ONE OF W. EUGENE SMITH'S first published photographs—of the drought-dried Arkansas River—appeared in The New York Times when he was fifteen years old. Over the next twenty years he made his name as a photojournalist with an activist's eye for depicting drama and injustice. During those decades when Life magazine was America's most influential source of visual news, Smith was one of its chief image-makers: he shot the combat zone of World War II, Spanish peasant life under Generalissimo Franco, and the poverty of black Americans in the rural South. Smith always wanted to go deep, to see everything about a story and to show it all; he was a monumental photographer with increasingly quixotic ambitions. Even as he helped to make Life great, and Life made him celebrated and prosperous, he fought the magazine's editors—often bitterly—for greater freedom and artistic range.

In 1955 Smith quit the magazine, and two years later he left his family and moved into a derelict loft building in New York's wholesale flower district. The dilapidated five-story walk-up at 821 Sixth Avenue, where Smith lived...
and worked for nearly a decade, was an after-hours hangout for jazz musicians who drifted by throughout the night for ad-hoc jam and rap sessions. Smith shot more than a thousand rolls of film at the loft—and he also wired the entire building with microphones, from the sidewalk to the top floor, recording more than four thousand hours of audio tape, capturing every creak and conversation, as well as the nocturnal life of a musical generation. On these tapes, the steady trickle of water in Smith's darkroom blended with the brake-and-throttle chug of the Sixth Avenue bus. Musicians told stories, laughed and bummed cigarettes, passed joints and Rheingold beers. Sometimes the music soared; sometimes it went nowhere. Hot-dog wrappers and paper cups blew down Sixth Avenue. At dawn the flower shops opened and daily routines reemerged, never exactly the same, always responding to the weather. Smith listened, and watched.

Roughly half of the photographs Smith shot at his loft showed what was happening inside—the jazz scene—and these include an extraordinary portrait gallery: Thelonious Monk and Zoot Sims are there, and so are Roland Kirk, Bill Evans, Chick Corea, and Albert Ayler, along with scores of underground legends and more obscure figures. The rest of Smith's work on Sixth Avenue showed what he saw going on outside—the view from his window of life on the streets below. These are the photographs he had in mind when he wrote to Ansel Adams, "Always there is the window. It forever seduces me away from my work in this cold-water flat. I breathe and smile and quicken and languish in appreciation of it, the proscenium arch with me on the third stage looking it down and up and bent along the sides and the whole audience in performance down before me, an ever-changing pandemonium of delicate details and habitual rhythms."

Smith's friend, the great street photographer Robert Frank, said, "Gene went from a public journalist to a private artist in the loft," and Smith's tape recorder tells us that he knew it at the time. One hot night at the jazz loft in September of 1961, Sonny Clark was nodding out in the hallway and musicians were calling up from the street, gathering to jam. Smith was packing to depart for Japan the next day. A reel-to-reel tape picked up the sixteen-year-old girlfriend of a junkie saxophonist, asking the photographer about his name. "What's the W stand for?" she asks, and Smith tells her, "Wonderful."

—Sam Stephenson
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