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PHOTOGRAPHER BILL HAYES CAPTURES NYC STREET LIFE IN NEW
BOOK

By Peter Stamelman, March 30, 2018



Author and photographer Bill Hayes is originally from Spokane, Washington, a city not usually associated with strolling, or with producing flaneurs. But Hayes does love walking and he does love taking pictures.

Author and photographer Bill Hayes. Photo by Walter Kurtz

As the Paris Review says, the flaneur is not just a stroller, but a “passionate wanderer emblematic of 19th-century French literary culture.”

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“Strictly speaking, I don’t consider myself a flaneur,” Hayes said. “In fact, I’m afraid I wasn’t even aware of the French tradition of flaner. I had, of course, read Susan Sontag’s ‘On Photography’ [Sontag has a chapter on flaner and street photography in the book] and although I do love much of Sontag’s nonfiction, that particular book never made a huge impact on me. I think I found it a little too self-consciously contrary — especially her words on [Diane] Arbus!”

I ask Hayes how he would describe his style of photography.

“Well, certainly street photography is a good description. But I never set out to ‘be’ something, or act in some ‘way,’ particularly with a camera,” he said. “Instead, my taking up a camera and exploring New York came from a combination of natural curiosity, intense loneliness (my longtime partner in San Francisco had died unexpectedly and suddenly not too long before I moved to NYC and I didn’t know many people here) and simple joy in what I was discovering and seeing. And a desire to create pictures (which were at first simply for myself), something which I had wanted to do for a long, long time.”

Of the 150 images in the book, some fifteen were taken in Brooklyn. Among the most memorable: two cooks on a break behind a deli in Brooklyn Heights, a Crown Heights couple bundled up and holding hands on a blustery winter’s day and two moving men playing cards in the back of their van in Greenpoint. Hayes possesses the rare gift of making the quotidian look singular.

I begin the interview by asking him if he was intimidated by all the New York street photographers who have preceded him.

The following are edited excerpts of our conversation.

Brooklyn Eagle: With so many iconic New York City street photographers - Berenice Abbott, Paul Strand, Sid Grossman, Helen Levitt, Ruth Orkin - having already photographed so encyclopedically, were you worried that there was nothing new to capture?

Bill Hayes: (Laughing) No, I wasn’t worried because this is my experience of New York, my New York. I wasn’t trying to imitate someone else but just to photograph the city the way I saw it and the way I was exploring it. And the truth is that, at the outset when I moved here, I didn’t have in mind that I would do a book and have a show. I was doing a fair amount of picture-taking and in the process falling in love with New York City.

Eagle: And you moved here from San Francisco?

BH: Well, I moved here in 2009 from San Francisco, where I had lived for 25 years, but I’m originally from Spokane. I was raised in Spokane and went to college in the Bay Area. So before I moved here, all my life had been spent on the West Coast.

Eagle: Who were the photographers who influenced you?

BH: I wouldn’t say “influenced,” I would say “inspired” me. The top three would definitely be Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand and Peter Hujar.

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Eagle: So that's your holy trinity?

BH: Yes. And Arbus I discovered very early. As I mentioned, I grew up in Spokane. There was only one nice bookstore. And when I was about 14 or 15 I discovered the classic 'Aperture Monograph.' And it made a huge impact for its view of New York City, for its subject matter. Also for the really straight-forward, clean way she takes portraits — very straight on. (Laughing) That definitely had a lasting impact on me.

Eagle: And what about Winogrand?

BH: It wasn't until later that I got to know Winogrand's work. When I moved to San Francisco, one of my first jobs was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. And the same year I started there, Sandra Philips was appointed curator of photography. Now I was just this low-level person working in the communications office, but I wrote the press release for her appointment and we got to know each other. And she used to let me tag along while she was assembling and putting together shows. Every lunch break, I'd be following her around, from gallery to gallery. And during my time there she did a seminal Winogrand show. So I learned a lot about Winogrand and fell in love with his work. Different from Arbus ... I loved the speed of his work and the joy he took in photographing New York City. Now my New York City work is very different from his; I'm doing portraits and his work was much more "invisible" street photography.

Eagle: Now during all this time were you yourself photographing?

BH: No, and I think that's important for you to understand. I was not photographing. I didn't pick up a camera and start photographing until 2007. But in all those years I was absorbing and paying attention and I loved photography. I was always going to gallery and museum photography shows and I began to imagine the kind of photography I wanted to do. So when the time finally came I was just ready.

Eagle: can you talk a bit about Peter Hujar, the third photographer who inspired you?

BH: Hujar came later, around the time when [Robert] Mapplethorpe sort of exploded. I was very interested in Mapplethorpe's work for sure but I was more drawn to Hujar, whose work I find more restrained, of course [compared to Mapplethorpe], and more elegant. He did do street photography but it is his portraits I really love. I think what I'm trying to do with my photograph is to bring that same Hujar elegance, that same sort of hushed quality, to my street photography.

Eagle: So at what point did you begin photographing?

BH: When I moved to New York City in 2009 is when I seriously began photographing. I had bought a camera in 2007 in San Francisco and did a little bit there, but San Francisco doesn't have the kind of street life that we have here. But when I moved here I almost immediately went out and started taking the kind of photographs that I still take today and that are in "How New York Breaks Your Heart."

Eagle: Were you still an avid photography exhibition-goer? Did you see shows at Museum of Modern Art, at the Metropolitan, the Whitney Museum of American Art?

BH: Yes, always, often with my late partner Oliver Sacks. He was knowledgeable about a lot of things and not surprisingly he was extremely knowledgeable about the history of photography. As a boy he had loved chemistry, so much so that he

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wanted to be a chemist. And he had his own darkroom at home and he loved the chemistry of photography. So he knew a lot about that side of photography. And we went to see everything from 19 century photography exhibitions to contemporary shows at galleries.

Eagle: How did you and Oliver first meet?

BH: We met when Oliver wrote me a letter. I was still living in San Francisco at the time (2008) and out of the blue I got a letter in the mail with the return address "Oliver Sacks." Of course I knew his work, but nothing more. He had read my most recent book "The Anatomist," a nonfiction narrative account of the story behind the 19th-century classic text "Gray's Anatomy." He simply wrote to say how much he'd enjoyed it. I wrote back and then a correspondence ensued. We met in person once before I actually moved to New York, but we didn't become involved and fall in love until after I moved here. We would go often on Friday or Saturday nights to the Met to see exhibits. [Note: Oliver Sacks died in August of 2015.]

Eagle: When you were shooting the photos for this book, did you literally carry your camera with you every time you leave your apartment. And do you always leave the apartment with a plan, an itinerary?

BH: No, it's much more random. Sometimes I would leave the apartment and not even be sure in which direction I was going to set out. But my approach to the material is still the same as the very first day I started photographing: I always ask permission. I always say, "May I take your picture?" So my photos became on-the-spot portraits. Even my earliest pictures have that same straight-on portraiture feeling. And, at first, I only took the photographs for myself and for Oliver.

Eagle: What made you decide to go public?

BH: A couple of things: More and more of my friends and my family saw them and liked them and that gave me confidence I suppose. But really the turning point was writing my memoir "Insomniac City," which came out last year. The book has an unconventional structure; it's composed of essays, vignettes, letters, journal entries and street photographs. And it felt very natural; photography seemed like another way to tell stories. The photographs in the book come and go, like people one encounters on the street. So I wove into ["Insomniac City"] about 40 photographs; they don't come with stories, they just appear. And the reaction to them really surprised me: people really liked them! And that convinced me to do a complete book of photographs and "How New York Breaks Your Heart" seemed like a good title.

Eagle: An excellent title for an exceptional collection of images. Here's to your taking many more!

"How New York Breaks Your Heart" is published by Bloomsbury USA. For more information, go to www.bloomsbury.com.