

Arts and Leisure: Portraits of 'Jazz Giants' capture the magical story of an art form

by Robert L. Pincus

Herman Leonard, thinking back on his work of the 1940s and 1950s, says that "taking music photographs was my hobby." A lot of people would give a greater weight to his pictures.

TRUTH AND BEAUTY - Herman Leonard, flanked by his images from the 1940s and 1950s, still loves making pictures as much now as he did then. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. The Smithsonian Institution would be among them. His archive of musician portraits are in its collections.

The pivotal figures Leonard photographed include Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie "Bird" Parker. All are vital to the story of American music, of course. But it isn't their historical value alone that distinguishes these images.

Part of the magnetic appeal of his photographs is how elegantly composed and beautifully lit they are, even if he was shooting them during rehearsals and performances. There is his 1949 image of Holiday standing before a mike, her cheeks glistening with light. In a 1948 view of saxophonist Dexter Gordon at New York's Royal Roost, smoke from his cigarette makes the picture look almost dreamlike.

Seeing these pictures, you understand Leonard's often stated ambition "to tell the truth but tell it in terms of beauty."

It's hard to believe that the 84-year-old photographer had his first show in 1988.

"Nobody expressed an interest in doing shows of jazz pictures," says Leonard, standing in the Morrison Hotel Gallery in San Diego. "I had published some in *Downbeat* and *Metronome*. But galleries. There was no market."

But he had a good reason to try for a show.

"I was starving at the time," he recalls.

His first exhibition at Special Photographers Co. was immensely popular, attracting viewers by the thousands, and Leonard sold some 250 prints. From then on, his reputation as a photographer would be linked to this body of work, even if the full spectrum of his pictures and interests was wider.

EARLY AMBITION

Even as a boy in Allentown, Pa., Leonard had wanted to be a photographer. He never changed his mind.

In high school, he was yearbook photographer. Leonard then attended Ohio University, beginning in 1940; at the time it was the only university in the country with a degree program in photography.

After completing his degree in 1947 - he served in the Army in Burma between 1943 and 1945 - he managed to obtain an apprenticeship with one of the most acclaimed portrait photographers of the day, Canadian Yasouf Karsh.

"I always knew I wanted to be a portrait photographer. In portraiture, at least provisionally, you establish an intimate relationship with your subject.

"How many people can say they spent six hours with Einstein?" says Leonard, referring to a Karsh assignment at Princeton University on which he assisted.

He is still partial to a portrait of Einstein he shot that day.

After finishing the apprenticeship with Karsh in 1948, Leonard established his own studio in New York's Greenwich Village. Commercial work for the likes of Look, Life, Esquire and Cosmopolitan provided a good share of his income. But his jazz images were, it turns out, more than a hobby. Leonard also did album covers and promotional pictures for several prominent record labels, and in Metronome's 1950 yearbook there was a 16-page tribute to his jazz pictures.

He stayed in New York until 1956. Many of the photographs in his current show were taken during these years.

Leonard still talks about those pictures with such enthusiasm you might think he made them weeks or mere days ago.

"I liked the music so much I was simply being entertained all the time while I was taking pictures. I never set up a shot."

A smiling Leonard pauses, then adds, "Well, maybe one."

He points to his 1955 portrait of pianist Art Tatum.

"I traveled to Los Angeles for an assignment and didn't want to shoot him at the keyboard. So, I posed him. I wanted the focus to be on his hands."

Shifting to a view of Miles Davis from 1949, he says, "He was the best photographic subject I ever had. His face was perfect for the camera."

Leonard still finds his last image of Davis keenly poignant. It was taken in 1991, at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

"It was taken six weeks before his death," says Leonard. "I could see the anguish in his face. I feel as if he knew he was going to die soon."

Along with his ambition to be a portrait photographer, he said he had another: "to be Marco Polo," as he puts it. Photography let him fulfill this ambition, too.

Marlon Brando asked him to become his personal photographer for a six-month South Pacific stint in 1956, which took him to Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia.

After that, Leonard settled in Paris for a few years, doing work for fashion houses like Christian Dior and Chanel. Some of those shoots were in Morocco, Tunisia, Greece and other spots across the globe.

His peripatetic lifestyle then took him to London, the Spanish island of Ibiza, back to London, then Paris again and finally to the U.S. in 1989. He spent some time in San Francisco, but ultimately settled on New Orleans as his home, living there from 1991 until 2005.

"I was more comfortable in my own skin in New Orleans than in any place I ever lived. I loved the generosity of the people and the spirit of the city."

He photographed many of its musicians. And he might never have left if his home and photography studio had not been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

Years of prints and his records were destroyed, but his negatives were, thankfully, preserved at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans.

He's made a new home and studio for himself in Studio City, Calif., and is simply grateful that he's able to keep producing prints and continue introducing people to these pictures. From the musicians he has admired so greatly, it seems Leonard has learned the art of improvisation and continues to thrive, no matter what challenges life presents.

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