

The Telegraph

Jazz by Herman Leonard: review

Herman Leonard's smoky, moody images of jazz greats such as Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong capture a lost era, says Mick Brown.



Louis Armstrong in Paris in 1960 Photo: © Herman Leonard Photography, LLC taken from Jazz by Herman Leonard published by Atlantic Books.

By Mick Brown

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Describing the animating force behind his photographs of jazz musicians, Herman Leonard once spoke of wanting to “make people see the way the music sounded”. And it is true that for many people Leonard’s pictures, in all their smoky, moody brilliance, are the defining pictorial representation of jazz.

Goethe described architecture as “frozen music”, but the description might equally apply to Leonard’s photographs; his highly stylised images of artists such as Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon and Lester Young performing in the jazz clubs of New York in the late Forties and early Fifties beseech, caress, seduce and inspire.

As his friend Quincy Jones once observed, Leonard achieved with his camera what the musicians who were his subjects did with their instruments – “tells the truth, and makes it swing”.

But Leonard’s pictures went further than that, capturing not only jazz, the music, but jazz, the life – or rather the idea of a life that has persisted to this day: the joy of creativity and camaraderie; the contrast between the illusory glamour of the spotlight of the stage and the tawdriness backstage; the sweat, the self-possession, the swagger and the style.

These photographs are, among other things, a vivid testament to the seductive powers of spiffy headgear, immaculate tailoring and classic vintage eyewear.

This new anthology spans six decades of Leonard’s work, from 1948 when he first started taking photographs in the clubs around 52nd Street in New York, and includes many hitherto unseen photographs, as well as his most familiar and celebrated images.

It was originally conceived as the definitive celebration of his life’s work, but instead became his epitaph when Leonard died in August at the age of 87. As a record of the golden years of jazz, it is unsurpassable.

The son of Jewish immigrants from Romania, Leonard began his career as an apprentice to the great portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh, before moving to New York in 1948, where he set up in a small studio in Greenwich Village and began photographing jazz musicians.

It was a labour of love. As Leonard would later recall, there was little profit in shooting pictures of

jazz musicians at the time, and he couldn't even afford entry to the clubs; the owners would let him come in and work in return for a few shots for publicity purposes.

From Karsh, he learnt how to control light and texture. Leonard shot only in black and white – the viewer's brain, he explained, “doesn't have to work as much” – his subjects often backlit with strobe lights, dividing the pictures into planes of light and deep shadow.

One is tempted to think that it was from Karsh that he also learnt the potency of a smouldering cigarette and an evanescent plume of smoke to add atmosphere – look at Karsh's portraits of Humphrey Bogart and the actor Peter Lorre, taken in 1946, a year before Leonard began work as his apprentice.

Leonard's most ubiquitous prop was smoke – great gusts of it. So much so that in probably his most famous picture, of the sax player Dexter Gordon in contemplative repose at the Royal Roost, you wonder if Leonard hasn't employed a battalion of chain-smokers just out of camera shot to amplify the effect.

Another sax player, James Moody, is photographed with his instrument in one hand, a burning cigarette in the other, grinning through a wreath of smoke, his teeth a row of tombstones, looking like a model for the Mexican day of the dead, or a government health warning (although Moody, it should be said, lived to the age of 85, dying only last month).

Leonard was a master of composition and the oblique angle. He was fond of shooting from waist height, lending his subjects – Lester Young, Kenny Clarke and Sarah Vaughan – a towering, heroic aspect.

By contrast, his study of Charlie Parker and the Metronome-All Stars, frozen in a moment at rehearsal, is shot from a slightly elevated position, the quartet grouped around a piano, instruments down, faces grave, as if grappling with how to solve some particularly thorny harmonic problem.

Technically, Leonard was a skilled photographer, but perhaps his greatest gift was for intimacy.

More than an observer, he became an insider, cultivating friendships and a sense of trust with his subjects that, in effect, rendered him invisible and enabled him to capture them at ease, or off-guard.

Louis Armstrong is photographed backstage at a club in Paris, slumped in a chair and wiping the

perspiration from his face with a white handkerchief as he weighs up the assortment of champagne, wine and beers laid out on a table for his refreshment. Billie Holiday is caught in a moment of rare domesticity in her kitchen, dressed in a pinafore, skillet in hand, her dog Mister at her side.

Leonard had an unerring eye for the defining gesture, the signature motif. Frank Sinatra is shot from behind at a rehearsal, his slim shoulders draped in an immaculate houndstooth sports jacket, the snap-brim trilby, his hand thrust into the rear pocket of his trousers, a study in insouciant cool.

Then there is “Lester Young’s hat” – my favourite of all Leonard’s pictures. Young’s crocodile-skin case stands open on a table, sheet music spilling out of it, his porkpie hat hanging from its open lid; in front of the case a smouldering cigarette is balanced on the top of an empty Coke bottle, like a votive candle in front of a shrine.

The effect is of some mesmeric legerdemain; as if Young himself has been snatched from the picture a second before the shutter clicked, leaving the essential trappings of his life to fall into artful array.

As Reggie Nadelson points out in her illuminating introduction to this book, Leonard’s jazz photographs were not immediately appreciated. When, in 1950, he presented his portfolio to the Museum of Modern Art in hope of a show, his work was rejected on the grounds that although it was “very nice... I don’t hear the music”.

It was not until 1986, when he was living in London, broke and in the midst of a divorce, that a small gallery agreed to stage the first exhibition of his work. It is ironic that by then Leonard’s best work was behind him.

The young tyros of the Forties and Fifties had by now become old lions; and Leonard’s compositions, too, had lost something of their old verve and wild energy.

You turn back the pages of this book to the early years and you are reminded that what Leonard was capturing was an era that is irrevocably lost. When asked to recreate the mood of his most famous shots, his reply was always the same: “Nobody smokes any more.”