

All that jazz

A lavish new edition of William Claxton's *Jazzlife* showcases his images of the 1960s scene to stunning effect, finds Miranda Gavin

Jazzlife is not just a document of the American jazz scene in 1960 – it's a labour of love and a testament to an era on the cusp of the black civil rights movement.

Reassembled and repackaged in XXL format, well-known jazz photographer William Claxton and German musicologist Joachim Berendt take us on a trail through the key cities, from New Orleans to New York, capturing the heart and soul of the jazz scene.

Now in its second incarnation, this collectors' item has been expanded and updated, and includes many previously unseen colour photographs. Featured artists include Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Thelonius Monk and John Coltrane, as well as many unknowns. The new edition is a book of epic proportions and, in its limited-edition package, an audio-visual feast, including the original recordings Berendt's made throughout the duo's trip.

Chromatic scale

The book opens with nine double-page photographs, in both black-and-white and colour, which set the scene and signal the mood of the rest of the *Jazzlife*. It is clear that this pair know their subject inside out, and that includes both traditional and avant garde jazz. Strong on composition and often playful, Claxton's images are a delight. He used available light and a Nikon F and Leica M3 to get under the skin of many of his heroes, creating personal, intimate and unobtrusive images.

But beyond that, this study of 'America's great art', as Berendt called it, is a snapshot of a time when racial tensions permeated the fabric of everyday life. Gospel singer Mahlia Jackson looks almost radiant mid-song in Chicago, but the text reveals that she lived under constant threat from her neighbours.



Above: Photograph © William Claxton.

Later, a single-page photograph simply shows two drinking fountains in the Deep South with the words 'Colored' and 'White' written above them. This shouldn't really be surprising: one of the underlying premises of the four-month trip was the belief that, to really understand these musicians and their music, it was vital to visit their cities.

Claxton's ability to interpret and feel the music he photographs is also evident. Whether it is a portrait of Joe Williams and the Count Basie Band emerging from the stage amidst swirls of white light, or colour band portraits set against the Golden Gate Bridge, Claxton captures the jazz scene with sensitivity and many of his photographs capture its joie de vivre too.

Priced at £100, *Jazzlife* is clearly pitched at the collector

and the sheer size and weight of the new volume makes the term coffee-table book rather redundant – this is dining-table size.

With all texts presented in English, German and French, *Jazzlife* is a portrait of an era and a valuable social document. It's also a cracking good photography book. **BJP**

'The chance to photograph many of my jazz heroes was too tempting to resist.'

In print

Jazzlife by William Claxton is published by Taschen (ISBN: 3-8228-3066-6). The book is priced £100 and comes in an extra large size – 30x40cm – and features text by Joachim Berendt as well as a CD. Visit www.taschen.com for more information.