

The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith: A film about music, photography and the postwar world

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Some subjects and films are a pleasure to write about.

Between 1957 and 1965 or so, famed American photographer W. Eugene Smith (1918-78) took some 40,000 photos and recorded nearly 4,000 hours of audio tape in a New York City loft that had become the particular haunt of jazz musicians looking for a place to play at all hours of the night. Having elaborately wired the rundown building at 821 Sixth Avenue, in the wholesale flower district, Smith captured on tape more than 300 musicians, including some of the most prominent figures of the day.

A remarkable documentary, *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, directed by Sara Fishko, brings this episode and related history to life through a careful intertwining of narration, photographs, fragments of the audio tapes, interviews and a number of recreations.

The film radiates outward in many directions, toward jazz and music of course; photography and other arts; New York City in the postwar years; American society and its preoccupations; and, inevitably, toward historical questions as well, especially World War II and its vast impact.

It becomes clear early on in *The Jazz Loft* that Smith was an extraordinary, dynamic individual. Various eyewitnesses pay tribute to the atmosphere and look of the Sixth Avenue loft. There were “photos everywhere,” hanging from walls and in hallways, hanging from each other, forming a kind of leaning-in foliage. Records too, we see, were all over the place. The building itself was in a state of advanced disrepair. Heat and hot water were in short supply. Smith’s son Patrick calls it bluntly a “dump.”

The musicians arrived because there were “not many places to jam.” Smith lived, illegally, in a commercial district, so he had no neighbors who would complain about music being played all night long.

Jazz composer and pianist Carla Bley, composer David Amram, the late saxophonist Phil Woods, pianist and composer Freddie Redd, bassists Chuck Israels and Bill Crow and others weigh in.

Drummer Ronnie Free remembers Smith as a “mad scientist.” Photographer Bill Pierce, who apprenticed with Smith, says of the latter, he “worked and worked and worked and worked and worked.” When a deadline approached, Smith labored non-stop, making free use of amphetamines. A “careful printer” of photographs, he worked “hours and hours” on a single print. He was known to go through 250 sheets of photographic paper,

endangering himself and his family financially by such methods, one might add, on one print.

Several figures, in addition to Smith, stand out. Hall Overton (1920-72) also rented a space in the building. Perhaps only dimly remembered today, Overton, a composer, musician, and, above all, music teacher, seems to have been a remarkable human being. A classical composer and member of the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music, Overton moved into the loft in 1954 and immersed himself in jazz. He is recalled for the sensitivity and originality of his teaching methods, by Steve Reich, Carman Moore and others, and also, for his dedication and sacrifices: “You paid him for one hour, he taught for four hours.”

One of the most riveting sequences in the *Jazz Loft* involves the collaboration between Overton and jazz pianist-composer Thelonious Monk (1917-82) as they attempt to arrange Monk’s very distinctive and “crunched up” music for a 10-piece orchestra in preparation for a concert at New York’s Town Hall in 1959.

Through careful, thoughtful use of Smith’s still photographs and portions of conversation (recorded by Smith as well), the intense, artistically intimate relationship between the two men comes to light. “They talked through the piano,” someone suggests.

The orchestra rehearsals, as Phil Woods and French horn player Robert Northern recall, presented their own difficulties, especially on Monk’s tune “Little Rootie Tootie.” This sequence and its denouement—which I will not spoil for the reader—alone are, as they say, worth the price of admission.

Free (born 1936) made a tremendous mark as a jazz drummer in the 1950s. He more or less lived in the loft for several years. He was on a musical “mission.” Drugs were often part of the jazz life too. Free became overwhelmingly addicted. At 25, he explains to the camera, he “felt like 100.” He eventually found himself in Bellevue Hospital’s notorious psychiatric ward. For Free, the music and the addiction proved inseparable. Sadly, the only way he found to liberate himself from drugs was to liberate himself from playing jazz.

Zoot Sims (1925-85), the saxophonist, also looms large in the *Jazz Loft*. We hear his voice as well as his music. “Well, let’s blow one.” Woods describes Sims’ outlasting a crowd of sax players in one session, that lasted days. The music, recalls another witness, “just poured out of him.”

However, Smith, the witness to and recorder of all this life and

art, as much as he sometimes “lurked” in the shadows, remains the dominant and most complex figure in Sara Fishko’s film. Different sides of his life and personality emerge over the course of the work.

Born in Wichita, Kansas, Smith moved to New York City in the late 1930s and went to work for *Newsweek* and eventually, *Life* magazine, which famously emphasized photojournalism. During World War II, Smith covered various theaters, including, finally, the war in the Pacific. The photographer threw himself into this effort and it remained a decisive experience to the end of his days. It nearly cost him his life. After many campaigns, he was seriously wounded in Okinawa in May 1945.

Smith was not equivocal about the aim of his wartime photography, writing, for example, that “each time I pressed the shutter release it was a shouted condemnation” and “I would that my photographs might be, not the coverage of a news-event, but an indictment of war.”

Following the war and his recovery, Smith went to work for *Life* again, where he became known for his extended photo essays. Those included “Country Doctor” (1948), an essay on a doctor in rural Colorado; “Spanish Village” (1950), on the small town of Deleitosa, intended by Smith in part as a critique of the Franco regime; and “Nurse Midwife” (1951), on black midwife Maude E. Callen in South Carolina and her impoverished patients. He also covered the general election in Britain in 1950, narrowly won by the Labour Party, during which he shot working class people, including South Wales coal miners.

Smith left *Life* in 1954 after a series of bitter disagreements with his editors, culminating in a conflict over a photo essay on Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s humanitarian work in French Equatorial Africa. He referred to *Life* as a “magazine factory” on one occasion and noted on another that “I have a talent which others need for their commercial ends.”

In 1955 he undertook an assignment that was supposed to take him to Pittsburgh for three weeks and result in 100 photographs. Instead, Smith shot nearly 20,000 photos over several years and never finished the assignment. “Lunacy,” someone calls it.

In 1957, he left his family and a beautiful home in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, and moved into the grimy, dilapidated building on Sixth Avenue.

The choice was personally and financially a painful one. But Smith clearly felt his commitment to artistic truth was incompatible, in the end, with his role as a celebrated, well-paid employee of American publishing magnate Henry Luce and Time, Inc. Smith “argued with *Life* all the time,” one interviewee in the *Jazz Loft* points out. Another notes, “He’d quit 100 times.”

Whatever his conscious social outlook, Smith’s intense artistic seriousness (French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson referred to his “passionate integrity”) and compassion inevitably set him in opposition to the official culture of the 1950s, saturated with self-satisfaction, conformism and belief in America’s “democratic” greatness. About a finished work, Smith once commented, he felt he ought to be able to say, “this is my honest interpretation of the world; this is not influenced by money, or trickery, or pressure—except the pressure of my soul.”

In a 1954 letter, he affirmed his responsibility “to render with

intelligence, with artistic eloquence, a correct and breathing account of what is found.” He promised, moreover, to “get to the guts of the matter and show the bastards as they are.”

In the mid-1950s, Smith turned toward the musicians who shared his commitment, who did virtually nothing else but play and play, who were prepared to sacrifice their existence to the existence of their work.

It would be wrong to describe too much, *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith* is available on Amazon, iTunes, etc., for a few dollars—the reader should watch it him or herself.

One should also take note of several fascinating books by Sam Stephenson, who first discovered Smith’s trove of audio tapes and has spent years studying and writing about his work, including *Dream Street: W. Eugene Smith’s Pittsburgh Project* (2001, W.W. Norton), *The Jazz Loft Project* (2009, Knopf) and an upcoming work, *Gene Smith’s Sink: A Wide-Angle View* (2017, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux).

Sara Fishko’s *Jazz Loft* sticks elegantly but relentlessly to the matter at hand. It reflects some of the same commitment to seriousness in art as its subject. It does not get lost in gossip, in sex lives and race. Whether it fully means to be or not, it is a polemic against the sloppiness, carelessness and selfishness of so much contemporary film and art work.

Along these lines, quite correctly, the director emphasizes, in the content of the film and her manner of constructing it, as well as in our conversation (see accompanying article), that in any discussion of art work, the *work* of art has to be central. While both photography and jazz “seem to happen spontaneously ... without much effort,” she remarked to me, her film is “the living, breathing proof of the fact that the opposite is true. All these people—the photographer and the jazz musicians—worked all night, every night, crazily, obsessively.” They worked like mad “to be ready for the moment of inspiration if and when it did come.”



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