



One of us

HE WAS IN THE RIGHT PLACE, AT THE RIGHT TIME - TIME AFTER TIME. A NEW BOOK AND EXHIBITION COMMEMORATES THE CAREER OF A GREAT PHOTOGRAPHER

WORDS ALAN HARPER

New York in the 1950s saw the birth of a new civilisation – ours. It was a time like no other. The war was won, the economy was booming, and in a period of unprecedented creativity artists from Mark Rothko to Mies van der Rohe laid the foundations of modern culture.

But while the painter is an acknowledged god of abstract expressionism, and the Seagram Building still says everything that ever needed saying about architectural Modernism, it is arguably music, from dazzling theatres on Broadway and smoky jazz clubs in the West Village, which has proved to be the Big Apple's most enduring gift to the world.

One record label stood head and shoulders above its contemporaries, and in Columbia Records' vast converted church on 30th Street, sound engineers recorded everyone from the cast of *West Side Story* to Miles Davis's modal musings. Working alongside them and roaming among the musicians and singers during sessions was a photographer named Don Hunstein, whose priceless archive of pictures is now the subject of a new exhibition.

Hired by the label in 1956, Hunstein arrived just in time to witness this golden age of recorded music, and the countless photographs he made during a 30-year career now stand as

Miles Davis recording Gil Evans' arrangement of *Porgy and Bess*, New York, 1957. Opposite: Bob Dylan at home, Greenwich Village, February 1963.

An 18-year-old Aretha Franklin rehearsing with trombonist Tyree Glenn, August 1960. Below: Don Hunstein at work, late 1960s.



“a memorial to an era when the major labels took themselves seriously as libraries of culture,” according to *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles.

Columbia is the world's oldest record label, with roots reaching back into the late 19th Century. Bessie Smith and Al Jolson were Columbia recording artists, and by the late 1920s Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman had all joined the roster. By mid-century the label had acquired a remarkably eclectic stable of artists and thanks to the acuity of A&R men like John Hammond and Mitch Miller, continued to do so.

So as well as jazz greats of the era such as Monk, Mingus and Billie Holliday, Columbia

also recorded Tony Bennett and Johnny Mathis, classical virtuosos like the pianist Glenn Gould, and ground-breaking orchestral works by Igor Stravinsky and Leonard Bernstein. The future soul diva Aretha Franklin cut her first sides for the label as a young girl of 18. Bob Dylan was a Columbia discovery. Johnny Cash was tempted over from Sun Records in 1958.

When it came to observing musicians at work, Hunstein's style as a photographer was strictly documentary. Ordinary ceiling lights in the studios gave a flat, overall tone which he said was “great for what I did, nice and even”. He makes it sound simple, but as a master of his craft he was adept at using highlights and shadows to create eloquent compositions. More than that, he knew intuitively not just how, but when to take the photo. While he occasionally used medium-format cameras he preferred smaller, less conspicuous and quieter Leicas and Nikons, which seem to have enabled ▶



Top: Johnny Cash backstage with guitarist Luther Perkins, 1960. Above: Dave Brubeck recording *Time Out* in 1959. Left: Tony Bennett on stage in Miami, 1957.

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Right: Duke Ellington at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival. Below: Glenn Gould in the 30th Street studios, 1957.



Below: the cover shot for Bob Dylan's *Freewheelin'* album, 1963. Bottom: Simon and Garfunkel, October 1966.



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Cassius Clay with Sam Cooke, rehearsing *The Gang's All Here*, March 1964. Right: Leonard Bernstein, 1970.



him to move among the artists without breaking whatever spells they were weaving.

"There was nothing metaphysical about what I did," he said. "I'd just like to think I had a good eye for detail, that I captured the moment at hand. But mostly, I just did my job."

Born in 1928, Hunstein began taking photographs while stationed in England with the US Air Force in the early 1950s, and enrolled at the Central School of Art & Design in London. He was inspired by the pioneer photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose mantra was 'the decisive moment' – that fraction of a second when "your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera".

Hunstein seldom used colour film – colour repro was expensive, and all his Columbia images, whether for news releases or album covers, were taken solely for the printing press. Black-and-white can be limiting, but in the hands of a master like Hunstein it can also be liberating. The two chords of a Miles Davis modal piece can say as much as a symphony.

When called upon for more formal portraits and album covers Hunstein's technique and natural rapport with his subjects produced pictures that endure to this day. The best of them

have become icons of the artists and the times. "In the performers' faces, Hunstein's journalistic side persists: he brings out the flesh-and-blood humanity behind the showmanship. Hunstein photographed artists, not mannequins," wrote Jon Pareles in his foreword to the book of the exhibition.

"I tried to create an atmosphere so the artist was relaxed and open," Hunstein said. "That was essential. That was key." His famous cover image for Bob Dylan's *Freewheelin'* album in 1963, showing the spiky young folk singer and his girlfriend walking in Jones Street on a freezing February afternoon, was voted 'most iconic New York City album cover' by *Time Out* magazine. "Dylan himself was already quite image conscious and self-assured," recalled the photographer. "He knew how to play to the camera." The light was fading fast and there was time to shoot just one roll of colour film, but it was enough.

Art Garfunkel, the subject of several Hunstein shoots along with his musical partner Paul Simon, regarded the photographer as "a magician". He wrote: "The human exchange with him is sincere; it's funny; it relaxes the subject. Hanging out with Don over-rides the self-consciousness of picture taking. Many photo sessions have gone down for me since then, but I don't know when it ever worked again so well. He turned out to be one of us."



The travelling exhibition 'Keeping Time: The Photography of Don Hunstein' is at Bethel Woods Center, New York, until December 31. For future venues check www.donhunstein.com. The companion book is published by Insight Editions.