

# Listening to pictures



BackBeat  
with Cornelius Thomas

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Chet Baker and Russ Freeman in Hollywood, 1954.  
(From William Claxton's *Jazz Photography*.)



Beale Street Jug Band, New Orleans, 1960.  
(From William Claxton's *Jazz Photography*.)

**T**HE ART of jazz photography has begun to enjoy recognition long overdue.

First visual jazz historians William Gottlieb (*The Golden Age of Jazz*) and Herman Leonard (*The Special Photographers Library*) and Basil Breakey (*Beyond the Blues*) became icons of the art of giving jazz an aesthetic aspect.

In 1997 Taschen took a plunge and published William Claxton's *Jazz Photography*. The result was a combo of delightful photographs covering the lowly street musician to the conservatory trained sophisticate in the period 1952 to 1995.

Growing up in California in the 1940s and '50s, the youthful Claxton (born circa 1933), listened to Duke Ellington, Lena Horne and Tommy Dorsey and pasted the West Coast sound pictures into his scrapbooks. He yearned to become part of that magical world.

About his fascination with jazz musicians Claxton says on the [williamclaxton.com](http://williamclaxton.com) website: "First, and most important, I love their music. But I am also fascinat-

ed by the diverse qualities they possess. They have ingenuousness, a sort of open, innocent attitude. I am just as intrigued by the movements and body language of musicians while they play."

Claxton also explains his method, saying: "I study them carefully before photographing them, much as I would study a dancer, an actor (and) I note how their faces or bodies reflect or catch the light; when and at what angles they look their best. When I feel I have a visual grasp of the subject, I press the shutter release."

The results of Claxton's photographs are plays on light and shade, mood and emotion.

The key to his success, Claxton reckons, boils down to a simple belief:

"There is beauty in all kinds of human beings."

Claxton believes that photography (and jazz, of course) constitutes an international language.

Thus in his book, *Young Chet*, he states that "Photography is jazz for the eye." Flipping through William

Claxton's *Jazz Photography*, I found this observation easy to understand.

● While banners may not boast it, the undercurrent of jazz pulses strongly on the local front. And the city is continually blessed with visiting and resident jazz musicians.

Local jazz talents Stirling High's Lindelwa Dalamba and Siya Makuzeni last week won South African Music Rights Organisation bursaries; the powerhouse voice of Africa, Stompie Mavi, treated fans this week; Another Level maintains its crisp course of winelight jazz.

But there's more.

This weekend The Basics vocalist Cizario Roberts will entertain fans of jazz singing at the Steakhouse in Parkside while at Smokey Swallows in Vincent the Alan Webster Quartet will soothe the end of the week with mainstream instrumental jazz.

Heard the grapevine buzz that South Africa's own Lady Day, Esther Miller — currently on tour in the United Kingdom — may be coming to East London.