

Ira Gitler, Influential Jazz Critic and Historian, Dies at 90



The jazz critic and historian Ira Gitler, right, with the tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon in the early 1980s. “Musicians respected him,” a colleague said of Mr. Gitler. “They considered him one of the tribe.” Mary Jo Gitler

By **Richard Sandomir**

Feb. 27, 2019

Ira Gitler, who was one of the most respected and prolific jazz writers of the

postwar era and an early champion of bebop, died on Saturday in Manhattan. He was 90.

His son, Fitz, confirmed the death, at a nursing facility.

Mr. Gitler's criticism appeared regularly in publications like *DownBeat* and *JazzTimes*. He wrote two books about bebop, the challenging form of modern jazz that emerged in the 1940s. And, along with Leonard Feather and Nat Hentoff, he was among the most prodigious writers of liner notes, annotating more than 700 albums.

In 2017 he was [named a Jazz Master](#) by the National Endowment for the Arts.

"He had a terrific ear, and could not be fooled by reputation, no matter how," [the jazz writer Gary Giddins](#) said in an email. "Musicians respected him; they considered him one of the tribe. You can't say that about a lot of critics."

Mr. Gitler's immersion in modern jazz led him to a job with the jazz label Prestige Records in 1950. He packed and unpacked 78s, did promotional work and swept the floors. More important, he wrote his first liner notes, in 1951, [for "Swingin' With Zoot Sims,"](#) and later that year produced his first recording session, for the saxophonist Sonny Rollins.

In 1953, he produced a memorable session with Miles Davis on trumpet and Charlie Parker and Mr. Rollins on saxophones. It was, he recalled, a difficult afternoon: Davis was late and, while the group waited, Parker drank nearly a bottle of gin in two large gulps and dozed off. After Davis's arrival, Mr. Gitler told him, in profane terms, that he was not playing well.

"Maybe he wanted to leave — I think he was bluffing — but he started packing up his horn," Mr. Gitler said in [a 2009 video interview](#) with the filmmaker Bret Primack. "I said I didn't mean anything, that I was trying to get him going."

Davis stayed, and the session proceeded. They recorded three songs, finishing with the Thelonious Monk ballad ["Round Midnight,"](#) which Mr. Gitler felt would be less taxing on Davis.

“It turned out to be kind of somber,” Mr. Gitler said. “It had the feeling of that day, and to me it was a masterpiece.” The tune became a staple of Davis’s repertoire.

Mr. Gitler, an amateur saxophonist, called Prestige his finishing school, and his experience there informed the rest of his career. His knowledge of jazz — acquired by going to nightclubs, attending recording sessions and hanging out with musicians — made him an erudite figure in the field. He was an early supporter of musicians like the tenor saxophonist [Dexter Gordon](#), who spent many years in Europe and out of the American limelight before experiencing a career resurgence in the 1970s.

Mr. Gitler was born on Dec. 18, 1928, in Brooklyn to parents who had immigrated from Russia. His father, Samuel, was a furrier, and his mother, Frances (Goldberg) Gitler, was a homemaker.

At age 5, Ira started taking piano lessons; soon after, he was introduced to swing music by his brother, Monroe, who was 12 years older. Together they listened to big bands on the radio and to records by Count Basie and Benny Goodman. In 1940, Ira tagged along with his brother and a date to see [Jimmie Lunceford](#) and his band at the Strand Theater in Brooklyn.

As a teenager, he traveled to nightclubs in Manhattan and first heard bebop live. Writing in 1946 for the Columbia Grammar School newspaper, he reviewed the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie’s electric performance at the Spotlite Club on West 52nd Street. He later recalled their brief first meeting.



Mr. Gitler in 1994. David Redfern/Redferns, via Getty Images

“When Dizzy passed my table after his set,” he wrote, “I greeted him familiarly (even though I had never been in his presence) and asked him when he was going to record again. ‘We recorded today,’ he answered with a twinkle in his high-pitched, slightly sandpaper voice.”

While attending the University of Missouri, Mr. Gitler spent time in jazz clubs in St. Louis, Kansas City, Mo., and Chicago and, during summer vacations, on 52nd Street and in Harlem. He dropped out of college before graduating and joined Prestige.

In the mid-1950s he left the label to pursue freelance writing — the only jobs he held after that were two stints as an editor at DownBeat, between 1963 and 1970 — and quickly distinguished himself. In his notes for John Coltrane’s album “Soultrane” (1958), Mr. Gitler coined the enduring phrase “sheets of sound” to describe that saxophonist’s intense arpeggio runs.

“The image I had in my head,” [Mr. Gitler told the website All About Jazz](#) in

2009, “were bolts of cloth undulating as they unfurled. Coltrane never said anything about the term. He never referred to it when I saw him, and I didn’t ask him about it.”

Mr. Giddins said that Mr. Gitler’s liner notes had helped cement his reputation. “Those notes are as much a part of those albums as the sequencing of tracks and the cover art,” he said.

Mr. Gitler had a close association with Mr. Feather, the longtime jazz critic for The Los Angeles Times. He was an assistant on Mr. Feather’s “The New Encyclopedia of Jazz” (1960), and he completed [“The Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz”](#) (1999) after Mr. Feather’s death in 1994 and was credited as co-author.

On his own, Mr. Gitler wrote “Jazz Masters of the 40s” (1966) and “Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s” (1985).

As passionate as Mr. Gitler was about jazz, he was equally passionate about another pursuit: ice hockey. He played for and coached an amateur-league team, Gitler’s Gorillas, and wrote “Blood on the Ice: Hockey’s Most Violent Moments” (1974). He also wrote for the program sold to fans at Ranger games at Madison Square Garden.

Stan Fischler, a longtime hockey writer and commentator and a friend of Mr. Gitler’s, recalled on Twitter that a high point of Mr. Gitler’s avocation was playing defense on a fantasy hockey team in 1984 in Lake Placid, N.Y., with the Hall of Famers Gordie Howe and Bill Gadsby.

Mr. Fischler wrote that Gadsby, also a defenseman, was worried that Mr. Gitler would not be able to help hold their team’s one-goal lead when he skated onto the ice in the final minute of the game. “As Bill skated past Ira,” he wrote, “Gadsby stopped, leaned over and uttered the deathless words: ‘Ira, just get in the way!’ ” The lead held.

In addition to his son, Mr. Gitler is survived by his wife, [Mary Jo \(Schwalbach\) Gitler](#), an artist, and two grandchildren.