

WILLIAM CLAXTON

BE-BOP PHOTOGRAPHER

The seminal photobook *Jazzlife* originally came out in 1961, and has been out of print and much sought after for many years. On the occasion of the publication of a revised and expanded version by Taschen, David Land met up with photographer William Claxton to discuss the work



William Claxton, who in his earlier career photographed for *Life*, *Paris Match* and *Vogue*, was born and raised in California, and is now back there, living in Los Angeles, having in the interim lived across the globe, from Paris and London, to Tokyo. This interview took place in David Bailey's studio, where Claxton was being photographed, while he was over in London to promote the launch of *Jazzlife*.

"I was commissioned in 1960 to do *Jazzlife*, on the strength of my work in magazines and on record covers, by German musicologist Joachim E Berendt", he says. "I asked him why he'd chosen me out of all the photographers in the world, and he said because he thought I had soul, which made me feel good. He was a successful writer and lecturer for many years. He moved onto metaphysical things after jazz, and was killed aged 72 in Hanover, while walking to a lecture he was about to give. It was a rainy night, and he stepped in front of a car.

"1954-55 was the start of the boom in the production

Above: Andre Previn, Hollywood.

Right: The funeral procession home from the cemetery turns into a joyous occasion and celebration for the dead, with dancing in the streets while following the music of the brass band.

of LPs and, back in 1960, I was doing anything up to 10 record covers a week, because everybody was recording. It was wonderful. So many of the black musicians who had been unknown became recognised as a result, and they actually had their own records, which had never happened before, and their photographs were reproduced on these big 12 inch sleeves which LPs had – that was a great period for art.

"Joachim and I drove around the United States for four months, tracing jazz's origins and influences. We met in New York in April 1960 and rented a car, and drove to almost every state of the union, all over the eastern states, down the whole seaboard, and then through Louisiana and Boston, up through Memphis, Chicago, and then back up to the west coast. We skipped over a few states - there wasn't much music anywhere in the United States in those days. We tried to get music on the car radio, and could get nothing but terrible hillbilly music and local bands that weren't very good.

"We tracked down jazz of all kinds, from gospel to



the New Orleans marching bands. We also went to a couple of big prisons, where we knew there were a lot of black musicians being held. That was quite a wild experience, but we got some good pictures out of it.

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"I shot on a Nikon F, and I had an old Leica M3, which I bought used. In addition, I lugged around several lenses and a Rolleiflex, which Richard Avedon had given me. My girlfriend at that time was a model - this is before I was married - and she took me to an Avedon shoot in New York City. He had Hasselblads and Rolleiflexes lined up on a bench. I was admiring them, and he said, 'do you want one?' I treasured that camera, shot everything with it, including many of the record covers, because it was square format, which meant there was space for type and design.

"I love thinking as a photojournalist. I like a photo story that has a beginning, a middle and an end to it, so that you get some kind of closure. It might take three or four pictures to do it, preferably more. You see in the new book I photographed gas stations, coffee shops, a country carnival. We didn't put that material into the first book because it just concentrated on jazz. So, the new publication has much more journalistic information about 1960s America, which makes me really happy.

"I was aware of Robert Frank's work in 1960. He had an influence on me. He encouraged me. William Klein was another contemporary of mine. When I was

first shooting for *Vogue*, he was shooting high contrast, flash-lit pictures on 35mm. He always made strong gutsy images, which I admired very much. I finally met him, years later, and he likes my work too. He bought one of my pictures.

"Jazz is closely related to the blues, and soul, and folk music - it all came from the same places: the European influences and the American beats, and it's the same standard. When you love music as I do, it doesn't really matter that much - the blues I can listen to, but Stravinsky too.

"We always had music around the household when I was a child. My mother was a musician. She used to sing in one of the better choirs in town, and she played harp, and we had a piano in the house and she gave lessons. I took piano lessons but I wasn't very good at it, I wouldn't stick with it. I got hung up on the visuals instead. I got my first little Box Brownie camera, and I loved that.

"Besides my mother and my brother, my dog and my cat, I think the first well known musician I photographed was Duke Ellington. Back in those days, 1940-41, they still had vaudeville shows. My buddy and I would go to the Orphean Theatre in downtown Los Angeles, see the movie, the two features, the marching, the cartoons, the comedies, then a juggling act and a bicycle act and then Duke Ellington! We'd sit through all that, and then we'd go right back and see another show. One time, I got to Duke's dressing room and knocked on his door - it seemed like the thing to do - and he greeted me so warmly. Through the years, whenever he was in town, or I was in the town where he was, I would go see Duke, and we became close, and I really loved him and admired his work.

"The original *Jazzlife* was published in German and only distributed in Germany, and it was the biggest



selling book on jazz in Germany for a long time. I finally got a cheque for \$3000 after about 20 years – that was the first payment - apart from the \$7000 I got to drive around and do the book. That was a lot of money for me in those days.

“The Taschen publication of *Jazzlife* is a rebirth of the same book. Joachim was a very good writer, and explained in the simplest manner what jazz was and what made it important, and Benedict Taschen remembered *Jazzlife* from when he was a teenager learning about jazz. We dug up all the pictures we could find from the shoots that went into the book – 5-600 prints, plus transparencies. Some of them had disintegrated terribly - the colour needed miracles bringing it back up.

“We digitised everything we could. If we didn’t have the negative, then we just took the best vintage print we could find, and scanned it. It was wonderful when we could use the actual negative: 50-year-old black and

Above: Stan Getz by a stage door, Cosmo Alley, Hollywood.
Right: Philly Joe Jones (left) and Larence Morable, Falcon Lair, Beverly Hills.

white 35mm frames of the hot sun hitting a white shirt on a black-skinned man, with the shiny trumpet highlights, and the ebony-black piano behind him. Digitised, you can see a level of detail that I didn’t know was possible. The camera and the film were able to capture it in those days, but we weren’t able to project it. Never worked in the conventional way. Of course, a lot of the images were also retouched - chemical spots and fingerprints removed with Photoshop.

“When the first book was printed in 1961, Germany hadn’t really yet recovered from the war, so the publisher couldn’t afford good quality print paper, so the first copies are all yellowed and look terrible. But Taschen uses the very best paper, the best inks and the best of everything. It’s quite spectacular.

“I wrote a new introduction to the book, explaining how it came about. I kept a diary during the trip. It was very sparse, just one or two words sometimes, but it



jogged my memory very well, and I remembered all kinds of things about the trip, lots of anecdotes and good stories about musicians, so that made for an interesting introduction, after which the book reverts to Joachim's original text, translated into English and French, and then I added some more stories around the pictures, to develop photo connections. I try to keep the reader reminded all the way through the book that this was 1960 and that, while some of the things Joachim and I were saying seemed ok at the time, the world has changed a great deal since then.

"I was pretty naïve at the time, I think, and I never let issues of racial segregation, and the fact that I was a white man photographing black musicians, bother me. Also, in those days, people were polite, no matter where you were. If I walked into a black household or a party, they were polite about it, and I didn't know any better, I just treated them with respect.



Above: Children in New York, the last picture in the book.

Jazzlife, William Claxton, Joachim E Berendt. Pub Taschen ISBN 3822830666, £100.

"I purposely included all kinds of people and musicians, street musicians, unknown people who never got to be known, but in their own way they were wonderful musicians. I never liked the idea of putting together celebrities or just stars, and this was a chance to include the people who have worked through their art: the little man, the street musicians - they're all here.

"The last picture in the book is of children in New York City on a hot afternoon, with my dedication: 'This is the last shot that I made on our trip across America. It was made at 6.09pm on a summer evening, June 1960, just outside Washington Square in Greenwich Village. I wonder about these three boys. They must be in their 50s now. I wonder where they are now and if any of them became professional musicians. This book is dedicated to all musicians, past, present and future, with my admiration, love and respect for the jazz life they live.'" **David Land**