

GEORGIA STRAKAT
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Claxton's photographs capture the jazz spirit

JAZZ: WILLIAM CLAXTON

At Presentation House until April 2. For more information see Time Out.

Jazz is made of subtle shadings of colour and inflection, brought forth from the minds and fingers of a remarkable set of strongly individualistic characters, and William Claxton is one of its finest practi-

Visual Arts

REVIEW

tioners. Only he doesn't blow a horn or finger a piano. His instrument is the camera, and for 10 years, from 1953 until 1963, he was one of the visual artists who defined the look of jazz with an extraordinary string of insightful and personalized photographs, many of which are now on display at North Vancouver's Presentation House gallery.

As a long-time jazz aficionado, I initially found the most striking element of the Claxton show to be its familiarity. I've been living, unknowingly, with a number of his best shots for a long time: a dapper Hampton Hawes, the living embodiment of mysterious, on the cover of his second trio outing; Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh looking unusually boyish and playful on their Atlantic duet record; Barney Kessel, Ray Brown, and Shelley Manne cavorting 'round a maypole on one of their "poll-winners" sessions; a studious Ornette Coleman cradling his plastic alto sax on the cover of *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. These images, and many more—some uncredited, other simply absorbed unthinkingly—define, for me, that period when jazz was evolving out of bebop into its current wonderful complexity. Seeing them larger, well-printed, framed, and lit with gallery lights is like coming across a new side of an old friend's talents.

Without the music to divert one's attention from the visuals, these photographs still sing, swing, and radiate hip. The crabwise curl of pianist Carl Perkins' left hand is suitably suggestive of the artist's technical unorthodoxy (he'd pluck out additional bass notes with his elbow) and his fresh approach to the keyboard. Art Pepper, sax in hand, slogging up a shockingly rural L.A. hillside, evokes an understanding of the musician's continual quest for emotional honesty and artistic improvement. The half-smile on Thelonious Monk's lips belies the physical solidity of the great composer's bulk.

an especially sophisticated awareness of the powers of shadow and light, whether natural or artificially manipulated. But more than that, they're full of unforced references to the lives and music of their subjects.

The greatest photographers always seem at once in love with and ever-so-slightly removed from their subjects. Claxton has this quality. He approaches these jazz musicians, complex and often inward-looking men and women, with the penetrating insight of a great analyst, waiting for that lightning

moment when, their defenses down, they'll let a glimpse of their inner world reveal itself through their public face.

His posed shots are vital; his action snaps put the viewer in the club, even on the bandstand, with the intimacy of a participant. The ungainly dynamism of Dinah Washington; Billie Holiday's ruined, tragic beauty; John Coltrane's matadorial determination as he mounts the stairs on the way to one of his Newport festival triumphs—they are all captured and made vivid for posterity.

Claxton didn't just shoot portraits: his concern was with the whole jazz milieu, the world that spawned those wonderful sounds, and some of the street scenes are as evocative of particular periods in jazz history as any of his famous shots of the stars. But even in these shots, the human element stands out. I don't think I'll ever forget his 4 a.m., midsummer shot of the Birdland nightclub doorway—not for the strange light or the low-rise landscape, but for the gaze of that anonymous musical aspirant, nodding on his feet, using a saxophone for a cane, gaunt, and a million miles away from the Manhattan dawn.

Like jazz, William Claxton's photographs cover the whole range of human emotions. Like jazz, they speak of specific historical times without seeming dated or cliched. Like jazz, they use simple ingredients to evoke complex emotional and intellectual ponderings. Like jazz, they'll give back whatever thought and time you invest in them.

Incidentally, Claxton's exhibition is underscored by classic jazz recordings from performance artist Eric Metcalfe's collection. For even more multi-media input, the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society has arranged a series of Sunday evening gallery concerts featuring some of Vancouver's leading creative musicians. This week the eclectic Lunar Adventures explore their probing mix of Celtic harmolodicism; they'll be followed on March 19 by Bruce Freedman's Chief Feature quartet, which will mix up traditional and innovative sounds with its usual intensity. □ **Alex Varty**