



*There goes the
neighbourhood*

Photographer *W. Eugene Smith* spent eight years recording daily life in and around his shabby New York loft. Among his subjects were some of the great names of modern jazz



AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER W. EUGENE SMITH WAS ALWAYS OBSESSIVE. When the renowned Life magazine contributor was commissioned to spend three weeks taking 100 shots of Pittsburgh – for a book – he spent a year in the city, before retreating in 1957 to a shabby Manhattan loft to sift through the tens of thousands of negatives he had accrued.

Few of the photographs were seen at the time, not least by the book's frustrated author. Distracted by editorial wrangles – and, increasingly, amphetamines – Smith, who had walked out on both Life and his family, became obsessed with the to-ings and fro-ings at the



grubby five-floor walk-up at 821 Sixth Avenue, between 28th & 29th streets, that housed his large but dirt-cheap studio.

The filthy, dilapidated building lay in the heart of New York's wholesale flower market. By day, it was a regular working area of the city, but at night, with few residents to kick up a fuss, it was a long-established centre for prostitution and low entertainment. By the time Smith moved in, his building had become the nocturnal destination for jazz musicians, writers, artists and anyone interested in hanging out with them. The easy availability of drugs probably helped draw a crowd.

(Previous pages) Thelonious Monk and his Town Hall band in rehearsal, 1959; (these pages) Smith (left) in his fourth-floor studio at 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957. Among his subjects are (facing page, top left) one of the area's many flower sellers and (above, standing) bass player Bob Crow



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY W. EUGENE SMITH. COLLECTION CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA © THE HEIRS OF W. EUGENE SMITH

“Ad hoc jam sessions gave the lofts a soundtrack of unadulterated era-defining jazz”

Ad hoc jam sessions – sometimes lasting entire weekends – gave the lofts a soundtrack of unadulterated, era-defining jazz. Cultural icons mingled with pimps and pushers; anonymous junkies rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. Salvador Dali, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Anais Nin and Norman Mailer dropped by.

All of this became material for Smith. Shots from the photographer’s fourth-floor window of the daily routines of respectable florists are juxtaposed with portraits of musicians – more than 300 of whom have been identified, ranging from unknowns to the masters of the swing era, such as Pee Wee Russell, the trenchant

modernist pianist Thelonious Monk, and the first flush of the avant-garde in the shape of saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler.

But even that, and the 40,000 photographs he eventually produced, wasn’t enough for Smith. Absorbed by what he later called “an ever changing pandemonium of delicate details and habitual rhythms”, he wired the building’s upper three storeys for sound and over the next seven years recorded 1,740 reels of audio tape. The recordings take in some landmark moments, including Monk rehearsing for his famous 1959 Town Hall concert. But still Smith didn’t stop. He also captured the ambient noise of the building

(Above) View of the rundown New York neighbourhood that became Smith’s home from 1957 to 1965; (above right) blind multi-instrumentalist Roland Kirk and partial shots of alto saxophonist Lee Konitz

and its environs – with random snippets of conversations, radio and television programmes and arbitrary street noise. The cumulative result is a multimedia collage of New York’s artistic community at a creative peak.

Smith remained at 821 Sixth Avenue until 1965. When he died in 1978, in Arizona, he left behind \$18 in his bank account, 25,000 vinyl records and 20 tonnes of negatives, prints and tapes. That evocative archive has been edited with flair by Sam Stephenson, director of the Jazz Loft Project at Duke University, North Carolina, into a book whose pages convey, beautifully, the strange cultural moment

when a rat-infested hulk of a building hosted a perfect storm of creativity. ■

Mike Hobart is the FT’s jazz critic.

An exhibition of Smith’s photographs, “The Underground Story of Photographer W. Eugene Smith and the Jazz Loft”, is at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 40 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, from February 17 to May 22. “The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith from 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957-1965” is published by Alfred A. Knopf.