

### Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 13 The Artist Critics Love to Hate Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor: A Podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This painting is enormous. This is even bigger than I imagined it was. Can you go stand next to it for me?

Eric Jentsch: For real?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. I am just inside the entrance to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History with curator, Eric Jentsch.

Eric Jentsch: Eric is 6'2. It is twice as tall as you are.

Lizzie Peabody: The museum isn't open yet so this space, which ordinarily would be echoing with visitors' voices is quiet, but towering over Eric is a painting that's loud. It's like this big collage of color and sound.

Eric Jentsch: Which is, I think, a good way of describing jazz.

Lizzie Peabody: The painting is called, "Big Band." It shows 18 American jazz legends playing together in a cacophony of color.

Eric Jentsch: You have this vibrancy around Billie Holiday there's orange and yellow.

[MUSIC]

Eric Jentsch: And then Elvis Gerald, that kind of goes into these pinks and florals through Charlie Parker and Miles Davis you have these darker blues.

[MUSIC]

Eric Jentsch: And then up near Gene Krupa it's more energetic, it's purple. It feels like you have these swaths of color. But I think even though it's a visual medium, you kind of get a sense of jazz in that it is very fluid, improvisational, lots of colors, hues, emotions, characters, voices.

Lizzie Peabody: In real life, these musicians never shared the same stage. Their different musical styles would have made collaboration tough, but here they are like a fantasy sports team of jazz players brought to life in the classic style of artist, LeRoy Neiman.

Eric Jentsch: It's very much LeRoy Neiman, who is probably one of the first artists that I was ever really aware of as a kid. His very distinct style is these bright colors, this sort of celebrities, in this case jazz musicians.

Lizzie Peabody: You may not recognize Neiman's name, but you almost certainly know his style. It's an energetic mix of hyper real color and hasty looking lines that give it a sense of action. It's distinctive. But surprisingly hard to define.

Eric Jentsch: Is it expressionism? Is it impressionism? He's a Neimanism. Very recognizable. That's a good way to say it.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman's artwork papered the 1950s through the '90s, it was everywhere. Especially places you wouldn't expect to find art. Sports Illustrated magazine, chess tournaments, the racetracks, political conventions, the Olympic games, and Playboy magazine. He painted entertainers, athletes and celebrities, and became friends with many of them. He made millions of dollars from his art and became a celebrity himself, but not everyone loved Neiman. In 2012, when he died, the New York times published a review of his work and in it, the critic called him a hack. The article reads Mr. Neiman, who died this week at 91, was not an artist who anyone in what I will here called the serious art world ever cared about.

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we take a look at the vibrant life and legacy of LeRoy Neiman. The artist critics loved to hate. What made the artist so celebrated in popular culture so scorned by the so-called serious art world. And who gets to decide what art is good anyway. All that Coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: LeRoy Neiman first got attention for his art in the U.S. Army while stationed in Europe during World War II.

Heather Long: He got sent off to paint camouflage on the roofs of the tents because they didn't want them to be bombed.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Heather Long, LeRoy Neiman's niece.

Heather Long: And instead of painting camouflage he painted a beautiful nude on top. I'm not sure that they would have avoided the bomb that way.

Lizzie Peabody: That sounds about as attention getting as you can get.

Heather Long: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: LeRoy Neiman was drawing from the time he could hold a pencil. As a kid growing up poor in the depression, he would draw temporary tattoos on his classmates' arms, and even earned some change drawing ads for the local grocer. He was drafted into the army as a cook, but he found ways to paint.

LeRoy Neiman: I did a Cheesecake mural, and nudes romping around, jumping through donuts.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Neiman in an interview with the Jazz Oral History program at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History back in 2006. Neiman was 85 at the time.

LeRoy Neiman: I made myself conspicuous and I got special treatment for it so I drew everything. I'd never painted a mural, but you can paint or draw. You can do anything.

Lizzie Peabody: LeRoy painted posters and backdrops for Red Cross productions. In the army he got his first inklings that he might be able to make a living as an artist. And when he got back to the United States, he saw how.

LeRoy Neiman: The Stars And Stripes published a story that for every day you're in the army you get a day of pre-education in the GI bill. And I knew the day, the moment I'd read that piece, how my life was going to be, I applied to a bunch of art schools.

Lizzie Peabody: On the GI bill Neiman went to the prestigious school of the Art Institute of Chicago. And after graduating, he joined the faculty and taught figure drawing and fashion illustration. Renowned galleries started buying his work like the Minneapolis Art Institute and the Corcoran Gallery in DC. He was well on his way to becoming a respected, fine artist. And then he found Playboy.

Heather Long: Yes. Or Playboy might've found him, I'm not sure, but they needed some little drawing. Hugh Hefner was asking for some little drawing, I guess on the Playboy joke page.

Lizzie Peabody: In the early 1950s, Playboy magazine was Hugh Hefner's brand new idea. In each issue just behind the centerfold was a party jokes page. Hefner asked Neiman to add an illustration, and he did.

Heather Long: And that became the, "Femlin" for which he became so famous.

Lizzie Peabody: The "Femlin" was a female gremlin, though to be honest she's not very gremlin-y. More like a tea cup sized cocktail waitress. Sketched in black ink, she scampered around the jokes page, climbing into highball glasses and making sexy mischief.

Heather Long: The "Femlin" is a saucy girl in black tights and not much else.

Lizzie Peabody: She was a hit. So popular that the framed prints at Playboy clubs had to be bolted to the walls because they'd disappear. "Proving," says Leroy, "That larceny is the sincerest form of flattery." Neiman became Playboy magazine's artist in residence. And this is a little hard to get from our perspective today, but in its early days, Playboy wasn't just selling naughty pictures. It was selling a young male fantasy of the good life. And to that end, Neiman traveled all across the world, writing and illustrating a feature called, "Man At His Leisure," his jet setters guide to the world's hottest spots.

Carol Becker: LeRoy went around the world, drawing and writing about these little episodes in Rome and in Paris, and he was living this kind of high life.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Carol Becker, she's Dean of the Columbia University School of the Arts, and also a friend of LeRoy Neiman's. She says, "Neiman went to the bull fights in Spain. Film festivals on the Riviera."

Carol Becker: He was having these adventures that everyone wished they could be having. And he was doing these little images of them and drawings of them, and that was all being reproduced in Playboy.

Lizzie Peabody: And Playboy was getting more and more readers every month. They went from selling 1,000,000 magazines per issue in 1960 to nearly 6,000,000 by the mid '70s.

Carol Becker: So, LeRoy was in the middle of all of this and he was making all these images and he was becoming famous as a result of it.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: While Neiman was in Chicago working for Playboy, he'd go out in search of live music.

LeRoy Neiman: That's when I got into jazz. Playboy building was across the alley from the Chez Paree.

Lizzie Peabody: A nightclub.

LeRoy Neiman: I'd walk across there in the afternoon. Sometimes there'd be somebody rehearsing I'd go and check out what's going on over there.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman would sketch the jazz musicians.

LeRoy Neiman: That Louis was there at that time.

Lizzie Peabody: Louis Armstrong.

LeRoy Neiman: He was good company. He was fun. And he would talk to you. I liked him very much.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman sought out jazz for the action of it, the closeness and the physicality of the players.

LeRoy Neiman: And it's also intimate and the people love to be close to these guys. The music will sound better far away, but they just want to be close. I do. I do it because I draw, but there's something about the loudness of it and the flare that they have.

Lizzie Peabody: To Neiman drawing jazz players was different from drawing other musicians.

LeRoy Neiman: Can do a string group, classical, and not identify the people. But when you get to jazz you got to draw the individuals. People want to see an image of somebody they recognize.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman painted the faces people would recognize. He has stories about everyone from Ella Fitzgerald.

LeRoy Neiman: She was like a bird.

Lizzie Peabody: To Miles Davis.

LeRoy Neiman: Miles was always a problem because he always wanted to have a relationship with your woman.

Lizzie Peabody: To Duke Ellington.

[MUSIC]

LeRoy Neiman: He was so classy. He was Classy.

Lizzie Peabody: The same things that drew Neiman to jazz clubs also took him to sports stadiums. The crowds, the motion, the big personalities. He'd take his sketchpad to boxing matches, the racetracks, baseball games. Neiman wrote in his memoir, "Almost immediately I became immersed in the spectacle of big time sports, and the hysteria and adrenaline of the spectators."

Carol Becker: He would sit at the NFL games and he would draw, and he was like a people's artists, and people recognized him, and he dressed in this very flamboyant way always whether it was the cape, or the mustache.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah. Neiman had a look. He wore brightly colored linen shirts. And his niece Heather says matching colorful socks.

Heather Long: No black socks. And of course his handlebar mustache.

Lizzie Peabody: And under that mustache, a long cigar.

Heather Long: He always had his cigar with him.

Lizzie Peabody: He generally stood out from the crowd, and the strangeness of a guy sketching live on location at a sports stadium got him noticed by the local TV stations broadcasting the games. They'd pan in on his sketchpad while he'd flourish his pencil, and with a few lines bring the action to life on paper.

Speaker: LeRoy Neiman says adversity brings out the best in him. And after all he does work in watercolors.

Lizzie Peabody: In this TV clip Neiman is sketching a Chiefs game in the pouring rain.

LeRoy Neiman: It'd be much more comfortable to have a telephoto lens and be up where it's warm. But here's where you see the people the way they are.

Speaker: Neiman's captured many Kansas City stars along the way. He's worked in bad weather before.

LeRoy Neiman: Look at yourself, you're here yourself, aren't you? We're all here. We're all crazy.

Lizzie Peabody: As the sports media empire grew through the '70s and '80s, Neiman rode that wave reaching massive audiences drawing on live TV long before Bob Ross set up his easel. His ear to ear mustache became a fixture on the sidelines of the Superbowl and the World Series, Wimbledon, and the Kentucky Derby. He was the official artist of the Olympic games five times. And the New York Jets made him their artists in residence. Once when the Jets were playing really poorly the crowd began to chant, "Put Leroy Leroy in." He was becoming as much a celebrity as the people on his canvas. Here he is on TV with Merv Griffin in 1980.

Merv Griffin: That's a lot of love we were all very proud of you LeRoy.

LeRoy Neiman: I want the people to love what I do because I love what I do, and I love the people that I do.

Merv Griffin: And most of all you love action. Don't you?

LeRoy Neiman: I love action and I love the people that do it well.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman painted and sketched over 100 portraits of Muhammad Ali and became his very close friend. One portrait shows Ali mid-punch, his eyeballs and teeth startling flashes of white against bright splashes of red, blue, and yellow.

Speaker: Is there an aesthetic connection between arts and sports?

LeRoy Neiman: Oh decidedly. Sports are graceful and beautiful, and I think any work of art worth its substance, where its worth is being, or being done, is to be strong. Strength is a part of beauty and strength is a big part of sports.

Carol Becker: He was drawn to these incredible athletes and he was interested in drawing the body and representing the body. He wasn't ironic about it at all. He cared about it.

Lizzie Peabody: He was reverential.

Carol Becker: He was reverential, that's a good word, and I think that's why people want to own those prints and why regular people who may not have any other art in their house, or even think about art, will buy LeRoy Neiman prints and want to live with them because they are hopeful.

Lizzie Peabody: Carol Becker of the Columbia University School of the Arts says Neiman was a populist artist.

Carol Becker: When I say populist, I mean appealing to a very large audience. He wasn't doing things that people would have a hard time understanding. No, he always told the story of someone leaping out of a manhole cover and saying, "LeRoy." Somebody working on the sewer system knew him. But I don't think that that probably worked in his favor in terms of the art world that probably wanted him to be more elite than he was.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: By the end of his career. Neiman was earning \$10 million a year on his art. He'd been all over the world, drawn every celebrity you can think of, but for the man who seemed to be able to go anywhere, open any door, the door to the so-called serious art world remained shut tight. For the most part, art critics ignored him. And if prompted to comment on his work wrote things like:

Speaker: What Howard Johnson's is to the taste buds. LeRoy Neiman is to the eyes.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman makes art for people who don't like art.

Speaker: His technique has been variously described as gaudy, cheesy, vulgar, schlocky and Holiday Inn Expressionist.

Lizzie Peabody: I asked his niece, Heather, what Neiman made of this.

Heather Long: He never said anything about that. He must have believed that eventually people are going to recognize my work.

Lizzie Peabody: That respect from the fine art world never really came, but why not? After the break we'll hear from the critics. Don't go away.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We're back and we're talking about the life and work of celebrity artist LeRoy Neiman. Neiman was by all measures an astoundingly successful artists. Well, all measures but one. He was the artist that critics loved to hate. When Neiman died in 2012 art critic Ken Johnson doubled down in the New York times writing, "Is the serious art world wrong to exclude and disdain Mr. Neiman and his art. I don't think so." So, I called him up.

Lizzie Peabody: I read your piece and I just kept thinking, this is so mean. What made you write it at that moment? He wasn't even buried.

Ken Johnson: Oh boy, you're not the first person to say to me, "I read your review. That was kind of mean." And I don't know. I think my obligation to my audience is to be honest about my feelings.

Lizzie Peabody: Ken has worked as an art critic for most of his career. And he says, it's his job as a critic to be frank about his opinion.

Ken Johnson: If everybody sort of hides their opinions behind euphemism, then we don't know what we're talking about. Culture starts to become mush. You got to call them like you see them.

Lizzie Peabody: I asked Ken to read a little more of the piece aloud.

Ken Johnson: Mr. Neiman was the archetypal hack. With his ever-present cigar and enormous mustache he was a cliché of the bon vivant in a bad artist in every way. But it's a good question. What was I thinking? His body was barely cold and I'm writing this stuff. But I think in some ways when I'm writing something like that, I know that people are going to go, "What? I can't believe you said that." And so there's a certain of fun that comes out in criticism when you're taking on something that you really think deserves it.

Lizzie Peabody: But I wanted to know what about Neiman's work deserves this criticism. Ken says, take the big band painting, for example.

Ken Johnson: What does this music mean to him? What you get are all these little fragments that look like people playing on color television or something. It's too sweet. It's this monotonously televisual view of life in the world.

Lizzie Peabody: So, you're saying he didn't have a point of view or he didn't have an edge?

Ken Johnson: He had a point of view and it was so banal, it was just so banal that's what I wanted to say. In other words, what I think you want from an artist, especially if his purview is society and culture, to have some kind of critical element. Just want it a little bit more complicated.

Lizzie Peabody: So, do you think that Neiman might've achieved more critical acclaim if he were more critical himself?

Ken Johnson: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: So, what is the role of the artist then in your mind?

Ken Johnson: It's to see the world warts and all.

Lizzie Peabody: And he didn't see enough warts.

Ken Johnson: I don't think he saw any.

Lizzie Peabody: It sounds like the very thing that made him so popular was what disqualified him from critical acclaim. He wasn't challenging anything.

Jerry Saltz: That's really a great observation. Neiman does not challenge.

Lizzie Peabody: Jerry Saltz is the senior art critic for New York magazine. So, he's a big deal.

Jerry Saltz: To me, LeRoy Neiman was this weird sort of hippie Carnaby street dandy who always had the Salvador Dali mustache, and wore colorful clothes, and smoked long cigars, and hung out with Hef and Playboy bunnies, and drew Sammy Davis Junior, and Liza, and Rocky, Sylvester Stallone, Kentucky Derby horses, and more Playboy bunnies. And I just thought, "What the hell is this guy?" Now his style is kind of a mishmash between abstract expressionism, color field painting, really bad school of Paris. Crapola.

Lizzie Peabody: Jerry says he never thought much about Neiman until one day in 2009. It was spring time and Jerry was giving the commencement address to the Columbia School of Fine Arts graduates.

Jerry Saltz: I was there on the stage about to give my address and there was LeRoy Neiman, and I got completely pointy headed, elitist art critic creature thinking, "I do not want to be seen with LeRoy Neiman. I mean, my God, I'm this important art critic. What's he doing here?"

Lizzie Peabody: The ceremony began and Jerry learned what Neiman was doing there. He was receiving an honorary professorship of the arts. See there's this whole part of Neiman's life that unlike most things, he didn't flaunt. And it has to do with how he spent his money.

Carol Becker: He never had other fancy houses, he didn't have boats, he didn't have fancy cars, he didn't have those things that you could do with all that money. He used his money in a different way.

Lizzie Peabody: Carol Becker says when Neiman was teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago way back in the 1950s, he sat on the admissions committee.

Carol Becker: And he thought there was this wonderful young woman that she should get to study. And no one agreed with him. And the reason they didn't agree with him was she was African-American. He was just horrified. So, when he became successful, he wanted to be sure that anyone who had talent could go to school and become an artist. And he put money towards that. He gave scholarship money for that purpose.

Lizzie Peabody: LeRoy donated scholarships for low income art students and started several art programs for high schoolers. He donated the Center For Print Studies at Columbia University, where young artists learn from more experienced printmakers and where artists who've never worked in printmaking at all can try their hand at it. Part of the proceeds from those prints fund more students scholarships.

Jerry Saltz: Unlike most super famous artists that made his kind of big bucks Neiman gave back.

Lizzie Peabody: So, back on stage at the Columbia commencement ceremony, Jerry Saltz was hearing a lot of this for the first time and realizing when it came to Neiman,

Jerry Saltz: I never really spent much time. The truth is the whole art world never spent much time on LeRoy Neiman.

Lizzie Peabody: Jerry gave his speech.

Jerry Saltz: And at the end of the ceremony, out of nowhere, Janet, his wife came up to me with a sheet of paper and said, LeRoy wanted you to have this. And I looked down and saw an incredible quick sketch portrait of me talking with my hands, my big mouth open, gesturing, and it said, "Jerry Saltz addresses Columbia graduates, LeRoy Neiman May something 2009." And I looked down and all of my cloaking devices and defenses and art world self-importance dropped for a minute.

Jerry Saltz: I've always considered myself a kind of populist. A people's critic. And in this moment I suddenly realized LeRoy Neiman in spite of me not loving or liking his work had for a lifetime done what I had been preaching to the students exactly to do which was, your style finds you. And that it is your job to explore its furthest reaches. And I suddenly understood that LeRoy Neiman had done exactly this.

Lizzie Peabody: And just like the Grinch on Christmas, Jerry felt his chest start to twitch and swell.

Jerry Saltz: My heart opened and thought, "Well, gosh darn it. I too can accept LeRoy Neiman. Even if he's not my cup of tea, he's a cup of tea."

Lizzie Peabody: He is a cup of tea.

Jerry Saltz: He is a real specific cup of tea and you know what? That's not easy to do. Listen. One of the hardest things to do for any artist is to develop a style that is both instantaneously recognizable as that person's style, and also the style says something.

Lizzie Peabody: Neiman's style definitely says something. Loudly and proudly. But it doesn't say the same thing to everybody. If you walk into the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History you'll find a floor to ceiling painting of 18 jazz masters. What's your first reaction when you look at the painting?

Carol Becker: Oh, I think it would be exuberant.

Heather Long: It's incredibly vibrant.

LeRoy Neiman: I think, Oh my God, that's so ugly.

Eric Jentsch: There's something very open, celebratory and fun.

Jerry Saltz: When I look at Big Band the problems fall away a little bit. I see love.

Lizzie Peabody: There's no one set of standards to judge art. The elite art world may prize a certain critical view of the world, an exclusivity or a challenge. Whereas popular culture may respond to work that feels relatable, charismatic. But in short, it seems like he could not have been both LeRoy Neiman and accepted.

Eric Jentsch: By the art critic, because he was accepted by everyone else. And that seems like a paradox to me because the point of art is to show your vision of the world, and Neiman had his. And the fact that it's accessible being a negative says more about the art world and its parameters than really whether Neiman was a success or not.

Lizzie Peabody: In 1995, Neiman told American Artist magazine, "Maybe the critics are right, but what am I supposed to do about it? Stop painting? Change my work completely? I go back to the studio and there I am at the easel again. I enjoy what I'm doing and I feel good working. Other thoughts are just crowded out."

LeRoy Neiman: In fact, it was Duke Ellington that told me, one favorite quote I had from Duke, he said, "We all become more of what we already are." Isn't that a great statement? "We all become more of what we already are."

Lizzie Peabody: LeRoy Neiman didn't make art for the critics. He made the art he felt compelled to make. And Jerry Saltz says that's the only way to do it.

Jerry Saltz: I would only say to anybody listening to this podcast, get to work you big babies. There's something really big in you that wants to self-replicate. Get out of its damn way and make some bad art.

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For pictures of LeRoy Neiman's, "Big Band" painting, check out our Newsletter. We'll also include links to the Smithsonian's collection of LeRoy Neiman's personal papers in the Archives of American Art. It's like 70 linear feet of mostly Playboy magazines. You can subscribe at [si.edu/sidedoor](http://si.edu/sidedoor).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to the LeRoy Neiman and Janet Byrne Neiman Foundation, especially Tara Zabor, Dan Duray, Heather Long, and Janet Neiman. Thanks also to Jerry Saltz, Ken Johnson and Carol Becker. Big shout out to our team at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History: Stephanie Johnson, Ken Kimery, Theo Gonzalez, Eric Jentsch, John Troutman, Krystal Klingenberg, Valeska Hilbig, and Laura Duff. Thank you to Smithsonian Folkways Recordings for contributing music for this episode, and to our very own Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra which you also heard. To learn more, go to [SmithsonianJazz.org](http://SmithsonianJazz.org).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, James Morrison, Stephanie De Leon Tzic, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email [sponsorship@prx.org](mailto:sponsorship@prx.org). I'm your host Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening ya big babies.

Ken Johnson: Tell Jerry I said, "You can't possibly in any way, honestly, like Neiman's work." Tell him if he says he likes it I think he's pretty barricaded.

Lizzie Peabody: I'll tell him you said so.

Jerry Saltz: Ken Johnson you are great critic and a good painter and you are one damned curmudgeon.

Lizzie Peabody: I'll pass the message along.

Jerry Saltz: Don't use words like prevaricate for God's sake. They lie.