

# Hanging with heroes

## INTERVIEW

William Claxton

The ground-breaking photographer tells SIOBHAN MURPHY about wild times on the road and all that jazz

'I'm feeling a little foggy,' admits photographer William Claxton, amiably. He's had no sleep the night before, flew in from Madrid this morning and is now on his way to a David Bailey shoot. A tough schedule for anyone but surely especially so for a man in his seventies.

The reason behind all this hard work stems from another trip, taken 45 years ago. In 1960, Claxton and the German musicologist Joachim Berendt took off in a Chevrolet Impala on a five-month road trip round America. Their aim was to document the nation's jazz culture in all its incarnations – the resulting book, *Jazz Life*, was considered one of the greatest jazz books of all time. But it was only printed in Germany.

'When it was first released, it was about 130 pages long and was reproduced on terrible newsprint, as the



Pioneer: William Claxton

Germans still didn't have any quality paper after the war,' says Claxton. 'All the pages have turned yellow since then.' So when art book publishers Taschen approached him about reproducing a mammoth, trilingual version of *Jazz Life*, with many more pictures than the original, Claxton was thrilled.

'I had to write a new introduction and the moment I started I began remembering all these details and stories I thought I'd forgotten,' he says. 'I'd wake up in the middle of the night reaching for my notebook, saying: "Oh, I remember a crazy thing that happened in North Carolina".'

His reminiscences are certainly wild: hazy days and drunken nights spent with some of the biggest names in jazz. One memorable night in Chicago with Jack Teagarden ended with the arrival of the police: Teagarden's generous offer to make Claxton and Berendt his famous Oklahoma chilli after the show was slightly dented by the fact he'd drunkenly broken into the wrong apartment to make it.

What strikes you most in Claxton and Berendt's tales, and in Claxton's mainly black and white photographs, is the innocent friendliness of the times. When the intrepid duo pitched up in the latest city on their grand tour and threw an afternoon party, everyone who was anyone on the local jazz scene turned up, despite the fact many hadn't seen that time of day in years.



Capturing the mood: William Claxton's rapport with musicians spawned relaxed images

'Jazz people are pretty approachable,' says Claxton. 'I consider myself a photojournalist, I love to shoot picture stories about human beings, so I'd spend a lot of time with whoever I was photographing and catch many musicians in their unguarded moments, when they were having lots of fun.'

What makes Claxton's pictures stand out is the joyfulness he so often captures, despite the hardships many black jazz

musicians were suffering in 1960s America. And it was the essential joyfulness of jazz that inspired his love for the genre. Growing up in a musical family, Claxton's boyhood heroes were the likes of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway and he started photographing jazz musicians while he was still a student at UCLA. In the 1950s, he helped set up Pacific Jazz Records, shooting all their record covers as well as many for major record companies.

'I studied piano for a year or two as a child but I didn't have the patience to practise,' he admits. 'Once I got hooked on photography I knew that was my calling but every day I'm sorry I can't sit down and play something I like. I'm a little bored with the current jazz scene,' he adds. 'Modern jazz is not the happy, joyful sounding thing it once was.'

*Jazz Life*, with a CD of Berendt's remastered original recordings, is published by Taschen, priced £100.