

The Jazz Loft Project
New York Public Library
for the Performing Arts

The Jazz Loft Project
by Sam Stephenson
Knopf

Eugene Smith was a driven, supremely talented man who wanted his

photography to change the world—and it did. At his career's apogee with *Life* magazine in the early 1950s, his empathetic, chiaroscuro photo essays portraying marginal people and sites made him a household name. But in 1957 he left all that behind—along with his wife and four kids in their comfortable house in Croton, N.Y.—to move into a decaying loft on New York's West 28th Street.

Outsider artists peopled the neighborhood. Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* a few blocks away; when Smith moved in, that novel was breaking the Beat scene, spearheading a postwar American renaissance.

Smith dove into this with the righteous vengeance he brought to everything. His new neighbors hosted artist hangouts and jam sessions. Smith ran wires all over his loft—then the entire building—to tape any sound emanating from anywhere. Among the famous jazzers he caught in the act: Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus and Bill Evans.

After Smith's 1979 death, some 4,000 hours of tape reposed, with his splendid photos, at the University of Arizona. What was on them was unsubstantiated legend. Enter Sam Stephenson, who tended their digitization and over painstaking years collated them with oral histories and other documentation. The result captures American culture in creative flux from the ground-eye level.

Some 200 photos are the heart of this multimedia exhibit, but audio and listening stations are chock full of evocative excerpts. Stephenson's monumental *The Jazz Loft Project* (Knopf) fills in details. Sara Fishko's insightful multipart radio series is available at www.wnyc.org. The exhibition is at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (www.nypl.org) through May 22, then travels the country for three years. —Gene Santoro



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Thelonious Monk and his band jam at photographer W. Eugene Smith's loft in New York City, February 1959. Saxman Zoot Sims blows. Smith surveys the street scene, circa 1957.