

Magazine

The Intimacy Behind Jazz's Seminal Image

On Photography

By GEOFF DYER MAY 9, 2017

It's quite easy to tell the story of how certain photographs were taken, to link what's going on within the frame to the situation or circumstances around it. In the case of Robert Capa's gray, sea-drenched images of soldiers struggling to shore on D-Day, we know the precise historical moment they depict, what happened before and after. In other instances, photographs contain an implied narrative that can be expanded and expounded upon. Here all we have are two faces in tight close-up, so slurred and dimly lit that the picture barely succeeds in the most basic task of photographic portraiture: to enable us to identify whom we are looking at. Would you be able to see that this is John Coltrane and Ben Webster without being told? Given the uncertainty, it makes sense to begin by mentioning what the photograph is not.

It is unlikely ever to be used to decorate the walls of jazzy bars in the way that Herman Leonard's seductively smoky photographs regularly did in the 1990s. Often posed, Leonard's pictures are always perfectly composed, but perhaps that's not the ideal way to show people playing music that depends on improvisation, on going beyond composition. In the spirit of the old joke among photographers — that the best camera is whichever one you have with you — the technical shortcomings of this picture are in keeping with a form of music in which technical excellence counts for

It was taken by Roy DeCarava in New York in 1960, one of a series of pictures of jazz musicians conceived and belatedly published as “The Sound I Saw.” DeCarava was born in Harlem in 1919, two years after Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, the same year as Art Blakey, a year before Charlie Parker — and 10 years after Ben Webster, who would have been 51 in 1960. John Coltrane was born in 1926, and so was about 34 when the picture was taken.

The difference in age between Coltrane and Webster is 17 years. How is that measured, and what does it mean in the context of the fraction of a second it took to make this picture? Webster, with his silky growl and big-bellied sob, began playing with Duke Ellington and his orchestra in 1935, taking over as lead tenor in 1939 before leaving for good in 1943 after some kind of bust-up. Rumors have it that he slapped Ellington or slashed one of his suits. Coltrane had played with Monk and with Miles Davis — most famously on “Kind of Blue” — and the year this picture was taken released an album cementing his status as a leader in his own right: “Giant Steps.” He formed his classic quartet with Elvin Jones (drums) and McCoy Tyner (piano) in 1960, but it was not until late 1961 that the position of bassist was permanently filled by Jimmy Garrison. Compared with the shattering beauty and sublime intensity of what was to come, those giant steps soon sounded almost tentative.

It could be argued, then, that Webster represents the past (when jazz could be considered a form of entertainment) and Coltrane the future (when it would not even entertain such an idea). But Webster outlived Coltrane, who died in 1967 at the age of 40, 50 years ago come July.

Coltrane would never get to be as old as Webster was in this picture.

In the mid-'60s, Webster moved to Europe, where he died, in Holland, in 1973, at age 64. He is buried in Copenhagen, where he spent much of the last decade of his life, playing with local and visiting musicians but audibly conscious of all that had been left behind — and as old friends died, of how he was being left behind. A street in the city is named after him.

than intruded upon. It helps, in this regard, that DeCarava is African-American. He is, quite literally, close to the two people in the photograph. A closer look at that closeness reveals something about the status of jazz musicians, or more exactly, about their three-tiered status. Racism means they are second-class citizens. DeCarava is on equal terms with them in this position of inequality, and so Coltrane and Webster are photographed in the same way that he would picture any other African-Americans on the street. “I don’t think of musicians as musicians but as people — and as workers,” he said. This picture, like his other images of musicians, is part of a larger and continuing dedication to photographing all aspects of African-American life and culture in New York. As he put it in a Guggenheim grant application in 1951: “I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret.”

To a part of the public, however, these second-class citizens were great artists. In Europe, they would go on to be revered not just as artists but as gods — gods who walked the earth, like anybody else. They were not stars like Elvis or, later, Michael Jackson, to whom access was restricted. It’s not as if they had to be papped from a distance with a massive telephoto lens. All sorts of ordinary people interacted with them, coming away with their own stories, their own photos. This is brought out movingly in “Cool Cats,” a recent documentary by Janus Koster-Rasmussen about the years Webster and fellow tenor-in-exile Dexter Gordon spent in Copenhagen. The janitor of the apartment block where Webster lived was called Mr. Olsen. He spoke no English, and Webster spoke no Danish, but as one marvelous, homely piece of footage shows, they were united by a love of that international elixir, beer!

What we have so far, then, is this: a picture whose technical shortcomings are shared by any number of amateur snaps, of second-class citizens/artists/gods, taken by a photographer of undisputed international stature.

Coltrane’s eyes are shut; he seems almost a baby in Webster’s rough, tender embrace. (As “Cool Cats” makes plain, Webster could go from teary affection when sober to threatening to pull a knife when drunk.) Coltrane had not yet become a legend, a legend who said he wanted to become a saint, the holy figure as

embodiment. Webster had been around long enough to see and hear earlier revolutions in the music and would live to hear several more. It may look as if he is giving Coltrane his blessing, but it's impossible to tell whether we are witnessing a greeting or a leave-taking. This is entirely appropriate, because in jazz, the two are often the same (as when we recognize the opening bars of "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye").

What we see is what we hear in many of Coltrane's greatest recordings: a greeting that is also a leave-taking. More broadly, the jazz tradition is made up of assaults on what has gone before and elegies for what has passed: Lester Bowie's joyous tribute to Louis Armstrong (on "All The Magic") or George Lewis's heartbreaking "Homage to Charles Parker." In some cases, assault and elegy occur simultaneously, throw their arms around each other, so to speak, as happens when Cecil Taylor goes to town on Mercer Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used to Be." We look back elegiacally on this moment in 1960 when so much revolutionary jazz and so many elegies lay in the future.

In an interview with the photographer Lee Friedlander and his wife, Maria, the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy said how lucky he was to have played in the 1950s, when so many of the greats were alive. Friedlander responded that "in 1950, 85 percent of the history of photography were living people." We can quibble with this — obviously Friedlander is referring mainly to 20th-century photography — but between them, he and Lacy enable us to appreciate the extraordinary convergence taking place in a picture made 10 years later, in 1960. In a photograph with no setting, nothing external to itself, there is so much context, so much history. A picture of two musicians, it is also necessarily the record of a trio session with DeCarava as leader so that, in the context of photographic history, Coltrane and Webster are sidemen.

Jazz, it is often said, is about being in the moment. By excluding narrative, DeCarava affirms the importance of the moment while simultaneously expanding it. In one way the shutter speed is too slow to record clearly what is happening in this moment. But this technical failing succeeds in allowing more time to leak in to and

can't know exactly where it was located in that pattern, but we do know that whereas history is concerned with beginnings (in jazz with Buddy Bolden or Louis Armstrong), with the chronological order of events, the pattern on a carpet converges on a center. This picture looks as if everything around it has been eaten away by time. We are always working our way out from it — or back toward it. In that sense, it is the central photograph in jazz.

Correction: June 4, 2017

An article on May 14 about the photographer Roy DeCarava referred inaccurately to the photographer Robert Capa's images of D-Day. The blurry quality of the photographs is most likely due to the conditions of battle — not to a mistake made by a London lab during processing.

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