



# p d n

## THE Legends ISSUE

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André Previn photographed by William Claxton

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## JAZZ FOR THE EYE

William Claxton expands the classic photography book on the most American form of music. By Edgar Allen Beem

**D**uring the summer of 1960, Los Angeles photographer William Claxton and German musicologist Joachim Berendt took the road trip to end all road trips: a three-month, 15,000-mile odyssey criss-crossing America in a rented '59 Chevy Impala to chronicle America's greatest indigenous art form, jazz.

Drawing on Claxton's jazz world connections, Berendt's encyclopedic knowledge of American jazz, and tips from musicians' unions, music edu-

cators, publishers and producers, the unlikely duo drove the highways and byways of America, from New York to L.A. and back with stops in such jazz hotspots as New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and D.C. At each place they would record in words and pictures the musical life of the country—from spirituals, blues and soul to Dixieland, bebop, improvisational jazz and West Coast cool.

The results of their epic journey were published



as the landmark volume *Jazz Life* (Burdia Verlag, 1961). The book quickly became a collector's item, but therein lay the problem.

"It was printed in Germany and only in German," explains Claxton. "It's a great book, but nobody could get it in America."

Now, *Jazz Life* (Taschen, 2005, \$200) has been gloriously resurrected and lavishly expanded, bringing back to life the greatest work of the world's greatest jazz photographer.

Claxton, a tall, distinguished gentleman of 78 years, was born in Pasadena, California, in 1927, and came of age with the cool West Coast jazz scene of the 1950s. In 1952, he co-founded the Pacific Jazz label with producer Richard Bock and, as a jazz world insider, photographed everyone from Charlie "Bird" Parker to Chet Baker, Thelonious Monk to Miles Davis.

Claxton first picked up a camera ("my magic box") at age 7 and was instantly aware that "the moment I click the shutter that image will never appear again." That powerful and precious sense of history informs Claxton's impressive body of work, a photo-documentation of music and musicians that runs from the original *Jazz Life* through *Jazz: A Photo History* (1979), *Jazz: William Claxton* (1987), *California Cool* (1992), *Jazz West Coast* (1993), *Young Chet* (on jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, 1993), *Claxography* (1995), *Jazz Portraits* (1998) and *Jazz Seen* (1999).

*Jazz Portraits* and *Jazz Seen* were both published by German publisher and jazz aficionado Benedikt Taschen.

"Benedikt Taschen is a fantastic publisher," says Claxton, recalling how the new edition of *Jazz Life* came to be. "One day he said, 'I remember that book you did. It was the best book I ever read on jazz. Do you still have those pictures?' I said, 'Yes, and a lot more that were never published.' So we decided to do the book the way it should have been done."

The original *Jazz Life* was a 268-page monograph on jazz in which Claxton's photographs were cut and pasted to illustrate Berendt's text. The new Taschen edition of *Jazz Life* is a 700-page behemoth that weighs as much as a shot put (16



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Opposite page, clockwise from left: Art Pepper climbing a hill in L.A. to symbolize his uphill struggle with his career and drug addiction; Philly Joe Jones (left) and Larance Marable, Beverly Hills; William Claxton. This page, right: The Ramsey Lewis Trio at Chicago's Loop. Below: Future jazz musicians, Greenwich Village, New York.

pounds). The added size and weight is a function not only of the text being printed in English, French and German, but also because 40 percent of the photographs were not previously published. The new edition gives Claxton's photographs ample space to stretch out and wail.

"The book we wanted was a book about photography as well as about jazz," Claxton explains.

Having pursued his twin passions for photography and jazz for so long, Claxton says they are now inseparable in his mind.

"My wife Peggy says photography is jazz for the eye. I can't separate the two. They're so similar. You study, you get the basic framework down, then you improvise based on a plan."

Claxton has been happily married to former model Peggy Moffitt since 1959. Moffitt was innovative fashion designer Rudi Gernreich's top model and muse, leading Claxton and Moffitt to collaborate on *The Rudi Gernreich Book* (1991). Though he is best known for the depth and breadth of his jazz photographs, Claxton has also published books on famous comedians (*Laugh*, 1999) and the actor Steve McQueen (*Steve McQueen*, 2000).

The hallmark of Claxton's jazz photographs is the photojournalistic approach he has most often taken to his chosen subject. While some of the photographs in *Jazz Life* are studio shots created as album covers, most are candid and casual images that capture musicians either in performance or in off-stage moments. One of his most famous jazz portraits is a photograph of trumpeter Art Pepper, newly released from prison and strung out waiting for his drug dealer to arrive, walking up the steep, skidmarked street in Los Angeles where he lived. Claxton asked Pepper to walk up the middle of the steep street, because his life had been a series of ups and downs.

"I told him, 'It's a metaphor for your life.' He laughed and did it."

*Jazz Life* contains a Who's Who of jazz in 1960—



**"My wife Peggy says photography is jazz for the eye. I can't separate the two. They're so similar," says Claxton.**

Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Nat King Cole, Gerry Mulligan, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, Ramsey Lewis, Dinah Washington, etc., but Claxton places the stars in context, providing a slice of musical life that includes lesser known and unknown musicians as well as scenes of the churches, clubs, bars and streets where jazz flourished.

The last photograph Claxton took on his 1960 jazz journey was of three young boys, street musicians near Washington Square, in New York City. He dedicated the new edition of *Jazz Life* to them.

"I wonder if they became professional musicians," he says. "I wonder if they're still alive. They'd be in their fifties now."

The most profound lesson Claxton says he learned by revisiting his *Jazz Life* photographs almost a half century later was not musical but tech-

nical. The 1960 photographs were shot with handheld cameras (a Nikon F, a Leica M3 and an old Rolleiflex given to him by Richard Avedon) in available light using Tri-X 320 film pushed to 1000 ASA to give the prints the desired grainy effect. Scanning the old negs was a revelation to Claxton.

"I'm so amazed now," he says. "I get out these 50-year-old 35 mm Tri-X negatives of say, a black musician wearing a white shirt standing in sunlight next to a black piano, I have them scanned and digitized, and there were details in all the blacks and whites I hadn't seen before. Now that we're able to digitize, you realize how much information was in there. The film had more information than you could possibly print on paper."

All that visual information, and more, is now part of Claxton's magnificent new *Jazz Life*.

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