

Chasing the giants of Jazz



STEVE CRIST

WILLIAM CLAXTON'S 1960 PHOTOS CAPTURED A NATION AND ITS MUSICAL ROOTS



WILLIAM CLAXTON PHOTOGRAPHS

Many of William Claxton's photographs from his 1960 tour were taken in San Francisco, such as this portrait of Darnell Howard on Lombard Street.

By Richard Scheinin
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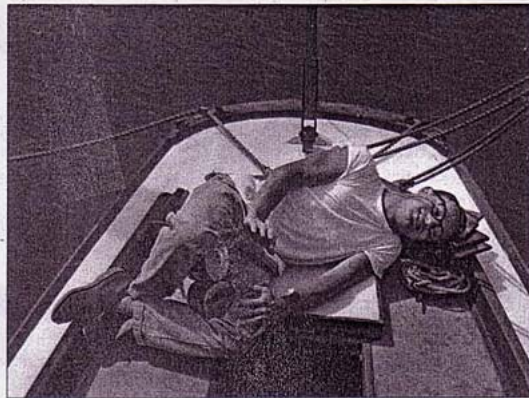
We should all have the nerve: When he was 16 and growing up in Los Angeles, budding photographer William Claxton sneaked backstage at the famous Orpheum Theatre, knocked on Duke Ellington's dressing room door, introduced himself to America's greatest musician, and wound up snapping Duke's photo. "We were friends until he died," Claxton says.

He isn't kidding. Or exaggerating.

For decades, Claxton, now 78, has been a leading fashion and celebrity photographer, putting his wife, model Peggy Moffitt, in the pages of *Time* in a topless swimsuit in 1964 (the magazine, gun-shy, used a back shot) and capturing Steve McQueen in a fast car in 1962. Those are iconic images.

But it's jazz that first captured Claxton's heart and, really, never let it go. And it was jazz musicians — Ellington, Paul Desmond, Gerry Mulligan, even the young Miles Davis — who became his friends. For all his hanging out with Sinatra, Streisand, McQueen and the like, "Those were assignments," he says. "I was never a celebrity chaser. Only the musicians was I a nut about."

There is a special beauty and intimacy — a truth — to Claxton's jazz images, some of the most revealing ever taken in the music's century-long history. "Claxton was and still is a remarkably sensitive photographer," says Orrin Keepnews, the famous jazz record producer in New York and Berkeley who commissioned Claxton for a number of pro-



A youthful Cal Tjader relaxes with coffee can "bongos" on a boat in Sausalito in 1960.



Online Extra

Log on to www.mercurynews.com/entertainment for a link to William Claxton's Web site.



JAZZ LIFE:
A Journey for Jazz
Across America in 1960
Photographs by William Claxton,
text by Joachim E. Berendt
Taschen, 695 pp., \$200

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CLAXTON | 1960 photos among jazz's best chronicles

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jects. "There's a great human warmth and sensitivity in this guy's work."

And now hundreds of those images — about one-third of which have never before been published — have been painstakingly reproduced on thick paper in a lavish volume — at \$95 oversize pages, it's heavy enough to tip over a coffee table — titled "Jazzlife: A Journey for Jazz Across America in 1960."

That year, Claxton, then 32, and German musicologist Joachim E. Berendt, who was about 35, rented a 1959 Impala with giant tail fins and a cardboard cover over the official license plate that read "See the USA in Your Chevrolet" and took off from New York to New Orleans (there are scores of musical images from that lost world) to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

They were searching for jazz and its roots, not only at clubs but on the streets, in black churches, at Southern crossroads and on St. Simon Island off the coast of Georgia, one in the chain of islands where George and Ira Gershwin set "Porgy and Bess."

The book that resulted was first published in 1961; the new "Jazzlife" is its fattened-up successor. And while Berendt, who died in an accident in 2000, framed each stop on the itinerary with a learned and insightful essay, Claxton's images are what make the music and its players leap to life.

Claxton is so proud of it. His older brother was a pianist, "that I was always at home with them and felt that they were my family."

He captured jazz at a time when it was still popular and ubiquitous, he points out over lunch in San Francisco, telling stories about the music's gold-



WILLIAM CLAXTON

Thelonious Monk is portrayed in San Francisco with a cocktail that helped prime him for a famous photo aboard a cable car.

en age and his role in preserving it with his old Nikon F and Leica M3 cameras.

The images speak clearly of the times — and of just how comfortable the musicians felt around Claxton.

There's Ellington on stage in Las Vegas, popping his fingers and looking debonair, gazing, eyebrows arched, just past Claxton's fly-on-the-wall lens.

There's vibraphonist Cal Tjader, the picture of youth, sprawled on the deck of his boat, beating a pair of "bon-

gos" made from coffee cans, in the Sausalito sunshine.

There's pianist Thelonious Monk, the enigma, here looking happily dazed, sipping a champagne cocktail at a San Francisco cafe, staring straight into the camera.

Claxton — "Clax" to musicians and friends — shot that one during the Bay Area leg of the 1960 journey. He was piggybacking an assignment from Riverside Records to shoot a photo of Monk, who happened to be playing with his band at

the Blackhawk night club, for an upcoming LP cover. The label wanted a shot of Monk on a cable car, an idea Claxton thought "corny" but pursued nonetheless.

"So I called Thelonious' hotel — many times, with no answer," he remembers. "He was always asleep or out. Or both: out of it. But finally I got him, explained what I hoped to do, and said, 'Why don't we meet at this place, this outdoor cafe in North Beach?'" It was a short cab drive from where the cable cars turn around.

Monk wasn't into it. "I ain't got no cable car eyes," he told Claxton.

Nonetheless, the pianist made it to the cafe at around 2 p.m. — breakfast time for Monk, who still wasn't up for the photo. That's when Claxton noticed a laminated card on the table with a picture of an attractive, smiling young woman, advertising "champagne cocktails."

They "tasted like 7-Up," Claxton remembers, laughing, "and after we had a few of them, Monk said, 'Oh, man, you know a cable car sounds like a good idea!' I said, 'Let's go.'"

And that's how the well-known album cover happened: It shows Monk, in raincoat and fedora and with a suitcase in his hand, hanging out of the cable car.

"If anyone was going to pin me down and make me put together a list of the half dozen best jazz covers of all time," says Keepnews, who gave Claxton the assignment, "I would fight to have that one included. Monk on the cable car. . . . He did a great job with that one, when you stop and consider who he was dealing with. Monk was not outstandingly cooperative with things like that."

Claxton, however, says "It isn't a great picture." He mostly tried for less predictable images: trumpeter Donald Byrd practicing on Manhattan's A train, the handful of other passengers pretending not to notice; blues singer Roosevelt Charles, his face contorted be-

tween heavenward praise and madness, at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola; trombonist Kid Ory, an old Louis Armstrong sidekick from New Orleans, performing in the shadows on stage at his own On the Levee nightclub on the Embarcadero in San Francisco, where the Ivy League types flocked to hear traditional jazz 45 years ago.

To Claxton, even they were "moldy figs. I was on the lookout for bebop, even post-bop," he says. "I was trying to be a cool guy in a cool world."

Growing up in the Swing Era, keeping scrapbooks

ard Bernstein, Noel Coward, Judy Garland, Spike Lee and Sting. A year or two ago, he spent a day photographing Paul McCartney ("a very nice man" and a very nice man") for a recording date, and last June he documented an Elton John reunion with songwriter Bernie Taupin.

In the end, though, jazz accounts for the most personal part of Claxton's legacy. And the 1960 road trip stands out for him, because it let him fulfill a dream: "I always loved photojournalism," he says. "I wanted to be a Life magazine photojournalist. And on that

"I started off knowing so many musicians as a young kid that I was always at home with them and felt that they were my family."

— WILLIAM CLAXTON

about Benny Goodman, Count Basie and Lena Horne, and never dreaming that one day he would meet them, his direction was set. He attended UCLA, majored in psychology ("I was fancied by the mind and I was really interested in creativity") and spent off hours at the small, private, black jazz clubs on Central Avenue where "booze was served in coffee cups."

He met Dexter Gordon, Charles Mingus ("always a grump"), Benny Carter and other heroes. After graduating in 1951, he began shooting recording sessions and musicians' portraits for album covers: trumpeter Shorty Rogers (who wrote a tune called "Clickin' with Clax"), the young Ornette Coleman ("terribly shy; oh, he could hardly speak") who soon would upend the jazz world with his revolutionary saxophone, and trumpeter Chet Baker, whose sexy-lethargic image essentially was created by Claxton.

Claxton also met Igor Stravinsky at a photo shoot for Columbia Records and went on to attend a number of Sunday afternoon cocktail parties thrown by the composer and his wife, Vera, in what is now West Hollywood. Over the years, he photographed Leon-

trip I think I captured the state of the union by photographing the people, the cars, the restaurants, the gas stations, the churches, and I think it made it that much richer.

"People say, 'Boy, you not only covered the jazz world, you captured an important slice of America.' It was an unusual time, right before the civil rights era really happened. It was a short, transitory moment."

There are so many special moments in "Jazzlife." One finds saxophonist Hank Mobley standing in the middle of Harlem's 125th Street at night. There's a fascinating street scene happening right next to him, but Mobley seems happily oblivious. He stares right at the camera, his arms outstretched in some sort of salute, his face lit up with a smile.

Years later, Mobley died in Philadelphia. A man with a drinking problem, he had landed on welfare and fallen off the scene. But here he is, once again happy to be alive. That's how we'll remember him. Thanks to Clax.

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