

Q&A: Nick Tosches on His New Book, *Save the Last Dance for Satan*, and the Lovable Underwear Company

By [Alexandra Beggs](#)

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By Jacob Blickenstaff.

A crowd of first-wave hipsters and suited editor types were waiting among the stacks of poetry anthologies and pulp romance paperbacks in New York's Jefferson Market Library last Friday. We were all waiting for [Nick Tosches](#), *Vanity Fair* writer and biographer of Jerry Lee Lewis and Dean Martin (among others) and author of the novel *In the Hand of Dante*. Nick was going to read from *Save the Last Dance for Satan*, a longer version of a story about the music industry in the 50s that he wrote for the December 2000 issue of *V.F.*

In the library, which was once a courthouse and women's detention center, organizers had set up a podium for Tosches on a walkway above the reading room. I kept envisioning the scene from *Suddenly, Last Summer* where Elizabeth Taylor, trying to escape from a mental asylum, ends up on a catwalk above the men's recreational room—and the men (already crazy) go even crazier at the sight of her. I hoped for the same reaction when Nick strode on the walkway, and sure enough when he appeared in a gray suit (which perfectly matched his gray hair) the crowd went wild.

He started reading right away in his Humphrey Bogart rasp, and the cheers turned to silence. After each poem or excerpt, he tossed the papers he was reading from into the crowd—and more than one adult leapt to grab them. A few days after the reading, I called Nick to discuss the corrupt but exciting music industry in New York in the 50s.

One ring.

Nick Tosches: Alex.

VF Daily: Hi Nick. Are you at home right now?

Yep. Right now is the perfect time because I'm sitting here with my glass of cold milk and it's my late-afternoon break.

I'm glad I could catch you.

I'm glad to be caught by you.

Where did the title *Save the Last Dance for Satan* come from?

It just came into my evil brain when I was writing it. It seemed to fit.

When did you move from Newark to Manhattan?

1969. I was 19, and I had a job at the Lovable Underwear Company, at 200 Madison Avenue. That's true. I was doing back then, in the days before computers, what they called paste-ups and mechanicals. You have a glue pot, a T-square, a razor blade, and you physically put together advertisements. That was the year I got my first piece published in a magazine called *Fusion*.

Was it a music piece?

No. It had to do with poetry.

Is that what you were interested in writing about?

Poetry and prose both. I still write a lot of poetry but I don't know who lives on poetry in this day and age. I used to be able to name three but I don't know if I can name one. I've been lucky. I've been able to write what I want, when I want, and that's really fortunate, especially these days.

What is it about the 50s music scene that interested you for this book?

There were a lot of great records made in this period, which goes from Elvis to 1965. But mostly before then, you had black guys singing about getting sloppy fall-down drunk on rot gut, and then Elvis came along and censored rock 'n' roll and made it acceptable for the white masses and transformed rock 'n' roll from a basically black music to something like a white-bread version. It went from rot gut to milkshakes. That's what happened to it. But beneath the surface, it was the people that were involved in putting a lot of these records out who were the wildest, most corrupt and interesting crew of characters ever brought together. That intrigued me. I forget what the question was, but was that an answer?

Yes. So what kind of corruption are we talking about?

Paying off disc jockeys to play certain records. This was fun corruption; these guys were characters. Now it's bland. People were counterfeiting records that were hits and other gentlemen were being called in to destroy the counterfeiting pressing plants. Certain musicians had to be trailed and guarded because of their, let's say, sexual proclivities in that day of superficial innocence; the jukebox industry which was and always has been Mafia controlled on a major level. As someone said, "Business as usual." Nothing was done without some form of bribery, some form of shake down, some form of physical threat, some form of violence, some form of arson. That's the way it operated, and on the surface there were all of these saccharine, lilting songs of love—it was a weird combination.

Along with the book, the publisher is also selling a perfume called "Tosches." Did you design the scent?

Yes. Right now I'm having such a kick of being a *parfumeur*, as the French would say. The publisher brought me several scents to choose from, and I picked the one I liked most and then it was adjusted from there. It's a faint floral scent. I wanted to call it "Eau du Newark," rather than my name, because the label has the old Newark skyline and superimposed on it is the motif of 78 RPM label from Savoy records, Newark's biggest R&B record label. Also it's my hometown and I wanted to associate the name more with Newark. But I was overruled, and that was it.

I saw that you tried to submit a picture of your leopard-print loafers for your *V.F.* contributor photo.

I just like that picture! I don't know if they took me seriously or not. I haven't heard back. It bugs me: Everybody's always concentrating on heads, and we have these other aspects. Those are almost 30 years old and the most comfortable shoes I have. I bought them at that store uptown, Bottega Veneta, and they wore out, got beat up. I couldn't replace them. They're fake cougar skin. Actually someone offered to buy them off me and I said, "No, they're too comfortable." Try and use the shoes. It's the Internet!



Photo by Joseph Riccobene.

Save the Last Dance for Satan is for sale by [Kicks books](#), and a perfume called Tosches is also being sold, in limited quantities, alongside the book.