

VANITY FAIR

LUSH LIGHTS

Herman Leonard's Eye for Jazz

Legendary jazz photographer Herman Leonard, now 86, shot virtually every giant of the genre—from Louis Armstrong and Art Blakey to Miles Davis and Lena Horne—in his trademark high-res, lush-light style. A vibrant new exhibition at New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center (on display through February 14) showcases Leonard's incomparable lens, as evidenced in this accompanying review by *V.F.*'s editor of creative development and this [up-tempo slide show](#).

BY DAVID FRIEND | JANUARY 12, 2010 12:00 AM



That Leonard look: young Dexter Gordon in New York City, 1948 (left), and the Duke in Paris, 1958.

The pictures, at first, seem jarring. Each is eerily nocturnal, as jazz photos tend to be. Each is flooded with the brilliance—even shock—of harsh flash. Each offers a splash of vivid detail (thanks to the high resolution of the large Speed Graphic camera), as if the film’s very emulsion has been awakened by a trumpet blast. And many of the images have been taken at odd angles, conveying the sense that the scene has somehow been rudely wrenched from midnight’s clutches.

Take the [1948 shot of Billy Eckstine](#). The body of the bandleader-vocalist appears to loom across the frame at 45 degrees, leaning like a deckhand might lean into a gale. And yet the filigree in the photo has a delicacy: the dappled ceiling above the bandstand suggests a tropical setting; beads of sweat evoke an inner fire; Eckstine’s long-nailed fingers, as if in prayer, are soft petals enveloping the microphone.

Here, in a single frame, is the magic of Billy Eckstine. And here, too, is the magic of the man behind the camera.

You can count the truly great jazz photographers on your fingers and toes—and still leave a digit or two for tapping. I’m talking about the legendary Bill Gottlieb and Bill Claxton and Francis Wolff, certainly, along with peers also accomplished in other photographic genres, such as Anthony Barboza, Roy DeCarava, Lee Friedlander, Art Kane, Gjon Mili, Julio Mitchel, Sam Shaw, Phil Stern, and W. Eugene Smith. I’m inclined to add to their ranks the longtime dean of jazz bassists, Milt Hinton, whose nimble forefinger knew its way around a shutter release. And surely I’m omitting a handful whose names escape me at the moment.

But there’s one jazz lensman who is having a real resurgence these days, just as the medium he covers appears to be enjoying its own renaissance. I’m speaking, of course, of Herman Leonard.

Leonard, 86 and still cooking, has become a 21st-century darling of gallery collectors. His iconic shot of Dexter Gordon graces the cover of the hot new jazz history by Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux—called, simply, *Jazz*. And, most impressive of all, Leonard has a new exhibition at New York’s Jazz at Lincoln Center, “[In the Best Possible Light](#),” on display through Valentine’s Day.

In the 40s, Allentown, Pennsylvania, native Herman Leonard, the son of Romanian immigrants, was taken under the wing of Karsh of Ottawa, the famed portraitist who excelled at using columns of light to mold photographic icons of statesmen, celebrities, and literary figures. By 1948—around the time of bebop’s birth—Leonard had established his own studio in Manhattan’s West Village and was making nighttime forays to the fabled jazz clubs along 52nd Street. He would use floodlights and his trusty Speed Graphic to lushly render musicians as luminous figures against their dimly lit surroundings, just as the Hollywood studio photographers of the 30s had rendered film stars amid the dark folds of the Depression. Leonard’s studies of jazz greats, from Miles Davis to Dexter Gordon, are among the finest ever committed to film.

Over the last half-century, Leonard has divided his time between Europe, the Gulf Coast, and Los Angeles, eventually losing some 6,000 photographic prints when Hurricane Katrina swept through his New Orleans home. (All of his negatives were miraculously spared. Two haunting water-damaged prints—one of Frank Sinatra and one of Miles Davis—command their own wall at the Jazz at Lincoln Center exhibition.)

For the bulk of the J.A.L.C. show, we linger in New York, Paris, and Montreux (from 1948 through 1991). The exhibition is simply the best yet to have been displayed in the music venue that regulars refer to as “the House of Swing.” Though the pictures are hung in a modest hall outside the Rose Theater (recent exhibitions have featured quirky collages by Louis Armstrong and vintage jazz performance shots by Ryszard Horowitz), Leonard’s collection enlivens the space as none before it. Images of six percussionists are wisely grouped together like a veritable drum circle. (One standout: a 1958 depiction of Art Blakey, in mid-report, at the Club Germain, in Paris.) Jazz singers appear in trios: Eckstine plus Sinatra plus Tony Bennett; Dinah Washington plus Lena Horne plus Pearl Bailey. The joint curation—by Robert G. O’Meally, C. Daniel Dawson, Diedra Harris-Kelley, Emily J. Lordi, and designer Linda Florio—turns out to have been a blessed collaboration.

Among the other highlights of the show include a 1960 portrait of Louis Armstrong, with his signature bruised lips and wipe-down rag, his hands folded and his trumpet downturned. We know he is sitting off stage right because we see the telltale shadows of the drummer’s cymbals (not visible in the scan that is posted in the [slide show](#)). But we also feel the heat of an unseen performance, as viewed by Armstrong, glaringly lit and set apart like a lonely, imperious sovereign.

The jewel of the show, however, is Leonard’s classic study of a young Dexter Gordon (with drummer Kenny Clarke) at New York City’s Royal Roost in 1948. Gordon’s head is raised to the light, as if he were inspired from on high (or, more likely, as if asked by Leonard, “Hey, Dexter, can you just raise your chin an inch?”). His crossed hands and the gaping mouth of his sax draw the eye subconsciously to the photo’s fulcrum. The picture incorporates three Leonard trademarks: bracing sidelight; the low-angle perspective that imparts grandeur upon his subject; and the use of billows of cigarette smoke to mimic the improvised curls that often waft from a jazzman’s horn. This particular image also adds some tantalizing visual grace notes—a mysterious, upturned trumpet, at left, balances the microphone (or music stand or cymbal base) to the far right, helping to frame the photo; a relaxed Clarke offsets Gordon’s reverential pose; and sheet music appears in the bottom-right-hand corner, its notations soft but resonant, like a just-completed solo that has been muffled by applause and consigned to memory.

David Friend is *Vanity Fair*’s editor of creative development.

© *Herman Leonard Photography, LLC.*

David Friend joined Vanity Fair as editor of creative development in 1998, after serving as Life magazine’s director of photography. 