

**Benjamin Cawthra**  
**Neureuther Book Collection Competition—Graduate Category**

### **The Improvising Image: A Jazz Photography Collection**

Not long ago as I worked on my dissertation, I heard a tell-tale thud at the door of my house. A package had surely arrived, and with any luck it was another long-anticipated book of jazz photography. I am writing on jazz images and their meaning in postwar American culture, but that is my academic pursuit. I fell in love with the photographs themselves some time ago, when I curated an exhibition on the life of Miles Davis. Pictures from around the world opened my eyes to a remarkably vibrant visual culture with jazz as its subject. I fell hard, to the extent that when I returned to graduate study in history after a long absence, I changed not only my topic but my century, embarking on a quest to make jazz, photography, and history work together.

The thud told the truth. Sure enough, Herman Leonard's *Jazz Memories* had arrived, and I was lucky to have received this new copy. This volume of his jazz photographs of musicians in performance and backstage from the 1940s on had gone out of print in the United States, but a final shipment of the French edition, I learned in summer 2005, would soon be coming to Mr. Leonard's New Orleans studio from Europe. Many of these images of the all-time jazz greats in the smoky clubs of postwar Manhattan, such as the Royal Roost and Birdland, are national treasures; Leonard prepared prints of several for the Smithsonian Institution's collections. Dizzy Gillespie, Dexter Gordon, Billie Holiday—Herman Leonard had captured them in dramatic black and white, creating an indelible mystique about the music and its practitioners that still

resonates today. From the beginning, he was one of the photographers I wished to interview for my project.

Herman Leonard was a part of a generation of photographers who had an intense devotion both to photography as a profession and jazz as a pastime. In their work, they documented jazz's history and helped inscribe it in the culture. In the course of my research, I've not only had the pleasure of interviewing several photographers from the postwar years but have also been driven to collect jazz photography books, many of which are long out of print. One such volume, Dennis Stock's *Jazz Street*, came to me complete with obituary clippings of many of the musicians pictured; a jazz fan in Michigan had recorded the demise of a generation (and left a few newspaper stains in the book as well, lending it some additional character). Some, such as William Claxton's remarkable visual record of his 1960 journey across America photographing jazz and African American photographer Hugh Bell's collection, have only recently become available in limited editions.

Sometimes the research and the collecting have converged. William Gottlieb, 89 when I interviewed him, signed my first edition of his book after recounting his extraordinary years photographing the 52<sup>nd</sup> Street jazz scene of the 1940s and showing me how to operate the SpeedGraphic 4 x 5 camera he used. His images are now at the Library of Congress. After a long bus ride on a hot day, I arrived at the Teaneck, New Jersey home of Chuck Stewart (79), who doesn't want to be known as a "jazz photographer" even though he has taken pictures for thousands of jazz album covers. When I arrived to interview him, jazz was playing and his massive compact disc

collection revealed an extraordinary love for the music. I interviewed him and he signed my copy of his book. These volumes are about more than my research; they represent some of my life's most vivid moments.

I planned to travel to New Orleans in the fall of 2005 to do some archival research, interview Mr. Leonard for my project, and pick up a clean copy of his book. He had spent more than a decade living in and photographing the city with its vibrant inhabitants and unrivaled musical culture. "He's not going anywhere," said Mr. Leonard's assistant, Jennifer Bagert (herself an accomplished photographer) when I asked how far in advance we should plan the interview. "This is where he lives."

Not long afterward, Hurricane Katrina struck. Herman Leonard evacuated the city with his family just in time, but his Lakeview studio and home were ruined by the flood. He lost almost all of his equipment but his negatives are safe. He resettled with his family in California. At age 82, it was a shocking and difficult time for him.

The fate of my research trip mattered little as the catastrophe's dimensions became clear. Like many others, I mourned New Orleans from afar. I had just served as a teaching assistant for a summer institute on jazz and American culture, and the city had a large presence in our month-long session. Now more than a thousand people had died on the Gulf Coast and the city was a wreck. I remember the sick feeling I had as I watched events unfold online and on television, and my project seemed quite small and unimportant in the face of such a disaster. For a time, the book didn't seem to matter.

But part of what I mourned was the loss of a musical culture that photographers like Leonard had captured in strongly communicative images. It is possible that a few

recordings and photographs will be the main documentation of some of New Orleans' threatened parade traditions, for example. Whether I could visit the city or not, I decided to call Jenny Bagert early in 2006 to see if by chance the books had made it from France. She had set up a new studio in another part of town and still represented Mr. Leonard, even though he would not be returning. As we talked about what had happened, her accent grew stronger. She was born there; generations of her family still lived in the city. She was the one who wasn't going anywhere.

The mail was being delivered again and the shipment from France had finally arrived after considerable delay. And as it turned out, Herman Leonard was returning to New Orleans just long enough to photograph Mardi Gras. Jenny offered to set up a phone interview after he returned to California and promised to have him sign my book while he was in town. A few days into Lent, I heard the thud at my door. "Above all," reads the inscription, "enjoy the music!" Obviously, Herman Leonard still does. Perhaps he is being healed by it. "Music does something that's deep and spiritual within your body," said photographer Anthony Barboza when I interviewed him.

Jazz is a cultural resource, an art form, that is about more than the music itself. Something about its spur-of-the-moment fire, something it has deep roots in African American culture, something about the way it speaks across the color line and beyond national boundaries, has inspired remarkable visual artists to capture its performance and its practitioners in photographs. Jazz and photography grew up together in the twentieth century, and the images in my book collection continue to startle, amuse, and inspire me. I can't wait for the next thud.

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