

FOLLOW THE MUSIC

The Life and High Times of
Elektra Records in the Great Years of
American Pop Culture

Jac Holzman and Gavan Daws



1. Jac Holzman 1931- 2. Elektra
Records 3. Music Business
4. Rock Musicians-United States 5.
California- Social Life and
Customs

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Chapter 1

Opening bars . . . Fugue of an Upper East Side kid . . . Maryland Avenue . . . Narrow streets,
some of cobblestone . . . With Sister Anne in the Vistadome

JAC HOLZMAN: I was not raised, I was lowered.

As far back as I can remember, I was sure that I had been born to the wrong parents. The family showed its best face in public; in private there were powerful currents of dissatisfaction and unease. My mother was not uncaring, but my father was a silent dominator. He ruled house and home, marriage and family. Everyone served at his pleasure—my mother, my younger brother Keith, and me. Especially me. Many times and in so many ways my father told me that I, his firstborn, had not bred true to his high standards. With my father I rarely did anything right. He withheld communication, controlling the emotional temperature, and he kept the cold turned up. The unstated message: I was not worth much.

My father was a successful doctor, a graduate of Harvard Medical School who had interned at Mt. Sinai and was a strong diagnostician much in demand for consultation. Working frequently with gentile doctors, he was tagged with the tolerant WASP designation of the time—"white Jew."

Money was the measure of my parents' wellbeing. We lived in a big apartment, with high ceilings, on the Upper East Side of New York, on 84th Street between Park and Madison. I was born in September 1931, and all through the years of the Great Depression we had servants, a live-in couple, the wife doubling as maid and cook, the husband as butler and chauffeur. My parents were at the fringe of café society, and I recall my mother in evening dress, my father in top hat, tails and spats, sporting an ivory-tipped cane.

Yet, for all my "advantages," I wanted to be anyone but who I was, anywhere but where I was. Every year from age five I ran away, pedaling my fancy Schwinn bike as fast and as far as I could from the Upper East Side, to sell on the street for train ticket money. On Mother's Day of my twelfth year I made it all the way to Trenton, New Jersey, on my own at last in Bleaksville, independently miserable in a hotel room with smudged cream-colored walls and a tiny moon of a dusty light bulb dangling from a frayed wire.

From these escape attempts I was always dragged home. My only other escape was far more to my liking—the movies. The images on the screen showed characters of stature, grace, and romance: the world the way I wished it could be. From my bedroom window, if I craned my neck just so, into view would come the Trans-Lux theater, which changed films weekly and gave you a free pass on your birthday. I haunted the place. I must have seen eight out of every ten

Hollywood movies made every year of my young life. If not at the Trans-Lux, then along 42nd Street, which was lined on both sides with theaters. I fondly remember "King Kong," Errol Flynn swashbuckling in "The Sea Hawk," and I was mesmerized by Orson Welles in "Citizen Kane," which I saw four times in two weeks, totally absorbed in the cinematography and the scale of the drama.

Movies jump-started my emotional life. And music was my emotional soundtrack. My parents had bought a 1939 state-of-the-art console, an Ansley Dynaphone with the legendary Garrard turntable, the pickup weighing close to half a pound. Included with the Dynaphone was a library of classical music on fragile shellac 78 rpm records. I was introduced to the great warhorses of the symphonic repertoire—nothing like the climax of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony to stir the blood.

Nearly all of my emotional life was passed cocooned in music, blocking out the discordancies of life; or in the dark of movie houses, absorbed in fantasy more real to me than reality. Home and family seemed jagged, hazy, often treacherous.

School too. I was never a conventional student and had no patience for anything the way it was taught. I absorbed what I needed to know by osmosis. Once, during a math test, I submitted the answers but not the proof and was accused of cheating. Why the rigor of proof if I could get to the answer without any effort? I sassed my teachers, first at PS 6 and then at a private school, Pennington, from which I managed to get myself expelled.

I went through my childhood making a general pest of myself, troublesome, not filially dutiful, uncomfortable in my own skin. My father thought child psychiatry would be helpful, but the psychiatrist told him he was the one who should make an appointment.

With psychiatry out, I was shipped off to the Peekskill Military Academy, "confined to barracks" for two years.

If it had not been for my grandparents, Estelle Sternberger and J. Max Weis, I would have been a basket case. Long after I had grown to adulthood I came across a line by Margaret Mead that expressed my situation perfectly: "Children and their grandparents have a common enemy." Estelle and Max gave me a sense of perspective and balance, and from them I felt my first unconditional love.

Estelle had grown up in Cincinnati. From her earliest years she was a crusader for women's rights, and in the mid-Twenties she was brought to New York to head the National Council of Jewish Women. She moved on to political commentary on WABC (CBS's flagship New York Station in the Thirties) and WQXR, the voice of the New York Times, and to writing speeches for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Estelle held a Saturday afternoon political salon, where I met Jim Farley, postmaster general of the United States and head of the Democratic Party. Also

Mary McLeod Bethune, a world-famous educator. Mrs. Bethune was the first black person I had ever seen up close, and she was jet-black, the ebony pigmentation that brought out the worst of American prejudice—"If you're white, alright. If you're brown, stick around. If you're black, get back." When I was introduced to Mrs. Bethune I shook her hand, for once a model of small-child good manners, and then to the horror of my liberal grandmother I furiously tried to rub the color off her wrist. Mrs. Bethune, who had the carriage and speech of a queen, kidded Estelle about that episode for years.

I loved to be with Estelle when she did her radio broadcasts. I would sit in the control booth, watching the sound mixer move the knobs for the different microphones. Precision and control were words I would not have known, ideas I could not have formulated, but that is what impressed me.

Jac's grandmother, Estelle Sternberger
Photo courtesy of the Holzman Family Archive

Everything about radio was fascinating. Somehow a transmitter agitated the airwaves, and out of a box came words and music. I was a big CBS fan, rising early to listen to the 8am world news: Winston Burdett or Eric Sevareid or Ed Murrow from London.

I began to experiment, building rudimentary crystal sets. At Pennington, after lights out at ten, when all electricity was cut off in the dorm, I would listen under the blankets. And at military school in Peekskill I built myself a tiny battery-operated heterodyne receiver, which I connected to the spring support of my mattress. With this oversize antenna I could pick up all the New York stations.

I fed my appetite for electronics knowledge by devouring the wonderfully illustrated catalogs of Concord Radio, Lafayette, Newark, and especially Allied out of Chicago. If you read the Allied catalog carefully it was an education in itself. You could infer how equipment worked, and how one component could be hooked together with others. I studied till the pages came loose from their binding.

JAC: My father enjoyed the old Washington food market, downtown. On a Saturday afternoon he might take Keith and me with him, and we would gravitate to the Cortland Street area. Collected there were all the stores selling surplus electronic gear from World War II, chaotically spilling out of cartons onto the sidewalk: Navy fighter gunsights, vacuum tubes, radio