

BOOKS

The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith From 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957-1965

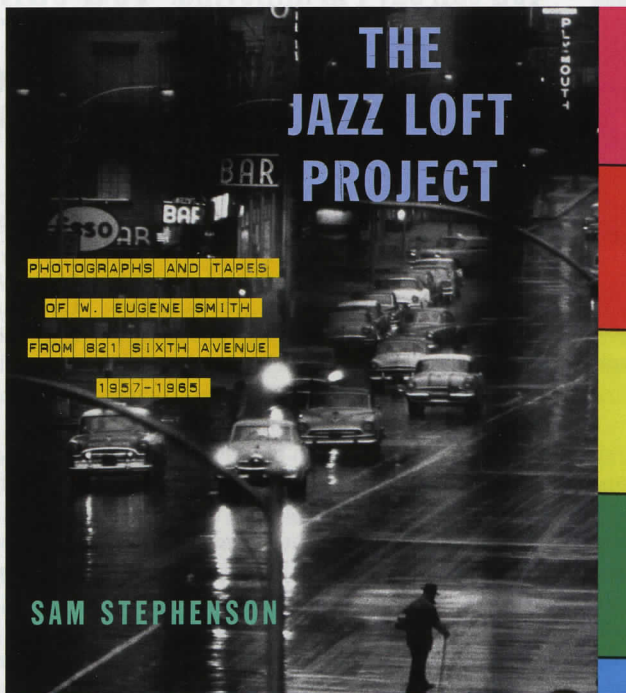
By Sam Stephenson. Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. 288 pages. \$40.

Last year produced a wealth of books on jazz, with Robin D.G. Kelley's *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*, Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux's *Jazz*, Terry Teachout's loving memoir of Louis Armstrong, *Pops*, and this amazing book. Of these four books, *Loft* is the most elliptical in approach but also the most alluring.

W. Eugene Smith was a legend in photographic circles when, in 1957, he gave up a steady job as staff photographer for *Life* magazine, left his wife and four children, and moved into a cockroach- and rat-infested apartment on Sixth Avenue, between 28th Street and 29th Street, in Manhattan's wholesale-flower district. He lived there from 1957 to 1971, shooting photographs out of his window and taping anything and everything that interested him. He rigged the wiring for his tape recorder across three floors through the walls, even floorboards, amassing a time capsule of random sounds and events, from jam sessions to conversations in the hall to late-night radio and television broadcasts. (He asked a visitor once, "Do you mind if I turn on my recorder in case something brilliant happens?") Before his death in 1978, Smith donated his photographs and audiotapes to the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography, twenty-two tons of materials including 1,740 reels (4,000 hours) of audiotape and roughly 40,000 photographic prints.

The Jazz Loft Project is a stew of Smith's photographs and audiotapes, augmented by interviews with those who lived in or passed through the loft. The loft was a magnet for jazz musicians. Rehearsal space was free. There were no neighbors to complain about noise. Best of all, mu-

sicians met there as equals; the only hierarchy was talent. And they played as long as they wanted—there was no time limit on solos. Composer-arranger Hall Overton and jazz legend Thelonious Monk rehearsed Monk's orchestra there for the famous Town Hall concert in 1959 and subsequent concerts in 1963 at Lincoln Center and 1964 at Carnegie Hall. Trum-



peter Miles Davis, bassist Charles Mingus, and vibraphonist Teddy Charles worked out the ensemble sound Davis featured on his album *Blue Haze*. Guitarists Jimmy Raney and Jim Hall and valve trombonist Bob Brookmeyer developed a unique ensemble sound for their combo.

Then there was Zoot. If one musician was king in these sessions, it was tenor saxophonist Zoot Sims. Bystanders claimed that he played best when he was so drunk he couldn't stand. "Everybody wanted to get a piece of Zoot, you know," says alto saxophonist Phil Woods.

Sam Stephenson, a writer and instructor at Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, and his colleague Dan Partridge traveled to nineteen states and the District of Columbia to interview 330 musicians for this book. They have documented 589 people who played or hung out at the Jazz Loft between 1957 and 1965. The list of musicians who were there is an honor roll of East Coast jazz in the 1950s to mid-1960s: Monk, Sims, Raney and Hall, and Brookmeyer, along with Roland Kirk, Sonny Rollins, Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffrè, Pee-wee Russell, Buck Clayton, Vic Dickenson, Bill Evans, Roy Haynes, Stan Getz, Steve Lacy, Don Cherry, Ornette Coleman, Joe Henderson, Dick Cary, Buck Clayton, Steve Swallow, Mose Allison, and Alice Coltrane. Socialite Doris Duke, the only daughter of the university's namesake, J.B. Duke, made an appearance there. So did composer Steve Reich; painter Salvador Dalí; writers Anais Nin and Norman Mailer; photographers Diane Arbus, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Robert Frank; and, maybe, once, Bob Dylan.

In December 2000, tenor saxophonist Lou Orenstein, largely unknown today, reminisced about the sessions in which he played. At Stephenson's urging, he jotted down a list of musicians he remembered playing with. Three were jazz icons (Chick Corea, Eric Dolphy, Elvin Jones), two others less well known but significant in jazz's development (Al Haig, Sonny Clark). The remaining names—eight in all—are men who have vanished from the historical record, along with the music they made. Jazz looks different viewed from below.

The Jazz Loft Project evokes a mood similar to that of Dylan Thomas' poem-play, *Under Milkwood*. Voices rise out of the background, are heard for a moment, and disappear again. Stephenson masterfully juxtaposes photo images and taped conversation to re-create a bygone time and place. *Loft* is a singularly affecting book, and the photographs are stunning.

—David Keymer

Keymer is a retired historian living in Modesto, California. He bought his first jazz recording sixty years ago.