

Photographer, Not Farmer

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These images are paired with NPR's Exclusive First Listen feature on Bill Frisell's new album Disfarmer.

Music inspired by photography is not unheard of. Film scores, for one, rely heavily on visuals to tell a musical narrative, as the story in turn relies on the music. Jazz guitarist Bill Frisell has taken the idea to another level with a new album *Disfarmer*, inspired by the lifetime photographic corpus of Mike Disfarmer.

Disfarmer seems an unusual name — and that's because the man made it up. Born Michael Meyer to immigrant German parents in 1884, he changed his name to indicate a rift with both his kin and his agrarian surroundings — believing Meyer to be German for "farmer." This alone might set him apart as singularly unusual, but his vocation as a small town portraitist in Heber Springs, Ark. estranged him still further from his farming contemporaries.

His photographs trace the emotional ebb and flow of town life from World War I to the Great Depression, from the solemn scene before World War II to the war's more optimistic aftermath. A notoriously unfriendly oddity, Disfarmer's presence behind the camera hardly elicited grins from the townsfolk. His eccentricities and social quirks are palpable in his portraits: the subjects

stand solemnly, often awkwardly — a token of their unfamiliarity with a big camera as well as Disfarmer's personality.

This somewhat recently assembled collection of photographs provides a rare big-picture portrait of a small town and all its various faces. Chuck Helm, director of performing arts at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, had a hunch that musician Bill Frisell would be inspired by Disfarmer's photography. He could not have been more correct.

In Frisell's words:

I try to picture what went on in Disfarmer's mind. How did he really feel about the people in this town? What was he thinking? What did he see? We'll never know, but as I write the music, I'd like to imagine it coming from his point of view. The sound of him looking through the lens.

Take a listen to Frisell's album *Disfarmer* while clicking through these images. The haunting reverberations of steel guitar and melancholy strings will transport you to an era mostly lost to American memory — save what's preserved in these photos. Read more about the album and the photos on NPR music.