

In 'Jazz,' legendary photographer Herman Leonard makes music stand still

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Sunday, November 21, 2010; 12:00 AM

Although music itself can't be photographed, no photographer ever got closer to pulling it off than Herman Leonard. And yet the publication of "Jazz," Leonard's remarkable book of photographs, is both reason to celebrate and to grieve: Many of the most iconic photographs in all of jazz - or of any music, for that matter - are collected in this lavish document of mostly the bebop era, the late 1940s and 1950s.

But the sad note here is that Leonard didn't get to see the published book; he died in August at 87. With his passing, and the recent deaths of two other legendary jazz photographers - William Gottlieb, 89, in 2006 and William Claxton, 80, in 2008 - we're unlikely to see another book of photographs that captures this chapter of this music with this scope of ambition.

Shooting jazz musicians - on stage, backstage, at home - was a work of passion for Leonard, but it didn't pay the bills. Mostly these pictures stayed in boxes under the photographer's bed for decades. Instead, he made his living as a fashion and commercial photographer. But Leonard was no jazz outsider. Instead, the young photographer was granted a level of intimacy with these performers that is breathtaking to behold.

Here is saxophonist Ben Webster, who in 1950 was very much the King of Tenors," as his 1953 Verve album would proclaim. Webster's hulking frame in a backstage doorway and his resigned, steely gaze are so intimidating that the musician could just as easily be taken for a hit man, were it not for the tenor sax in his hand. "Ben Big" was one of his nicknames, and so was "the Brute," because there were so many stories left in the wake of his quarrelsome and often violent drunkenness. But turn the page, and Leonard shows you the Ben Webster who infused ballads with more feeling perhaps than any musician in the history of the music. Peeking out of the shadows, as shy as a schoolboy, that's the Webster who was so easily given to tears, who could play so softly that his horn didn't even emit musical notes, but just breaths.

Part of the narrative of jazz in the late 1940s and 1950s is about who would survive the period and who would succumb to it. Charlie Parker is probably jazz's most famous casualty - the result of a chronic heroin habit - but when Leonard trains his lens on the musician in 1949, after he helped pioneer the bebop sound, Parker is in full charge, a bow tie cinched around his neck and blowing his alto sax like a man channeling a spirit. Six years later, he would be dead at 34.

A less heralded bebopper is trumpeter Clifford Brown, whom Leonard captures in one shot at such close range that you'll want to duck out of the way. Here Brown, his face caving in on itself, blows with such intensity that it's as though he's trying push his entire head through the mouthpiece. Miles Davis was jazz's great visionary, Dizzie Gillespie its great ambassador, but no trumpet player ever conveyed such pure joy as Brown, who in his rapid-fire solos could make a room feel pervaded by hummingbirds. Brown was jazz's straight arrow, a married man and homeowner whose only vice was chess. His death stemmed not from addiction but from a car crash en route to a gig in 1956.

That loss sent the jazz world reeling, but no one more so than Brown's partner in the Max Roach-Clifford

Brown quintet. After Brown's death, Roach, photographed here with his partner and alone, fell into a devastating spiral of drugs and alcohol. But the drummer proved to be not only one of jazz's great survivors, but one of its most influential musicians. Toward the end of the book, Roach appears again, still spry and dapper at 70, performing his trademark solo on the hi-hat - a musical feat so improbable that it was like watching a unicyclist win the Indy 500.

Leonard turned single moments - during performance, between takes - into gorgeous rhapsodies. Here's Duke Ellington on piano, in a club cloaked in darkness, and a spotlight that seems to come from the heavens. In Leonard's hands, the photo makes clear: Duke was the chosen one.

As much as Leonard could show you performers' radiant moments, he could also capture their heartbreak and their demons. Chet Baker's trumpet could create an aching melancholy, but his face was one for the ages, a James Dean who could make an audience swoon before he blew his first note. Years later, that face would be ravaged by the ruin of heroin and the violence that often goes along with it - and in this 1956 portrait, Baker hides behind his horn in a moment of seeming vulnerability.

In the 1960s, the photographer would change directions, and there are few portraits from that decade: a grim-faced Louis Armstrong in Paris, perhaps revealing the toll of more than half a century of playing for the masses, and a towering Sonny Rollins, also in Paris, blowing serenely but ready to mow his way forward in the decades ahead. Rock-and-roll would essentially replace, in the public consciousness, jazz as a music of rebellion and daring, and by the 1970s, many of the noted musicians had fled to Europe for work, stayed stateside and struggled for paying gigs, or tried to embrace the change in tastes as best they could. (See Wynton Kelly's treatment of the Doors' "Light My Fire.")

And although one certainly laments the absence of heavyweights such as John Coltrane, Bill Evans and Charles Mingus from this collection, there's something wonderful about how the book cuts suddenly to the 1990s, and we can see how our heroes have held up - and continued to hold up the music. The book ends with pictures of Miles Davis, and the backdrop of the ocean - a rare assist of natural light - is a lovely and telling surprise. Davis's career was about sailing on, exploring new lands: cool jazz, modal, hard bop, fusion.

Despite the cliched notion that jazz has become staid and content to keep looking back, an inspiring cast of innovative, younger musicians continues to push the music forward, but the days of jazz so coloring the American landscape - in neon signs, in anthems heard coast to coast, on the cover of Time magazine - belong to a different time. We can be grateful, though, that Herman Leonard was there to show us exactly what it felt like to step into a jazz club such as Birdland or the Roost. You can't understand jazz without hearing it, and you can't fully understand it without looking at Leonard's "Jazz."