

# Herman Leonard's intimate portraits of jazz greats draw viewers into smoky clubs

Iconic images of some of the biggest legends of jazz



Beginning in the 1940s, Herman Leonard took intimate portraits of the creators of America's music. A new exhibition "In the Groove: Jazz Portraits by Herman Leonard" is at the National Portrait Gallery.

By Matt Schudel August 6, 2016

When Herman Leonard began taking pictures at New York jazz clubs in the 1940s, he used two strobe lights because that's all he could afford. He had a bulky 4-by-5 Speed Graphic camera, the same model used by newspaper photographers of the era.

Then he waited for the lights to go down and for the musicians to take the stage. It's tempting to call the resulting portraits accidental masterpieces, since they were made with such ordinary tools.

Whether by happenstance, luck or design, Leonard captured indelible images of the greatest jazz artists of his or any other time: Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and many more.

An exhibit of Leonard's jazz photography, "In the Groove," which opened Friday at the National Portrait Gallery and was organized by photography curator Ann Shumard, is presented in conjunction with the September debut of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. It portrays an era from 1948 to 1960 when musicians — most of them African American — were developing new forms of jazz that embodied the exuberance and artistic freedom of postwar America.

Much of Leonard's later career was spent in Europe, where he did fashion shoots and commercial projects. His jazz portraits were forgotten for decades. Except for an occasional album cover, they were not seen in public until 1988, when Leonard — “flat broke,” in his words — pulled them out of a box for display at a gallery in London. Thousands of people attended the exhibit, and his reputation was secure.

After settling in New Orleans in the early 1990s, Leonard published several books and had many shows at galleries and museums. (The Smithsonian National Museum of American History has more than 130 of his pictures, and the current Portrait Gallery exhibition is drawn from a recently acquired collection.)

In 2005, Leonard, then 82, almost lost everything when his studio and as many as 8,000 of his prints were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Hours before the storm struck, his negatives were taken to a vault at a New Orleans museum and saved.

Despite their relatively recent rediscovery, Leonard's jazz photos seem to have been with us forever, as if conjured from smoke, nighttime and a saxophone's wail. His 1948 portrait of a young Dexter Gordon, wreathed in smoke, his face framed by the curve of his tenor saxophone, has come to be recognized as the quintessential picture of jazz.

Leonard, who was born in Allentown, Pa., in 1923, spent a year of apprenticeship in Ottawa with portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh, learning about lighting techniques and printing. (All 28 “In the Groove” images were printed by Leonard in 1998, 12 years before his death.)

There were other notable photographers of midcentury jazz, including William Gottlieb, William Claxton and Francis Wolff, but Leonard's vision somehow probes more deeply. His black and white portraits are beautifully composed and remarkable for their clarity, yet they have an animated quality that captures the feeling of jazz at the moment of creation.

We see the joy in the faces of singers Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, but Leonard shows us that jazz was not just bouncy fun. The mound of sheet music on Bud Powell's piano implicitly depicts the hours of preparation required to create the inspired moment. The usually buoyant Louis Armstrong is seen backstage, looking tired and sad.

The intimacy Leonard achieves in his photographs is almost reverential. Many of his subjects have their eyes closed: Powell, Parker, drummer Art Blakey, trumpeters Fats Navarro and Clifford Brown, saxophonists Stan Getz and Sonny Stitt all search within themselves for the perfect phrase. We're so close to the bandstand — and Leonard's lighting is so sharp — that we can see the beads of sweat on Parker's forehead and the vibrating strings of Ray Brown's bass.

Early in his career, when one of his strobe lights did not fire, Leonard discovered the mysterious glow imparted by cigarette smoke, which filled the nightclubs in those days. It became his visual signature.

In one of Leonard's most striking images, Lester Young's cigarette smolders on the lip of a Coke bottle, next to sheet music, his saxophone case and his porkpie hat. It is a complete portrait, even without a person. Frank Sinatra, viewed from behind and in silhouette, is instantly recognizable from the wave of his hand, with a cigarette in his fingertips.

In another photo, smoke rises from Navarro's trumpet, as it were in the act of spontaneous combustion. And in a way, many of these musicians did fly too close to the flame. Navarro was dead at 26, and others portrayed in the exhibition, including Parker, Holiday, Powell and Chet Baker, struggled with drugs and other demons.

But those were not the stories that Leonard wanted to tell. His goal was to reveal the radiance inside the music and the character of the people who made it. He recalled the advice of his mentor, Karsh, who said, "Always tell the truth, but in terms of beauty."

Leonard often claimed his pictures were the happy byproduct of being in the right place at the right time. After all, he was a jazz fan, and when he was in his 20s, his camera gave him free entree to the clubs. He hung out at afternoon rehearsals with the musicians, earning their trust.

But that makes it sound too easy. Quincy Jones, the subject of one of the photos in the Portrait Gallery exhibition, has noted that the musicians realized Leonard approached photography the way they prepared for a performance. Instead of practicing scales and chords, Leonard's rehearsals were with lights, shutter speeds and printing methods.

Then, when sound and smoke swirled into one, Leonard was ready with his camera, part of the rhythm of the moment. It was art, not an accident.

*"In the Groove: Jazz Portraits by Herman Leonard" is on view at the National Portrait Gallery, at Eighth and F streets NW, through Feb. 20, 2017.*

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