

Cadenza

By Gary Giddins

Travels With Bill



LUKE LOOS

The delayed, coincidental arrival in the middle 1950s of two extremely dissimilar novels—Kerouac's hurried *On the Road* and Nabokov's fastidious *Lolita*—helped spur a renewal of the American picaresque. The idea of hitting the road had been an act of desperation in the 1930s and the source of comedies set in exotic locales in the 1940s. But in the next decade, it reawakened romantic aspirations, a mixture of roguish bravado and a righteous search for truth. What more poetic year to embark than 1960, as Ike's America morphed into JFK's?

It happens that two writers mapped out full-season itineraries that year. Unknown to each other, they filled their tanks and set out from New York on trips that, for entirely different reasons, entailed redolent stays in Monterey, Calif., and climactic ones in New Orleans. One writer was eminent: John Steinbeck, who had documented wretched journeys of the Depression, designed a trailer-truck and left in the fall with his dog, whose name adorned the best-seller that followed, *Travels With Charlie*. Meanwhile, the other road trip was largely unknown until a few months ago.

In April of 1960, the German music critic Joachim-Ernst Berendt came to New York with the intention of motoring across the country in search not of America, but of American jazz—a far happier Valhalla. Instead of a camper, he leased a 1959 Impala, and instead of a sheepdog, he enlisted the photographer William Claxton. Claxton had already published a collection of photographs in 1955 (*Jazz West Coast*) and had earned a reputation in jazz with startling, energetic, often humorous LP covers, and in fashion, with his coverage of Rudi Gernreich's premiere model, Peggy Moffitt, Claxton's wife. Yet he was hardly famous, and the 1961 record of his travels, *Jazz-Life*, did little to raise his standing: It was published in Europe only, though many of its images eventually appeared in Claxton's trim 1987 volume, *Jazz*.

Now he has brought out an enlarged version of the original book, weighing in at 15 pounds, with 700 pages that measure 16 by 11-plus inches. As one colleague noted, it isn't a coffee-table book; it's the coffee table. Grandly produced by the resourceful international publisher Taschen in 2005, it is a volume worthy of a year remembered for long-lost musical discoveries. The size is integral to its authority. Like the Torah, it must be laid flat on a table, inviting you to pore over the diverse, moving, funny, nostalgic, urgent images that have the power, before many pages have been turned, to transport you to another time and place.

Jazzlife has lost its hyphen but gained an English translation (French and German versions are also included, on pages enlivened by additional photographs) along with radiant color shots and many two-page, full-bleed black-and-whites. In addition to the 1960 material, earlier pictures are included of people mentioned in the text—

among them Clifford Brown and Wardell Gray. (These shots are not dated, the volume's one lapse.) Berendt's essays have interesting observations, interviews and period statistics—he is especially good on New Orleans, which inspired Claxton to some of the most empathic, blissful work of his career. (A companion CD of field recordings, included with the book, also peaks in New Orleans.) But this is no longer the writer's book, if it ever was. I suspect that most people won't bother with all the small print, although Claxton's new introduction is quite lively.

I don't really understand photography, which is probably one reason it moves me so much. I don't know the technique involved in producing texture, which in Claxton's hands runs the gamut from crisp, decisive details to a rainbow of muted, lived-in grays. I especially don't get how 300 photographers can snap their shutters at the same face, and only a few capture the life behind it—each of them getting a different aspect of that life. The great jazz photographers approach the subject from discrete angles: the kinetic drama of Herman Leonard, the knowing candor of Milt Hinton, the dark meditations of Francis Wolff and so on.

If there is an overriding quality to Claxton's work, it is his unflinching generosity, which combines the collusion of the fan, who enables his subjects, with the irony of the artist, who frames them. There isn't a mean or dispassionate shot in these pages. (Could anyone but Claxton have caught Jack Sheldon groping Joe Maini?) Many of the most stirring photographs are journalistic—the man with the camera at a parade, festival or party. Even some of the sessions he arranged feel reportorial or serendipitous, like back-to-back shots of Ben Caruthers (the actor who starred in John Cassavetes' *Shadows*) and Elvin Jones (exhaling smoke), each outside Birdland, though emotionally on different planets.

Many pictures fall into two overlapping categories: those formally posed, involving a scenic device or piece of business or ceremonial portraiture, and those that may, in fact, stem from the same situations yet feel informally posed—as though the subjects just happened to raise their eyes to an old friend. These are the most provocative of Claxton's images, the ones that allow you to see familiar faces as you've never quite seen them before. I keep returning to one of Coleman Hawkins on page 603. Hawkins was called Bean because of his brains, and this shot perfectly captures his wary intelligence (the light cradles his forehead and focuses his eyes, which have seen everything), his bearish strength in repose, his well-traveled professionalism. This is a Hawkins we know from his music. *Jazzlife* is William Claxton's munificent gift to everyone who has ever been touched by that music. **JT**

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