

# WHEN CLAXTON CLICKS

When you picture the jazz legend Chet Baker or film star Steve McQueen, chances are you are remembering a William Claxton photograph. As his milestone work 'Jazzlife' is republished, the photographer talks to **Derek Scally**

**W**illiam Claxton is the man we have to thank for the way we look at jazz. His photographs of Chet Baker, Duke Ellington and Miles Davis have become their standard portraits, the visual accompaniment to their most famous recordings. In the hands of Claxton, a musician in his own right, the camera becomes something else – call it the Claxophone if you will – that captures the dynamic relationship between the musician, the music and the instrument. "Photography is jazz for the eyes. All you have to do is listen to my pictures," he says. "I try to be a photojournalist, trying to create on the spot like a jazz musician. I start out with a plan, then I show up and might find things totally different and have to improvise, improvisations on a theme."

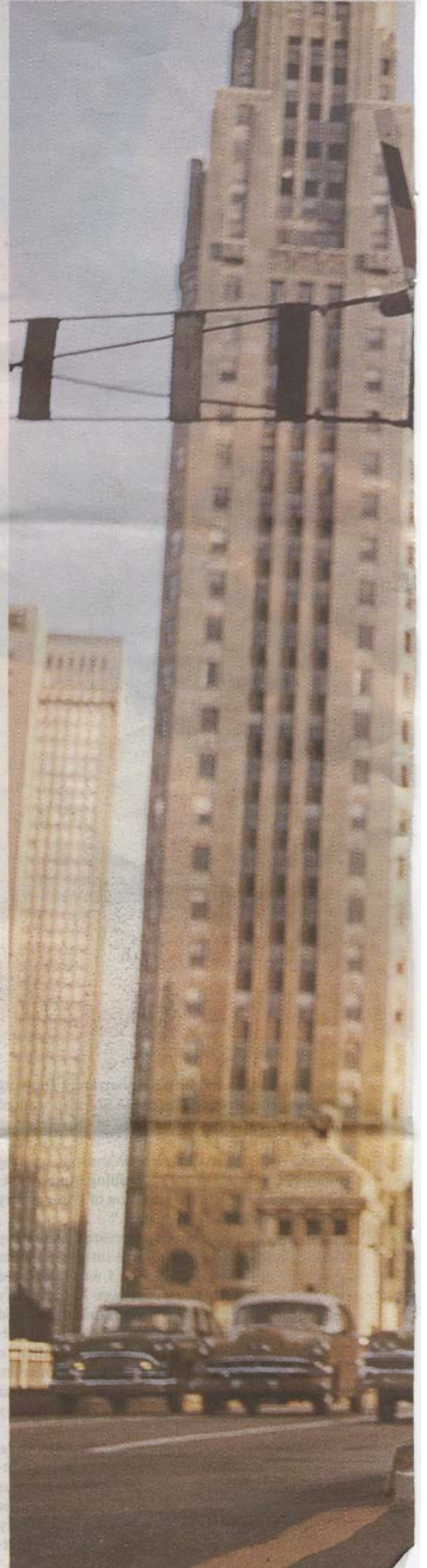
Claxton was born in 1927, in Pasadena, California. A childhood gift of a Brownie box camera sparked his interest in photography; his father's record collection developed his ear for jazz. He haunted LA's jazz clubs, a lanky teenager with a camera, wearing his father's suit to prevent anyone asking him for ID at the door. Inside, he took

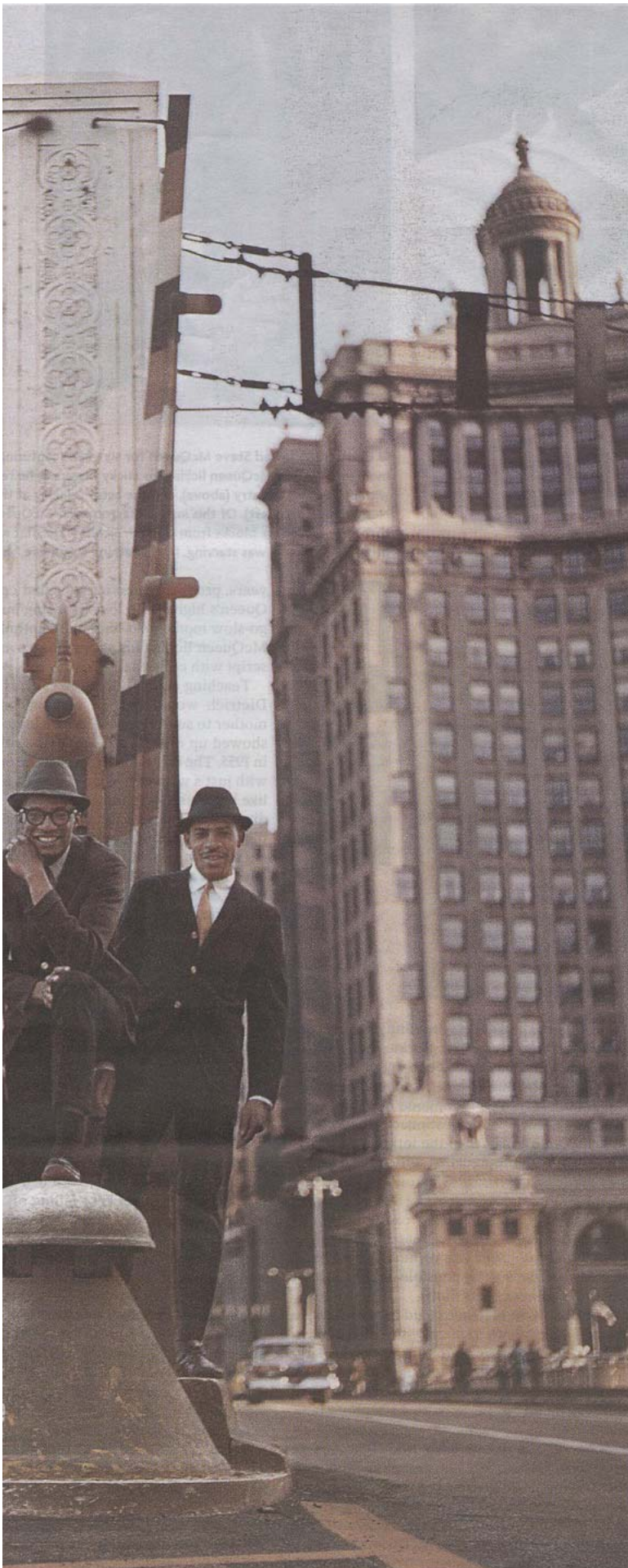
photographs; sometimes he gave the musicians the prints. His breakthrough came in 1952, when he photographed a then unknown Chet Baker during a session.

"I was up all night developing when this face appeared in the developing tray. A tough demeanor and a good physique but an angelic face with pale white skin and, the craziest thing, one tooth missing – he'd been in a fight. I thought, My God, that's Chet Baker," says Claxton with a chuckle. "That's when I finally understood [the term] photogenic, not knowing when you look at him but knowing when you see the print." Baker's first record producer said later that Claxton's photographs of the handsome trumpeter played a large part in establishing him with the public.

It was in the jazz clubs that Claxton developed his signature method, watching the light on the musicians' faces, their mannerisms, their relationships with their instruments. "Then I think to myself, That's a good look, I'll wait for that again." Claxton says he likes best photographing musicians during the adrenalin rush after a set. "They're high for 30 minutes, maybe two hours. I get them at a wonderful state of being."

Claxton's spare, signature style is mostly due to the modest financial circumstances of his early career, when he began photographing jazz





musicians in the studio for record covers. "The producer would say: 'I want a picture of every musician, every one a winner.' I could only afford two rolls of film, and I didn't have the confidence to ask for money for more. I just took pictures - 12 exposures on each roll, no second chance - and hoped I got it. And I did. Necessity really was the mother of invention."

The 144 sq in of an LP cover became Claxton's canvas, and he worked hard to turn out several a week for record producers and bands with better things to do. "I'd often ask what the album's title track was. *High on a Windy Hill*? Okay, I'll put the musicians on a hill," he laughs.

A key moment in Claxton's jazz career came with a call from Germany in 1959. On the phone was Joachim Berendt, a noted musicologist and writer who told Claxton he wanted to travel the US, documenting in words and images what he called "America's great art - jazz". The two men travelled from coast to coast and back again, paying calls on jazz musicians, visiting jazz clubs and prisons, and even making an inadvertent stop in the Faust Club, a lesbian jazz bar in St Louis.

Their collaboration, *Jazzlife*, was a milestone in publishing: a historical snapshot of the jazz world in 1960, with Berendt's interviews and essays offset by Claxton's striking photographs,

- Far left: the photographer and his 'Claxophone'
- Left: the Ramsey Lewis Trio at Chicago's Loop
- Top: André Previn in Hollywood
- Above: Dancing in New Orleans



● Claxton shadowed Steve McQueen for six years, capturing intimate moments, such as McQueen licking his sticky fingers as he reads a script with coffee and a pastry (above), and the actor relaxing at the Sherry-Netherland hotel (left). Of this image, Claxton says: 'McQueen remarked that he had lived six blocks from there in a cold-water flat with three other guys. "Man, I was starving. I did anything to survive," he said'



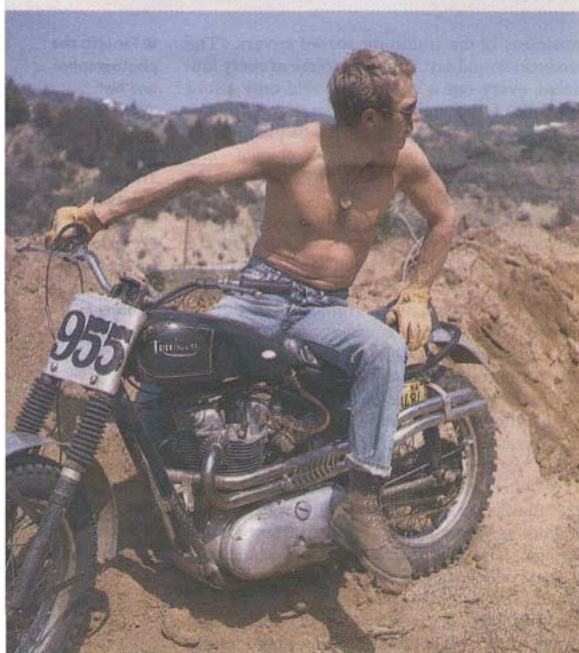
years, producing photographs that captured McQueen's high-speed love of racing but also some go-slow moments of incredible intimacy, such as McQueen licking his sticky fingers as he reads a script with coffee and a pastry.

Teaching control over the camera to Marlene Dietrich would be like teaching your grandmother to suck eggs, as Claxton learned when he showed up early at her Las Vegas dressingroom in 1955. The thin, elderly woman he encountered, with just a wisp of hair on her head, looked more like his Russian grandmother than the *Blue Angel* diva. "You must be the photographer," said the old woman, the off-stage Dietrich. "Put the camera away and come and sit down next to me." She gave him a cup of tea and, as he sipped, pointed out every wrinkle and tugged every fold of sagging skin she didn't want photographed. As she talked she put on her make-up, her costume and, finally, her carefully combed wig. She turned to face him, tightly wrapped in her Marlene Dietrich packaging, and said: "Now you may take pictures." "I just melted and started snapping," remembers Claxton. "Dietrich had a fantastic individualistic understanding of what the camera could do."

Claxton's star portraits are realistic, but when forced to choose between generous and cruel he always goes with the former, even if the latter would be the easier option, as in the Las Vegas hotel room of Judy Garland before a 1955 concert. "She was a mess, drinking too much wine and popping pills. Her towel kept falling off, she looked terrible and her legs were all bruised. I could have taken a picture of that but didn't," he says. "Her desperateness was enough; the state she was in." Claxton's photographs capture the desperate, backstage Garland, like a real-life Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard*, with pleading eyes and clawlike hands. But the concert photographs, from just a few minutes later, show another woman, the onstage belter in full command.

Now, after more than half a century behind the viewfinder, it appears that modesty is the secret of Claxton's longevity. "I tire of my pictures after a while," he says. "When I look at them I think, That was a good time, but I'm always looking forward to the next session." ♦

*Jazzlife*, by William Claxton and Joachim Berendt, and *Steve McQueen*, by Claxton, are published by Taschen, €150 and €20. See also [www.williamclaxton.com](http://www.williamclaxton.com)



which put the musicians in sunny landscapes instead of smoky clubs. The glorious book, out of print for years, has now been republished by Taschen in a labour-of-love expanded edition - with a jazz CD thrown in for good measure.

Claxton's world is unquestionably that of jazz, but he became a master of the intimate star portrait - even with the so-called difficult stars, such as Frank Sinatra. It was Claxton who took the famous photograph of a laughing Sinatra popping out of a harp case. The best examples of his portrait work are his riveting images of Steve McQueen - also published in a volume by Taschen - which are perhaps as responsible for McQueen's immortal coolness as his films.

"The first thing McQueen said to me when we met is: 'I hate photographers. Stay in the background'," remembers Claxton. This was the early 1960s, and McQueen was just emerging as a star. Claxton was determined not to be relegated to the background on the set with a telephoto lens, so he seized the moment and, one day, parked his Porsche on the film-studio lot, right beside McQueen's Ferrari. The two complimented each other on their taste in cars, and soon Claxton was having dinner in McQueen's dressing room, teaching him how to control the camera. "I love the word control," remarked McQueen.

Claxton shadowed the actor over the next six