

The New York Times

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April 27, 1997

JAZZ VIEW

Eloquent Images of a Smoky, Sultry World

By Barry Singer

WHAT DOES JAZZ LOOK like? The ecstasy of improvisation. The majesty of virtuosity. The indomitable strength of the blues. The sweetness and the pain of African-American experience. These aspects of jazz are visual as well as aural, what the photographer Roy DeCarava has called "the sound I saw."

In fact, no music has been more adored by the camera. Something about the faces in jazz, and the ephemeral improvised moment, have infatuated photographers for nearly a century now, inspiring viewfinder variations as eloquent as the most transcendent jazz solos. Factor in rich shadows, incandescent light and the romantic filtering properties of cigarette smoke. While any music making may serve as a fine photographic subject, jazz does it best.

The recent publication in Europe of "Jazz Memories," a sumptuous, book-length look at the career of Herman Leonard, underscores this point. One of the few first-generation jazz photographic greats still on the scene, Leonard, at 74, represents a vital link to the evolution of jazz photography as an art form all its own,

A crude, difficult to date pre-1895 snapshot of Buddy Bolden is generally acknowledged to be the first "jazz photograph." The only known picture of Bolden, a shadowy New Orleans jazz pioneer, it captured him, cornet in hand, outside a tent, flanked by five grainy musician peers. Little more than a curiosity of the ragtime age, this seminal jazz print supersedes sound, for Bolden's playing was never preserved on record. All that history tangibly retains of him is in this picture.

Conversely, the 78 recordings and radio broadcasts that transported jazz beyond its bandstand-confined infancy in the 1920's and early 1930's, did so facelessly. It took a few fans wielding cameras to broadcast photographically the music's vivid physical presence. Working almost exclusively in black and white, these jazz pioneers celebrated the way the way the musicians looked. In time, though, their iconographic images came to define the music itself.

There is a stark purity about the best jazz photographs. Consider the picture of Duke Ellington captured at a jam session in August 1939 by Charles Peterson, a New York band musician who

took up photography in the 30's and studied at the Clarence White School before pursuing a career shooting jazz professionally, becoming perhaps the first to do so. Ringed by a roomful of notable sidemen, the normally cool and imperious Ellington is here framed dead center, sweat-drenched, at the keyboard.

This combination of perspiration and elegance is jazz definitively. Change these figures to classical musicians, to rockers, to bluegrass players, and the photograph loses its heated counterpoint -- the seemingly effortless glamour of jazz, forged in its harnessing of raw emotion via the spontaneous rigor of improvisation.

Ellington's commanding, sharply focused presence -- in front of the blurrier shirt-sleeved intensity of the players -- expresses everything one must know about the leadership as well as the grown-up camaraderie necessary to make this music. Past Ellington's left shoulder, the session's organizer, the guitarist Eddie Condon, looks on approvingly, his jaw-jutting expression wordlessly stating, This is jazz.

Herman Leonard mined another facet of jazz's uniquely photogenic character with his 1948 still-life portrait of the saxophonist Lester Young. Taken at a midtown Manhattan recording studio, the picture offers only Young's saxophone case, sheet music, the porkpie hat that was his signature, a Coke bottle with Young's cigarette, still smoking, balanced on its lip. Prez (as Billie Holiday called him) does not even appear in the frame.

THIS COULD ONLY BE A JAZZ photograph. The implied improvisational composition of the picture, its deceptively meticulous underlying form. The smoke. So much is expressed here with so little, the effect is quite poignant -- as moving, as ineffably haunting as Young's own playing style. Style is the subject, the style of a great jazz musician -- that distillation of manner and experience into sound. Just as a jazz musician's sound is an expression of all that he has been, Leonard gives us a picture of all that Young was.

One cannot finally comprehend the bond between jazz and photography without looking at Bill Gottlieb. Though entirely self-taught, Gottlieb, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday, took more indelible jazz photographs than anyone else, his subjects ranging from Dizzy Gillespie and Ella Fitzgerald to the Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt -- two studies in jazz rapture.

None, however, quite compare with his portrait of Billie Holiday in full cry. It is the quintessence of both Gottlieb's artistry and the unparalleled expressive interdependence of jazz and photography. What Gottlieb manages to capture here (as he did again and again with his camera) is the essence of jazz -- a quality, outside sound, that only a camera can capture. It is the sight of a soul expressing itself.

Few things in the history of photography can touch the richness of personality, the emotion, the integrity, the wit, the charisma, the suits, the hats, the faces in a great jazz photograph.

Inexorably, as older photographers and their subjects continue to pass away, new young talent asserts itself. Ultimately, of course, only the pictures will survive to tell future generations how the music looked.

The jazz photographer was (and is) if nothing else, a fan. The moments preserved therefore come to us subjectively framed and perhaps more than a little idealized. The pictures remain, however, no less reliable than memory. In the end, one is left with something indisputable: the countenance of jazz in all of its music.

Photos: Stark Purity Duke Ellington ringed by sidemen at a jam session in New York in August 1939--A combination of perspiration and elegance. (Charles Peterson/Collection of Don Peterson); Enraptured Moments The Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt. (William P. Gottlieb/Collection of the Library of Congress); Evoking, Not Showing Lester Young's pork pie hat and saxophone case. (Herman Leonard); Indelible Faces Ella Fitzgerald sings as Dizzy Gillespie looks on. (William P. Gottlieb/Collection of the Library of Congress)

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