



Early morning outside  
Charlie Parker's  
club Blindland, New York.

# JAZZ USA

*On a 15,000-mile odyssey across America in 1959, photographer William Claxton created an unparalleled portfolio of jazz images. Long unseen, they capture the quicksilver spirit of a young nation, says Geoff Dyer*

**IN 1959** William Claxton got a call from Joachim Berendt, a German jazz scholar and critic, asking if he would be interested in taking a trip around America. Berendt would interview musicians and record their playing; Claxton – young but already well-known for album covers he'd shot – would photograph them. Their work would then be published in a book in Germany. Oh, and Claxton would be paid \$7,000 (it felt like seven million back then, he recalls). Nice gig. The downside was that Claxton had just got married and his wife, Peggy, would not be able to come. (When they were reunited in Newport, Rhode Island, Claxton was overjoyed – and it's easy to see why: that's her, looking slinky as a cat, next to a poster for a 'rebel' festival.)

Claxton and Berendt spent four months touring the country in a Chevrolet that, on occasions, doubled as a prop in the photos. They started in New York, headed south to New Orleans, and then to the West Coast before doubling back east. *Jazzland* was the extravagant result of this 15,000-mile odyssey, long unavailable but now reprinted by the publishers Taschen in expanded form. It is a portfolio and an immense documentary record of a musical and social moment – but it is more than that too.

Charlie Parker had died in 1955 – Berendt and Claxton visit his grave – but bebop, the musical style he created, now formed the basic language of jazz. People who had played with him – Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis – were now the stars of the day. In 1959 Miles recorded *Kind of Blue*; in the same year John Coltrane – a tumultuous force in Miles's band – made *Giant Steps* while Ornette Coleman announced *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Claxton and Berendt are drawn to these dizzy heights but they are also keen to record the way that jazz, as well as being an art form and a style, was also a grassroots phenomenon. Jazz was everywhere; to Berendt's European eyes it seemed almost a condition of existence. This becomes especially clear when they visit musicians in Angola prison in Louisiana. Nothing if not accommodating, the governor asks if they want to see 'the nigger side or the white side'. In liberal California, a jazz party is organised around the pool at a friend's house. In common with many of Claxton's photos of West Coast musicians it affords a relaxed, almost idyllic view of an integrated jazz scene.

From San Francisco the pair head back east to complete their trip – complete it not just in the geographical sense. Each city was dominated by a particular style. New Orleans was traditional; St. Louis was 'a city of trumpeters'; Detroit was all post-bop... *Jazzland* becomes not just a journey through a country but through the tradition of the music. An entire history is condensed into a few months; decades can be seen in the time it takes to make a photograph. **OMM**

*Jazzlife* by William Claxton is published by Taschen at £100. All photographs © William Claxton 2005. To order a copy for £90 with free UK p&hp, call the Observer Books Service on 0870 836 0885 or go to [observer.co.uk/bookshop](http://observer.co.uk/bookshop)

