

By Tom Nolan

Los Angeles

William Claxton, the noted Los Angeles photographer of jazz musicians and other artists, remembers well the first time he met Miles Davis, the legendary jazz trumpeter player, on a Manhattan avenue in 1952.

"I was a real neophyte," said the 79-year-old Mr. Claxton, sitting one recent afternoon in a booth at Musso & Frank Grill on Hollywood Boulevard. "It was my first trip as an adult to New York City: I had a good friend named Allen Eager—tenor-sax player, jazzman, bebopper—and I stayed at his apartment in the Bronx....And Allen Eager wanted to show me the theater district. It was a warm June summer night....And when the theaters let out, people would fill the streets up, trying to find a taxi. Walking right in front, coming toward us, was Miles Davis: short little guy, real good-looking, with two beautiful, beautiful fashion models, one on each arm—tall, white—Dorian Leigh and Sunny Harnett....Miles is feeling really good, and happy, and looked chic: Oxford-gray Brooks Brothers suit, white shirt and little narrow black tie....Allen and Miles embraced, and then Allen introduces me: 'Miles, meet my good friend from California, his name is Clax'—which was Allen's nickname for me. And Miles stepped back and says, 'Clax? Sounds like a household cleanser!' And we all laughed. What else could I do?"

No one was laughing once Mr. Claxton started taking and selling the first of his striking, elegant, compelling photographs: images that (on album covers, and in magazines and eventually books) would become indelible entries in the memory bank of generations of jazz-aware Americans.

Several hundred of those memorable pictures are collected in "Jazzlife" (Taschen, 696 pages, \$200), a mammoth 2005 volume documenting, in prose and photos, "a journey for jazz across America" that Mr. Claxton took, with the German jazz-scholar Joachim E. Berendt, in 1960. (This fall, Taschen will publish a boxed collector's edition of "Jazzlife" to include four signed, frameable prints.)

Traveling in a rented 1959 Chevrolet Impala, the two men spent some four months crisscrossing the U.S.—from L.A. to Chicago, New Orleans to Kansas City, Detroit to New York—recording a rich diversity of musical performers. (Taschen also plans a separate volume of Mr. Claxton's images of New Orleans, with part of its proceeds to go to a Hurricane Katrina relief fund.)

"It was a wonderful time in America, in 1960," remembered the photographer (who bid a temporary goodbye to his new bride, the soon-to-be-well-known fashion model Peggy Moffitt, in order to participate in the odyssey). "You could hear all kinds of jazz....People loved Dixieland, people loved Chicago-style. People still loved swing: The big bands were just barely left....And then it was the post-bebop years, where you had lots of bebop....So there was a great crossing-over."

Informed by Mr. Berendt's eclectic taste, and drawing on Mr. Claxton's already extensive contacts, the duo encountered all sorts of ensembles: from gospel choirs to blues combos, from street-parade bands to international headliners.

In Kansas City, Mr. Claxton photographed pianist Jay McShann in an exotic nightclub, dressed like a turbaned pasha. In New York, he got a rare shot of Miles Davis smiling. And in Las Vegas, he took some onstage shots of Duke Ellington: a man he'd already known casually half his young life.

"I met him the first time, I was a teenager," said Mr. Claxton, who was born in 1927. "I lived in Pasadena. I took the bus down to the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, where they were still showing vaude-



Miles Davis

ville. They'd have the big band, then they'd have two features [movies], 'March of Time,' cartoon-comedy—and then another cycle. I would sit there all day....

"One time I was watching Duke Ellington, and I just couldn't help myself—I went back to the stage door. Those days, things were much less complicated. The man running the stage door said, 'Oh sure, Mr. Ellington's room is right down there.' There was a big star on the door. I went up and went in. He was utterly charming to me....He had on a dressing-robe, deep-purple. Gold shirt. Gold-and-purple slippers....He was, really, a haberdasher's dream....He talked about his music. I asked him how certain records were made, and what the musicians were like; and he just shared everything. He was wonderful.

"And the great part of it was: as the years went by, whatever city I was in that he was in, I would go see him, and he'd always remember me. Then when I became a photographer, it was really easy

just to call up and say, 'Can I come to the recording session tomorrow?' or, 'Can I come to the party you're playing?' And he always welcomed me."

Mr. Claxton's career as a photographer began in earnest, if somewhat by chance, in 1952, at a small L.A. club called the Haig, where he got permission to take pictures of baritone-saxophonist Gerry Mulligan's just-formed piano-free quartet, featuring the then-unknown trumpet player Chet Baker. "It just knocked me off my feet, he played so wonderfully," said Mr. Claxton. "Exciting as can be. And during the session, a fellow came up, tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'My name is Dick Bock, I'd like to see your pictures, because I'm gonna put some records out of this.' And I said, 'Do you have a record company?' And he said, 'No—but by tomorrow morning, I will.'"

Mr. Claxton eventually became art director for that company, Pacific Jazz—and then a partner in it. His moody, stylish photographs of Chet Baker helped make that trumpeter an international icon; and Mr. Claxton's fresh-looking images of a host of other musicians became a visual objective-correlative to the 1950s "West Coast" school of jazz.

William Claxton took pictures of many other creative people, in the decades between now and then: classical composers (including Stravinsky and Milhaud), actors (such as Steve McQueen), writers (Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood). But always he preferred being with and shooting the jazz musicians who'd fascinated and inspired him since his youth.

"My approach to photography is very similar to jazz," Mr. Claxton said. "This wasn't conscious; this is just something I worked out for myself. I would plan what I was gonna do with the person—I'd have this idea and this idea—based on what I knew about them, and on what I knew they were gonna wear. And so I had my 'sheet music' together, or at least my 'open score.' When I'd meet them, everything would go to hell: She didn't want to wear that dress, or he didn't want to be photographed chewing on a mike. So I had to quickly, totally change over—and improvise. And that's what I did.

"That was a great training for me, and it made my life much easier; because I was ready for them no matter what they wanted. That's why I've always said that photography is jazz for the eye."

Mr. Nolan is writing a biography of Artie Shaw.