

FORM

PERFORMANCE

NOTES

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ALL that JAZZ

HUGH BELL'S PHOTOGRAPHS of the 1950s NEW YORK JAZZ SCENE

HUGH BELL'S GREENWICH Village photo studio was in the center of New York jazz culture, near to the Open Door Café. In 1952, in his last year at New York University, Bell shot one of his better-known photographs *Hot Jazz*, exhibited in *The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen's important 1955 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.¹

Within his body of work, Hugh Bell's jazz photographs are noteworthy for being in black and white. Roger Tilton's film *Jazz Dance*, from 1954, in which Hugh Bell was involved as assistant cameraman, was also shot in black and white. This monochrome jazz aesthetic seems to mirror jazz's political and racial background, but it also suggests the artistic qualities of both jazz and portraiture, as black-and-white film appealed to more sophisticated tastes, in contrast to color, which was used in commercial photography.

Bell, born to Caribbean parents in Harlem in 1927, studied at New York University, where he majored in journalism and cinematography.² He also began to take classes in camerawork in Harlem with the filmmaker Richard Leacock, for whom he became assistant cameraman for *Jazz Dance*.³ In 1953 Bell opened a photo studio in the heart of Greenwich Village, where he would work until his death in 2012. He did commercial projects for advertising agencies, banks, and pharmaceutical companies, and photographed for prominent magazines but occasionally lost jobs because he was black, a time he recalled in an interview for the documentary *Through a Lens Darkly*.⁴

Bell's photograph *Hot Jazz* captures the movement of the musical performance, his virtuosity mirroring the fast pace and controlled improvisation.⁵ In an interview, he notes, "I was always shooting pictures. I thought [jazz] was an interesting subject matter, so, as I was moving around with my camera independently, whenever I saw something jazzy, like at Carnegie Hall, I would shoot it. I had no idea what I was going to do with it, but that's what I was interested in—listening to it and photographing it at the same time."⁶ *Hot Jazz* shows the Tony Scott group playing at the Open Door Café in New York City, depicting a moment in the middle of the performance. The six musicians are absorbed in their instruments, but also in dialogue with each other, the image conveying their intensity and passion.⁷

Bell's use of light and dark is influenced by his knowledge of cinematography. The photograph was taken in a dark room energized with a few rays of light—similar to the morning sun—which contributes to the image's magical quality. The light is not natural, however: "... it seems to be a darkened nightclub—but the light came from a strobe." Bell had learned from making movies how to use light in movement, as he said, "more than regular photographers."⁸

In Bell's commercial work he photographed mainly women. His jazz photographs, however, mostly feature men, as jazz combos usually were all male. The one great exception was Billie Holiday, the first African American female singer to be accompanied by a white

1 – The information on Hugh Bell's life is based on the interview with Hugh Bell, in Nait Banai and Michael Valentine, *Hugh Bell: Between the Raindrops* (New York: The Bishop Gallery, 2005), and on a filmed interview with Hugh Bell from the 1990s, which is on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8MwVslFujM>. Hugh Bell's obituary appeared in *The New York Times* on November 26, 2012: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?pid=161264503>.

2 – Bell's parents were immigrants from St. Lucia, and there is very little information about them: "My father worked for the family court when he came to New York. I don't know what he did while in St. Lucia. My mother just lived the life of a middle-class West Indian woman." See Banai and Valentine, *Hugh Bell*, 17.

3 – Bell's job on the set was to constantly reload the cameras for Leacock, who was filming with two mobile cameras.

4 – *Through a Lens Darkly* is a documentary by Thomas Allen Harris, which premiered in February 2014. The filmmaker, together with Deborah Willis, interviewed Hugh Bell for the film. However, only three sentences of the interview made it into the final version of the documentary.

5 – *Hot Jazz* was photographed in 1952, but many of the prints were produced in 1954. See the Hugh Bell archive: <http://www.hughbell.org>.

6 – Banai and Valentine, *Hugh Bell*, 24.

7 – Tony Scott (Anthony Sciacca) (1921–2007) was an American jazz clarinetist with an interest in world music influenced by his conversion to Buddhism. See W. Kampmann, ed., *Reclams Jazzlexikon* (Stuttgart: Verlag, 2003), 473.

8 – Cynthia Maris Dantzig, *100 New York Photographers* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2009), 18.

band. She had a striking presence, and was described as “congenitally incapable of skating over the surface of life or art, and in that respect she was a contradiction of and a reproach to the world of popular song from which she drew so much of her material.”⁹ Holiday’s ironic interpretations of cliché-heavy love songs transformed their messages. She also performed openly political songs like “Strange Fruit,” which describes a lynching.

On March 27, 1948, Billie Holiday performed at Carnegie Hall for the first time after her release from prison, later describing the concert as “the biggest thing that ever happened to me.”¹⁰ Eight years later, on November 10, 1956, Holiday gave her second and last concert at Carnegie Hall. This time Bell was in the audience. At this point her autobiography had just been published and between the numbers she sang, lengthy excerpts were read by Gilbert Millstein. Bell was certainly aware of the voyeuristic fascination with Holiday’s tragic life when he took photographs backstage after the concert. Holiday was emotional and full of adrenaline. Bell photographed her as she spoke to a friend of his, who is barely visible next to her. Of these four images, only one was selected by Bell to be exhibited and reproduced, one that shows the singer confused and distressed, thereby playing into the media’s narrative of her tragic downfall.

Bell spoke at length about his photographs of Holiday:

A good photo has to have a point of view. . . . For instance, going back to Billie Holiday, to me she was a beautiful singer, but she was a troubled woman in terms of taking too many drugs. So, when I took the photo, I felt that one interesting aspect to her was: How do I exhibit in the photograph the fact that she was taking drugs? In her facial expressions, the way she handled her body, the way her clothes fell off her body, you know, that’s more important for me. Who is she?¹¹

He also described her as a “tough woman,” a “beautiful singer,” as well as a “troubled woman” and

a drug addict. However, the only one of his photographs of Billie Holiday published seems to depict the latter descriptions.

ART of JAZZ exhibits Bell’s complete series of photographs of Billie Holiday for the first time. When Bell was asked, “Of all your jazz photographs, which is your favorite?” he replied, “Well, I could say, when I shot Billie Holiday. You know she was a certain, particular type of person—tough woman. And, uh, a jazz friend of mine said, ‘Look, I’ll talk to her while you photograph her.’ And, sometimes she looked angry, sometimes she looked miserable, sometimes she looked like she was laughing, all in a period of about five or six minutes.”¹² The series paints a more diverse picture than just “a troubled woman in terms of taking too many drugs.” It depicts a singer talking to her fans after her performance, as well as someone very emotionally charged and possibly intoxicated. These photographs do not so much fit into a simple narrative of her decline, as illuminate her complex emotional state and situation. For this reason they may not have been as saleable as the one published.

Bell’s photographs of New York’s jazz scene from the 1950s to the 1970s depict breathtaking performances by musicians like Sarah Vaughan, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, and many more—portraits that are a testament to Bell’s compositional skills and his brilliant use of lighting. Shot in the smoke-filled jazz clubs of Greenwich Village, developed in his studio near Washington Square, confined to an archive in New Jersey, they are now shown in the Cooper Gallery exhibition, an important stage in the recovery of a great and neglected photographer.

9 – Burnett James, “Billie Holiday and the Art of Communication,” in *Essays on Jazz* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1961), 14.

10 – G. Early, “Pulp and Circumstance: The Story of Jazz in High Places,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 427.

11 – *Ibid.*, 427–28.

12 – Banai and Valentine, *Hugh Bell*, 25.

HUGH BELL

The camera bestowed cultural legitimacy on jazz as black music and helped to bolster the fame of performers like Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington. Black-and-white photographs taken onstage and offstage were reprinted in newspapers and magazines, exhibited in galleries and museums, and used for posters and album covers. The photographs helped to promote the respectability of jazz, while addressing issues of race.

Hugh Bell, a Harlem-born photographer, became part of New York's jazz scene in the 1950s, photographing jazz legends like Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Sarah Vaughan, Bobby Timmons, and many more. His photography demonstrates virtuosity, combining superior use of lighting with skillful composition. *Hot Jazz* (1952) was shown in *The Family of Man* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. His 1956 photographs of Billie Holiday offstage, which show her at a decisive moment of her career, after her second concert at Carnegie Hall, just before the beginning of her downfall caused by drug addiction, are featured as a series for the first time in *ART of JAZZ*.

Hugh Bell (1927–2012)

Charlie Parker and Teddy Kotick at Open Door Café 1953

Gelatin silver print

25.4 x 20.3 cm (10 x 8 in.)

Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)
Hot Jazz 1952
Gelatin silver print
21.6 x 27.9 cm (8½ x 11 in.)
Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)
Jazz at Circle in the Square 1954
Gelatin silver print
25.4 x 20.3 cm (10 x 8 in.)
Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)
Sarah Vaughan 1955
Gelatin silver print
61 x 50.8 cm (24 x 20 in.)
Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)

Billie Holiday, Carnegie Hall Dressing Room 1957

Photograph

25.4 x 20.34 cm (10 x 8 in.)

Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)

Billie Holiday, Carnegie Hall Dressing Room 1957

Photograph

35.6 x 27.9 cm (14 x 11 in.)

Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)

Billie Holiday, Carnegie Hall Dressing Room 1957

Photograph

50.8 x 40.6 cm (20 x 16 in.)

Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)
Billie Holiday, Carnegie Hall Dressing Room 1957
Photograph
35.6 x 27.9 cm (14 x 11 in.)
Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)

Duke Ellington 1973

Photograph

35.6 x 27.9 cm (14 x 11 in.)

Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive



Hugh Bell (1927–2012)
Sonny Stitt Sonny's Blues 1981
Album cover
30.5 x 30.5 cm (12 x 12 in.)
Courtesy of the Hugh Bell Archive

