

## HBO bio-pic revisits life of jazz patron/civil rights pioneer

Written by Kam Williams

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Although Baroness Pannonica “Nica” - Rothschild (1913-1988) was born into a very wealthy European dynasty, when she moved to Manhattan in the early Fifties, she gravitated towards another type of royalty altogether, namely, the elite musicians on the New York City jazz scene. She preferred hanging around these African-American innovators, despite the fact that the United States at the time tended to make examples of any whites who dared to fraternize across the color line.

Consequently, she would not only be persecuted in the press because of her associations, but she was even unfairly sentenced to 3 years in prison for possession of just \$10 worth of Marijuana. Such odious mistreatment never discouraged the pretty patron of the arts from helping her bebop idols battle their demons ranging from racism to addiction while trying to make a living.

Nica was particularly mesmerized by the work of Thelonious Monk, right from the moment in 1952 that she first heard the haunting strains of “Round Midnight.” Once she finally had a chance to meet the brilliant pianist/composer, the iconoclastic heiress and the equally-eccentric son of a sharecropper forged an enduring, platonic friendship which would last for the rest of their lives.

That mutually-respectful relationship is the primary focus of *The Jazz Baroness*, a fascinating documentary directed by Hanna Rothschild. Nica’s gifted great-niece deserves high praise for unearthing reams of riveting archival footage like performances by the Thelonious Monk Quartet of such classics as “Straight, No Chaser,” “Bolivar Blues” and “Nuttty.” The tunes have been seamlessly interwoven here with wistful remembrances by Nica’s and Thelonious’ relatives, by noted historians such as Stanley Crouch, Amiri Baraka and Gary Giddins, and by living legends like Sonny Rollins, Quincy Jones and Roy Haynes.

Besides the intimate personal story recounting how Nica and Thelonious became virtually inseparable (including the decade leading to his death when he lived in her home), there is a compelling secondary thread providing explanatory, background information which makes the bio-pic all the more meaningful.

For, the Rothschilds were Jewish, and their wealth didn’t save some family members from perishing in the Holocaust. So, one can’t help but think that perhaps that terrible tragedy in part explains why Nica would become such a passionate feminist and civil rights pioneer in the face of the toxic nature of the intolerance permeating the cultural fabric of her adopted country.

A must-see period piece not merely for avid jazz fans, but for anyone interested in a history lesson about what life was like just a couple of generations ago when bigotry was still very much accepted as “The American Way.”

### **Excellent (4 stars)**

Unrated

Running time: 82 minutes

Studio: Clandestine Films

Distributor: Home Box Office/British Broadcasting Company

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To see a trailer for *The Jazz Baroness*, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZRSqtidu3Q>

*The Jazz Baroness* is set to debut exclusively on HBO2 on Wednesday, November 25th from 8-9:30 PM (ET/PT) with additional play dates on Nov. 29th (8 AM), Nov. 30th (3 PM), Dec. 3rd (6:30 PM), Dec. 11th (7:45 AM) and Dec. 16th (1:30 PM)