

Bigpicture

Nobody knows the identity of the young man standing outside the most famous jazz club in the world at four in the morning on Broadway, 1960. But the saxophone, the sharp suit and the hollow eyes give a narrative of their own. It was the bebop era, when jazz was at the height of its powers and New York City was its spiritual home. Birdland, the club named in honour of Charlie "Bird" Parker, had opened 11 years earlier and established itself as the one place that every jazz musician had to play, although many resented its

dominant status. "Birdland gives me a bad feeling," said the saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, but he still played, as did John Coltrane, Sarah Vaughan and Miles Davis, in front of audiences that might have included Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra.

William Claxton's picture was taken as part of a four-month journey across America that documented the jazz life in its myriad forms. Claxton was a talented young photographer from California who had only been married for a few months to the model Peggy Moffitt when he got a call from a German musicologist called Joachim-Ernst Berendt. "He was coming

to America to do a study of 'America's great art - jazz'," remembers Claxton, and Berendt needed a photographer.

They would travel from New York to New Orleans to Los Angeles and all points in between, and the results would be published in a German book called *Jazz Life* in 1961. Moffitt smiled sadly at the news and said to her new husband: "What about me?" But he took the job anyway.

The results don't merely cover jazz, but the wider black experience of life in 60s America. In New Orleans Claxton shot a water fountain for "blacks" and "whites", and met blues singers doing time in Louisiana state penitentiary.

Snapshot Birdland, Broadway, 1960

Photograph by William Claxton

Berendt, a German in love with jazz, was amazed to discover how many top musicians wanted to move to Europe to get away from the racial problems of America. But New York remained the centre for their music, Broadway and 52nd Street in particular, where according to Berendt in *Jazz Life* "you run into jazz musicians of one kind or another at virtually every hour of the day or night." It seems that the hollow-eyed dreamer with the sax was just one among many.

Will Hodgkinson

Jazz Life by William Claxton and Joachim E Berendt is published by Taschen.

