

Milt on Photography

After the two books with my photographs came out, people got more interested in them than ever before. I had shows at places like the Rhode Island School of Design and the Denver Art Museum, which I've been told are very prestigious. Truthfully, that kind of thing has never really mattered to me. My main concern has always been that people from all walks of life have a chance to see my pictures. It's important to me that they get shown at places where jazz fans go, like Monterey. And I also like the idea that they were shown at community centers and libraries in smaller towns around the country.

In fact, for seven or eight years, there was a show which traveled to different FNAC stores in France and Belgium. These are places that sell albums and electronics, and each store has a gallery area so customers can see different exhibits. I've been told thousands of people got to see my photos in their stores, and that's exactly what I always wanted. Of course, there've been a few exhibitions which were special. One was a show I had with the great artist Jacob Lawrence in Hartford, Connecticut. Then there were the shows at the Corcoran and the Smithsonian Institution—both at the same time. When I went to Washington and saw my photos on the wall, I kept pinching myself, just to make sure it was really happening.

As people in the jazz world came to know about my photographs, musicians started asking me to take their pictures. And I also got plenty of comments and criticisms about why this or that person was included or left out of one of the books. I'd usually say that the people in charge of the books made the final selections. Of course, even if I'd taken good pictures of everyone I ever knew or worked with, it would have been impossible to include them all.

When my photos attracted so much attention, I began to question my abilities as a photographer. I went back and looked at my work and I asked myself why I started taking pictures, what my goals were, and whether I really deserved the kind of praise and recognition I was getting. I talked to a few knowledgeable friends, but the thing that helped me most was reading over what I'd said on this subject in the past. So I've reworded a few things, but I'm repeating the main points because it still describes how I feel about myself and photography.

I got my first camera in 1935. It was a 35 mm Argus C3, and it was a present for my twenty-fifth birthday. I had the Argus with me when I started on the road with Cab in 1936. Although I took a few posed shots, I was never much for taking formal pictures. Everybody was shooting the band onstage in uniform, and if you went to a professional photographer for your own publicity shot, he'd ask you to smile and act like you were playing your instrument. I've never wanted to get those kinds of photos because I don't see musicians that way.

I always tried to capture something different. Whenever possible, I liked to shoot people when they were off guard or unaware. Of course, I was limited in some ways. I didn't have a flash in the early days, and the film speed was so slow you couldn't take photographs indoors without using a long exposure. Even so, I did get some unusual shots inside, like pictures of the guys sleeping on the train. There were also times when the stage lights were on and I could use them to get a better indoor exposure.

Whenever I wanted a picture of a specific place, I'd always try to include one of the guys in the shot. For example, years ago when I was in Springfield, Illinois, with Cab, I wanted a shot of the Lincoln statue. But instead of taking a picture of the statue alone, I got Danny Barker to stand out in front of it. The same thing happened in the railroad yards where we'd always spend a lot of time waiting for trains. I was amazed at the size of the locomotives and the machinery they used to switch tracks. So once again, whenever possible, I'd have one or two guys stand next to a locomotive so I could get them in my shots. I also realized that if I put a person in the picture, it would show just how big those locomotives really were.

I admit I've always been biased toward black-and-white photos. It's probably because when color film first came out, what you saw in a print didn't seem to match the colors you'd see in nature. And after a while, color prints would fade. Besides, a lot of color processing was done through the mail, and since I was on the road

and didn't have a permanent address, it made it difficult to get prints back.

During my days in the studios, whenever I had time, I'd make a few black-and-white prints from what I'd shot a day or two earlier. Then I'd give them out to the guys the next time I saw them on a record date. Although it was unintentional, the prints I made of my white friends always came out looking very dark. And whenever someone teased me about it, I'd say the same thing: "I can't help it, that's just the way I see everybody."

I still get asked why I took some of the pictures I did, and it's hard to answer that question. When I took those early pictures of Dizzy, we were both in Cab's band. Even back in those days, I knew he was very innovative, but I never suspected he would turn out to be such a giant. The same thing was true for Chu and Cozy and the other guys. These were my friends, and I wanted pictures of them so that one day we could look back and remember the great times we'd shared. When I shot those Jim Crow signs in the South like the ones at the entrance to the train station in Atlanta, I wasn't trying to make a statement. We all lived in the North, and one of the only ways we could deal with the stupidity of the segregation laws was to make fun of them.

At some point, probably in the late '40s, I saw that jazz was changing quickly and there were new faces coming on the scene all the time. Some of the pioneers like Chu and Jimmy Blanton were already gone, and some of the other greats were well on their way to early deaths. For some reason, I felt strongly about using my camera to capture the people and events from the jazz world that I was lucky enough to see. I guess I realized I was actually living through jazz history.

Keg Johnson had more influence on my photography than anyone else. He was diligent and precise with just about everything in his life. He didn't have many personal possessions, but whenever he bought something, it had to be the best. Consequently, a couple of years before the war when he decided to get a camera, he got the best Leica he could find. After that, he spent weeks reading up on photography in books and magazines. When I saw the kind of pictures he was getting, I couldn't believe it. Everything was absolutely needle sharp. It wasn't long before I bought a Leica too.

We decided to process our own film while we were traveling with Cab, and we bought some basic equipment. Whenever we were in a big city playing a theater and staying in a hotel for more than a couple of days, we set up our darkroom. We usually started late at night, after the last show. That way we didn't have to figure out a way to block off the light in our room. We bought a special box which allowed us to make a 4x5 print from a 35 mm negative. We'd work until daybreak when the room started getting light, and by the time we cleaned up it would be about seven in the morning. We'd get some breakfast and then sleep for a few hours before heading over to the theater to play the first show.

In the early '50s, a short time after Mona and I bought our first house, I set up a small darkroom in the basement. By this time, I wasn't out on the road anymore and I thought I'd be able to spend more time working on my photography. I got my first enlarger through a friend from Cab's band, Gene Mikell, who left music and was working at the United Nations. He told me they were replacing darkroom equipment and he could get me an Omega for a hundred dollars. I grabbed it.

When I went to Japan with Louis Armstrong about the same time, I bought a Canon 35 mm range-finder camera. It had advantages over the Leica. It was easier to load film and it had a mechanical trigger for advancing frames. Also, when you changed lenses, you could reset the eyepiece to see what was included in your shot. Even though the Canon was easier to use, the pictures I got with the Leica were sharper, so I used them both. This went on for about ten years, until the early '60s when I bought a single-lens reflex—a Nikon F. At that point, I put away both the Leica and the Canon.

I get asked most often about the shots I took of Billie Holiday at what turned out to be her last recording session. I had the feeling she was close to the end. I think the record company people knew exactly what was going on and were trying to finish the album while she was still on her feet. I took most of the pictures while Billie was listening to playbacks. Looking at her, I could see how disappointed she was about how she sounded. The quality of her voice had changed, and she knew that better than anyone. As she listened, her eyes would fill with tears, and I had the feeling she was imagining how much better she'd sounded twenty

years before when she'd sung the same song. She was so wrapped up in listening that she was completely unaware of me and my camera.

I'm also pleased about some of the pictures I got at the *Sound of Jazz* television show. As far as I'm concerned, this was one of the best programs ever done on jazz. I got photos of Basie, Billie, Prez, Bean, and many others. I know you can get the program on videotape and I've seen it a dozen times, but photos are different. You can study them. You can analyze the expressions on people's faces, and to my way of thinking, you can see what they're really all about. That's one thing which always attracted me to photography. Of course, I got to shoot the rehearsals where performers are less formal and more relaxed. How often do you get a chance to shoot Basie watching Monk play?

In 1958, *Esquire* magazine invited practically every living jazz musician to pose for a picture up in Harlem. It was scheduled for ten in the morning. And even though there was no pay involved and the hour was early—especially for jazz musicians—the turnout was enormous. The minute I arrived, I knew it would be a big event. Some of these people might work together once in a while or see each other in a bar, but to have about seventy-five of them in one place at one time was truly amazing. I don't think the *Esquire* people had any idea about the importance of the gathering. All they seemed to want was a perfect shot of the whole group posed on the stoop of a brownstone. It was funny to watch the musicians fraternizing while the magazine people shouted directions at them.

Jean Bach, who made *A Great Day in Harlem*, the film about that day, found out that a couple of people had brought cameras. But except for *Esquire's* photographer, Art Kane, I don't remember seeing any of them. Fortunately, I had enough sense to bring three—my Leica and Canon and a little Keystone 8 mm movie camera. I gave Scoville Browne the Canon, which had color slide film in it. I used the Leica with black-and-white, and Mona took color movies which became a big part of Jean's film.

The shot I got that day of some of the greatest drummers in jazz is one of my favorites. Just being able to capture Jo Jones, Gene Krupa, George Wettling, Zutty Singleton, Sonny Greer, and Art Blakey all together was the chance of a lifetime. I also managed to take some photos of Prez looking upbeat—talking to J.C. Heard. It was one of those times when I sensed there was going to be a major event and I prepared ahead of time to record it. I wanted future generations to be able to see some of the best representatives of the different eras of jazz all together in one place. Looking back, I can truly say that gathering marked the final days of what's now called the Golden Age of Jazz. A few years later, many of the guys who were there were gone.

By the time I was playing in the studios regularly, I had one or two cameras with me all the time. Record companies had great professional photographers come in and shoot sessions, but they kept a close watch on these guys. They'd usually let them in at the beginning and end of a date, or during five-minute breaks. Sometimes I'd see a makeup artist work on a performer for an hour and someone else setting up a background to stage a candid shot. Of course, as a musician hired to play, I could get pictures whenever I wanted. During all those years, I don't remember anyone ever trying to stop me.

From what I've said about my photography, a few things should be clear. I don't think of myself as a professional. I have no formal training and I never had enough time to develop my technique. I really don't know the giants in the field except for the people who've taken photos of jazz musicians.

When I first started out in the '30s, I took pictures so I could show my family and friends that I'd really been to all those places and knew all those people. Several years later, the guys I was traveling with became my friends and I shot things we all experienced so we could share them later.

But as time went on, I realized the importance of the world I was living in, and I decided to try and make a record of it for future generations. Being a musician gave me access, and consequently some of the best photos I ever took were simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Of course, I had no idea that some of my shots would be used to document jazz history, but I'm glad I've lived to see it.

*With minor changes, this passage was excerpted from *Playing the Changes: Milt Hinton's Life in Stories and Photographs* by Milt Hinton, David G. Berger, and Holly Maxson, Vanderbilt University Press, 2008, pp. 311-315