in the music world and beyond. And as a Columbia Records executive—a dapper figure behind the glass of the recording studio or in a crowded nightclub—he saw music as the force that brought whites and blacks together and expressed their shared sense of life's joys and sorrows. This first biography of John Hammond is also a vivid and up-close account of great careers in the making: Bob Dylan recording his first album with Hammond for \$402, Bruce Springsteen showing up at Hammond's office carrying a beat-up acoustic guitar without a case. In Hammond's life, the story of American music is at once personal and epic: the story of a man at the center of things, his ears wide open.

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Customer Reviews

My only negative comment is perhaps some repetitiveness in some of the comments in the book. Otherwise I thoroughly enjoyed it. I like biographies in general. This is a must read for people interested in the music business. Mr. Hammond was an interesting character and a man who stood up for what he believed in. He loved jazz, and fought for racial equality. It is amazing how many different artists he was instrumental in promoting over the years.

John Hammond was a key figure in American popular music, bring diverse talents such as Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and Stevie Ray Vaughn, to widespread audiences. He also helped promote entire categories of music, including jazz, blues, and folk, contributing significantly to the popular revivals of these fields. Duston Prial's biography is insightful, based on careful research in libraries and through interviews. The book is well written, and it will be an important document in maintaining Hammond's well deserved reputation as a cultural icon. Hammond, however, appears as a somewhat distant character in Prial's account. One never really gets a sense of John Hammond's inner, subjective sense. Prial at times seems more concerned with pointing out where Hammond erred in his own autobiography -- "John Hammond on Record" (written with Irving Townsend and published in 1977) -- such as in the case of the reported causes of singer Bessie Smith's death. Prial fails to consider that Hammond actually may have believed (or internalized after so many retellings) the accounts that attributed her death to racist treatment following a car accident. Instead, Prial tells us, "The whole episode was an unseemly case of Hammond's not allowing the facts to get in the way of his good story." In some cases in the book it is not clear why Prial favors one version of events over another. The classic example is his account of Bob Dylan's trying to get out of his Columbia records contract. Readers interested in this incident should compare the richly insightful if brief account given by Hammond in his autobiography with Prial's retelling. These quibbles aside, Prial's book

makes for enjoyable reading.

> John Hammond's discovery and signing of superstars like Bob Dylan, Bruce> Springsteen and Stevie Ray Vaughn assure that most rock fans are familiar> with the image of the tall man, impeccably dressed with a wide grin.>> In "The Producer", an enlightening and gripping page turner, you learn that> Hammond played a leading role changing and developing American music. In> this book you watch the musical landscape of the 20th century move quickly> and dramatically. Remarkably, Hammond, a man whose instincts, generosity and> enthusiasm are without parallel in the music industry was there for nearly> all of it. The author's ability to move the action as well as exercise his> generous and in-depth knowledge of jazz, folk blues and rock in an> entertaining and informative manner is only one part of the "The Producer's"> achievements.>> As importantly, we learn that Hammond's innate stubbornness and privileged> upbringing gave him an unfaltering conviction that great music would succeed> in transcending racism and a segregated society. His involvement with the> burgeoning civil rights movement is written with great detail and> illustrates how Hammond would put his money, energies and reputation into> anything he believed strongly in.>> Above all, like all good books about music or musicians, "The Producer"> sends you back to discover or rediscover great American music that was> Hammond's proudest achievement.

From his love of music, to his activism in Civil Rights, John Hammond's life could be made into a mini-series! This biography is an informative and enjoyable read about Hammond's life. With that said, I didn't find it vastly different than Hammond's autobiography (John Hammond on Record). I'm not sure which book - the bio or the autobio - came out first, but I happened to read the autobiography first and found it to be more detailed and personable. Whichever you read first, you're sure to be impressed with what Hammond was able to accomplish in his lifetime. It's a shame he's not better known to the general public.

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