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Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Springsteen and many more

By LARRY SHAPIRO

Ask most Bruce Springsteen aficionados and they will tell you almost anything about the man: his first gigs, songs, bootleg recordings, etc. They can even recite the album credits on every single LP. If you ask them to tell you who is thanked on the Boss's most famous album, *Born In the U.S.A.*, one of the lines they will recite is: "With Much Thanks Always, John Hammond Sr."

At the time of the release of the album, Hammond was not a participating musician nor involved in the management of the New Jersey rocker. In fact, the 74-year-old semi-retired native New Yorker was working on new musical discoveries for Columbia Records.

Hammond's connection to Springsteen began in 1972, when the young musician entered Hammond's office at Columbia Records. After playing several original numbers, including the never officially recorded Springsteen epic, "If I Was The Priest" (in which Springsteen presents the Virgin Mary as an employee of a local whorehouse with Jesus as a customer), Hammond was taken with the boy's striking lyrical imagery and cockiness and signed the young musician to a contract. But the discovery of Springsteen was not John Hammond's only feat.

David Tarnow, a Toronto radio producer, became aware of those "other feats" when he did a radio special on an obscure blues singer named Annette Hanshaw in the early 1980s. Interviewing Hammond, who had worked with Hanshaw, Tarnow so impressed him with his work on such an obscure personality, that Hammond, after refusing dozens of other people, agreed to an extensive interview on his life and career.

From producing the legendary blues singer Bessie Smith in the early 1980s to signing Stevie Ray Vaughan in the early 1980s, John Hammond's 50-year career as record producer, talent scout, and impresario and his battle against discrimination in the record business, make him one of the most unique non-performers in the history of popular music. His death last July prompted a shower of praise from his "discoveries," which included the likes of: Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Leonard Cohen, George Benson and a host of jazz greats.

Tarnow spent two years working on his documentary, *The John Hammond Years*, a 13-part chronicle to the career of a man who had worked all his life to get black music, and jazz in particular, into the mainstream of American music.

Though often concentrating on the "stars" Hammond discovered, *The John Hammond Years* (which was rebroadcast on CBC radio last fall, after Hammond's death) offers a penetrating insight into an aspect of American society which had remained largely uninvestigated from a musical perspective.

Until 1942, not one black musician had ever worked in the orchestra of a white Broadway musical, and until 1943 there was not a single black musician working in white radio bands. Though he forever altered the face of Columbia Records when he signed Bob Dylan, John Hammond's greatest achievement was his life battle to integrate "Black America" and "America," and loosen the chains of discrimination and prejudice that permeated an entire industry.

Hammond described New York in the '30s as being as segregated as a southern city, where blacks were shut out of work and accommodation. And of course, their music remained largely untouched by

white audiences and radio programmers. On the few occasions their product was marketable, the blacks' ignorance of the music industry made them victims of the discrimination.

"Pine-Top Boogie Woogie" was the first real 'boogie woogie' song," Hammond recounted during the interview. "Two people copyrighted that . . . They still collect royalties on every song with 'boogie-woogie' in it. The guy who wrote it never made a dime. I can't tell you how many people made fortunes out of the ignorance of black artists. There were artists who sold their copyrights away for a dollar or a bottle of gin."

Hammond was an unlikely figure in the crusade for equal rights for blacks. A white, anglo-saxon Protestant, Hammond was born into the Vanderbilt family and grew up in New York. In the Tarnow interviews Hammond told of how he'd go down to the servants' quarters of the mansion as a child and listen to the music they were playing. It was quite different from the opera concerts his family dragged him to—black jazz was an entirely different form of musical expression.

In the 1920s, Hammond began to venture up to Harlem where, as he puts it, "if you went for music and not for sex it was the strangest thing in the world . . . I went for the music." Hammond became familiar with every jazz club in the area, sipping his lemonade and listening to the sounds of stride piano players and the orchestrations of Duke Ellington.

Rather than following in his father's legal footsteps, John Hammond began producing records in his early 20s. The immortal Bessie Smith became his first great client.

But his face to face encounter with racism really began when he agreed to cover a news story in the South for the newsmagazine, *The Nation*. The Scottsboro Trials, as they were called, centred on a group of blacks in Alabama who had been charged with raping a white woman. The punishment, if the defendants were convicted, was death. The victim's testimony was shaky, often contradictory and, after several trials and re-trials, the men were eventually found innocent.

While the Scottsboro Trials of 1933 spotlighted the struggles for justice for black Americans, they were an inspiration for John Hammond in a different direction. Hammond joined the NAACP and began a campaign to recruit black artists and get them recorded. One of Hammond's finds was William "Count" Basie. Hammond heard his band on what he said was "the farthest left hand side of the radio dial," and began getting Basie dates in New York.

Benny Goodman, who became the leader of the first racially integrated band, became another client of Hammond's. Hammon had Goodman signed to an English record label because most of the American record companies of the day had gone bankrupt in the '30s. At that time, Great Britain had also recognized jazz as an art form, unlike American companies which still didn't consider black music good enough for release.

"They (the black musicians) felt as if they'd been spit upon," Hammond explained. "Killed," it literally killed many great black artists. The discrimination applied to everything . . . it applied to the booking of agents who didn't book black bands, to the managers who were scared of having black customers, to the white musicians who resented their competition, to the unions who catered to the prejudices of their membership. Prejudice shrivelled them up as artists . . ."

In the 1940s a New Jersey shoe salesman named Barney Josephson had an idea, and opened New York's first racially integrated nightclub. "The Café Society," as it was to be called, became a symbol in the struggle for civil rights for blacks. But, however inspired Josephson's idea was, he still needed someone with a working knowledge of the New York jazz scene to supply the acts. Enter again John Hammond, who used the Café Society to highlight his discovery of a blues singer who came to be known to the world as Billie Holiday.

What made Hammond unique was an almost scholarly interest in black music. Hammond's efforts to get the black artists and their music into the spotlight of American society was perhaps best exemplified in his "Spirituals to Swing" concerts at Carnegie Hall in the late '30s. A musical chronicle of the black experience, the series included blues and gospel, and featured such legendary performers as James P. Johnson, Sidney Bechet, Big Bill Boonzy, Count Basie, and others. The concerts also rescued Meade Lux Lewis from the obscurity of a Chicago car wash and revived interest in "boogie-woogie."

But despite all his attempts, Hammond admitted 34 years later that, "We (the record industry) loused up a whole art form for 25 years through neglect and discrimination and the truth of the matter is that some of the best music never got heard because of prejudice. And now we're reaping a harvest of resentment and anger. When we go up to Harlem nowadays and have our problems, we've asked for it . . . the blacks have been spit upon . . ."

The death of Bessie Smith typified the aura of racism that was the context for Hammond's work. In 1936, Smith, "Empress of the Blues," was involved in a car crash in the deep south. But her eventual death was not solely caused by her injuries. Because she was black, the ambulance refused to take her to the hospital. By the time Smith had arrived at the hospital, she had lost so much blood that she was beyond saving.

The injustice that black America suffered (and to a large extent still does) was at least partly the result of the incredible economic inequality and racism which dominated America until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. That movement gained much of its musical inspiration from a young folk singer Hammond saw working with singer Carolyn Hester in the early '60s. The Bob Dylan episode of the *John Hammond Years* is unquestionably one of Tarnow's best efforts at capturing Hammond's incredible gift for recognizing talent. The kid from Hibbing, Minnesota had few original tunes but Hammond "liked his saltiness . . . and he was a born rebel."

Though his favourite music was jazz, Hammond had the ability to understand and appreciate all forms of music, including rock 'n' roll, blues, and gospel. For example, Hammond brought Polish pianist Adam Mackwiz to the US in the late '70s. Finally, just a few years before his death, Hammond came upon a Texan blues guitarist named Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Tarnow described Hammond as "the sweetest guy . . . very sure of what he liked . . . a man of strong taste and a just man who assisted many artists when they were out of luck." John Hammond, along with Jerry Wexler (who pioneered the *Rhythm and Blues* series on the Atlantic label), attempted to open America's eyes to the rich landscape of black music. Along the way, he had his ear open to some of the most significant artists in the history of American music and made sure that they got heard.