

## The Jazz Loft Project



*The loft building (second from left) at 821 6th Avenue, December, 2008. Photo by Scott Landis.*

From 1957 to 1965 legendary photographer W. Eugene Smith made approximately 4,000 hours of recordings on 1,741 reel-to-reel tapes and nearly 40,000 photographs in a loft building in Manhattan's wholesale flower district where major jazz musicians of the day gathered and played their music. Smith's prodigious work has remained in archives until now. The Jazz Loft Project is dedicated to uncovering the stories behind this underground crossroads in American cultural history. [READ MORE](#)

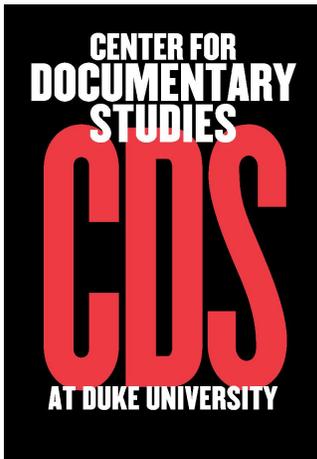
### Info

The Jazz Loft Project at the [Center for Documentary Studies](#) at Duke University was made possible through the generous support of the Reva and David Logan Foundation, with significant additional support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (The Grammy Foundation).

## Jazz Loft Residents, 1954 - 1965

The loft building at 821 Sixth Avenue, where W. Eugene Smith lived, worked, and documented jazz jam sessions in the late fifties and early sixties, was built in 1853. The old wholesale flower district attracted artists who worked in the low rent, cold water lofts in the neighborhood. Because it was a commercial district and the flower shops closed at the end of the day, musicians could rehearse late at night after returning from club gigs without disturbing any neighbors.

The time line below lists the artists and musicians that occupied the third, fourth, and fifth floors of 821 between 1954 and 1965, as well as residents' memories excerpted from interviews conducted by Jazz Loft Project Director Sam Stephenson and Research Associate Dan Partridge. Throughout the Jazz Loft years, several businesses operated out of the street level of 821, including the Rainbow Restaurant, Herald Pharmacy, and Bernie's Discount Electronics Center, among others. The second floor was used for storage.



## JAZZ LOFT IN THE NEWS

The Jazz Loft Project was featured in the March 25, 2009 issue of the Independent Weekly. Read the article [here](#).

## CORRECTION

Last month's newsletter erroneously identified Eddie Bert as a trumpet player. He is a trombone player. Thanks to all who pointed out this error.

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## 1954

Painter David X. Young moves into the fifth floor of the building at 821. Pianist, composer, and Julliard teacher Hall Overton shares the fourth floor with photographer Harold Feinstein. Trumpet player Dick Cary moves into the third floor.

Young had recently moved to New York and was working as a fitter in Henry Rothman's frame making workshop, cutting mats and assembling pictures into finished frames. Rothman's son, Dave recalls asking permission to visit his father's apprentice's loft as a 12 year old jazz fan:

*I said, "Hey, Dad. Friday night Dave Young says he's going to have some of his friends playing music over there, but it's late. Can I go over there and hang out?" He said, "Yeab. Yeab, no problem." So, Dave said, "Well, it's going to be real late." Said, "But I've got a cot there, so you could go to sleep. And then when they come in, you'll probably wake up because it'll get noisy." I'd go in and lie down on his cot, like on a Friday night, and fall asleep, like maybe 9:30 or 10:00 at night.*

*And then I'd wake up several hours later hearing voices, musical instruments tuning up, piano tinkling, drumming, and people standing around. I'd open my eyes and I'd see--there was usually just one light, and it was sort of dimly lit. And I'd see people standing there, smoking cigarettes, drinking beers, Dave Young sitting at the piano, somebody else sitting at the piano, these various guys playing instruments. And then they'd start to play music. And I'd sit and listen to the music. I remember somebody once saying, I distinctly remember, "Hey, who's that kid? Dave, who's that kid over there? Is he cool?" [Laughs] Something like that. And Dave said, "Oh, yeab. He's my boss's son. He's a jazz fan. He's great. Don't worry about him."*

## 1955

Pianist Dorrie Glenn moves in with Harold Feinstein. Eve Young moves in with David Young.

Dorrie Glenn recalls studying with Hall Overton:

*When Hall was there, I don't remember the details of this, but he gave me the key to his studio. And as far as I can remember and Harold [Feinstein] remembers, there was never any money exchanged. In other words, he gave me full use of his piano and his music studio, which was an enormous gift.*

*And then, I started studying with him, and I don't think I ever paid anything for that. I think it was, you know, it was a gift. And so, he taught me the basic harmonic structures that my whole style of playing is*

*based on.*

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### **1957**

Photographer W. Eugene Smith replaces Harold Feinstein in the front half of the fourth floor. Between 1957 and 1956 Smith makes nearly 40,000 photographs of the all night jazz jam sessions that occur in the building and of life in the flowers district as seen through his window. To complete his obsessive documentation, Smith wires the building with microphones to record the jam sessions on reel-to-reel tapes, as well as numerous conversations, street sounds, and radio and television programs.

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Bassist and loft regular Bill Crow remembers Smith's documentary work:

*Zoot [Sims] used to call him Lamont Cranston, because he was the shadow. He rarely got into conversations with us, or-- I remember one time after it snowed lightly, he got fascinated with the patterns that the tires had made in the snow, looking down from the loft, and he was talking about that and the pictures that he'd taken of it, and how interesting that was. That was the most I'd ever heard him talk. Most of the time he was just kind of around, poking microphones under things.*

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### **1958**

Ronnie Free begins residency as house drummer, crashing on Smith's recliner until early 1960.

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Ron Free remembers Eugene Smith and his time in the loft in an interview with Jazz Loft Project Director Sam Stephenson:

*Sam: What would Eugene Smith be doing?*

*Ron: Probably at his little worktable, you know, looking at negatives. I don't know what all he did do, man. He was always busy doing something. He had a worktable with all kinds of pictures and negatives.*

*Sam: How did it come about that you ended up basically living in his loft, right? How did that happen?*

*Ron: Damned if I remember! [Laughs] Just playing so many sessions there, you know, that I just--I don't remember ever really asking him, you know. It just kind of happened. I just wound up sleeping in one of his recliners*

*there.*

*Sam: Last week there was a woman here from the University of Arizona, you know, and they have all of his stuff. When he died, everything he owned was deposited out there, including two recliners.*

*Ron: My old recliner! [Laughs] I bet it's one of them. How about that?*

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### **1959**

Artist Carole Thomas moves in with Smith.

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Carole Thomas describes the music that permeated all floors of 821:

*I could soak in my bathtub and listen to Thelonious Monk for hours. And there were some holes around the pipes, so the music came up real loud and clear.*

*There were good musicians up there. There was good music. And you have these guys coming over after their club dates and their gigs and in those days I think there was more limitations for a particular kind of style and to have a place where they could just explore the music and interact with each other and just do it was great.*

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### **1960**

Dick Cary moves out in January and Smith takes over the third floor and continues to occupy his half of the fourth floor. By the middle of the year David Young moves out of the fifth floor and drummer Gary Hawkins moves in. Bassist Hal Bigler moves in and shares the fifth floor with Hawkins.

### **1961**

Bassist Dave Sibley moves in to the fifth floor in early 1961. Gary Hawkins move out. In June Hal Bigler moves out and is replaced by drummer Frank Amoss.

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Frank Amoss recalls moving to New York and the scene at 821 Sixth Avenue:

*And one of the first days I was there, I ran into a bass player who had played for a while with Dean Hudson. His name was Dave Sibley. And*

*he was living--he told me about the loft where he was living, and they were having constant sessions there, and invited me to come, which I did.*

*In those days you had to go down to the corner of 6th Avenue and 28th Street, where there was a phone booth, and call to the loft, and someone would open the window and throw a key out down to the sidewalk, and that was the way to get in and go upstairs to play. There was no other way to let anyone in. You always had to call up and get a key thrown out the window.*

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Throughout the summer of 1961 saxophonist Lin Halliday and his girlfriend Virginia McEwan squat in the stairwell of 821. Pianist Sonny Clark is frequently with them.

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Viginia Wald (McEwan) remembers arriving in New York with Lin Halliday:

*We drove to New York and it was very, very late at night when we got there, and the first place we went was the loft. Lin and been there previously when he came to New York while he was in Sal Salvador's band. Lin was returning to New York, but I spent my first night in New York City in the loft, and that became our home base during the whole time I was there.*

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By late summer 1961 Dave Sibley moves out and bassist Jimmy Stevenson moves into the fifth floor. In November Frank Amoss moves out. Pianist Alice McCleod (Coltrane) and saxophonist Joe Henderson briefly stay on the fifth floor before Jimmy Stevenson begins to occupy the entire fifth floor with his wife Sandy and their son Jimmy Jr.

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Jimmy Stevenson describes the jam sessions:

*There was no plan. The only thing that ever got any plan was when Don Ellis came through and we did--there were regular weekly sessions to go over the music and learn the music. But other than that, I don't think there was ever anything planned. It was just whoever showed up, and we just had at it, you know. And there would be people coming and going, and people would be working gigs, other people wouldn't be working. So whenever anybody was in New York that didn't have a gig that night, they'd usually end up there, up there at the loft. That was how it worked.*

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**1964**

Jimmy and Sandy Stevenson move out in June. Smith and Carole Thomas take over the fifth floor in addition to the third and front half of the fourth floor. Overton remains in the back half of the fourth floor until his death in 1972. Smith remains in 821 until 1971.

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In a 1971 filmed interview with David Young, Smith reflects on his time in the loft at 821:

*Before I took over so much of it, it used to be a rather interesting and exciting place. There was this strange painter on the top floor, and a musician underneath, and my quiet and gentlemanly conduct to offset all that [laughs]. No, but we've had up to three sessions going at once around here. I used to have it pretty well miked so I could flip switches and record a session going on in any one of the places, and even while I was still printing or doing other work.*

*It's a wonderful fire trap. A time it caught on fire, Hall (Overton) said something about, "Do you think all our work is going to get lost in this?" He was thinking of his manuscripts, and I felt sorry for him, but I almost felt a sense of relief. I could, you know, get out from under all this responsibility of damn books and shows and things, and I could change my name to Smith and start all over again, and have a nice, clean, intelligent little place.*

*I don't know. What else can you say about the loft? It's--No, it's been a warm and interesting place. Mainly, the people who have been here have always respected each and every one of the other people. Otherwise, any noise at any time of the day or night was fine. Although it does creak, for people who creep across floors, or up the steps.*

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*Smith at work in the loft at 821 Sixth Avenue. Still taken from 16mm film footage made by David Young in 1971.*

## The Loft Today

The loft building at 821 Sixth Avenue still stands today. The building is owned by the Chang family who import and sell wigs out of the building. In February, Mr. Ho, manager of the Chang's shop graciously allowed photographer Ted Barron to tour the building and take photographs for the project.



*Mr. Ho in the stairwell of 821.*



*Today the floors of 821 store boxes of migs.*



*Hole in the floor of 821 where a microphone may have once passed to allow tape recording between floors.*

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