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11-7-2018

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Recommended Citation

Monroe, Gary, "South Beach, 1977-1986: Photographs." (2018). *Study the South*. 14.
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STUDY *the* SOUTH



SOUTH BEACH: 1977-1986 PHOTOGRAPHS

SOUTH BEACH, 1977-1986 PHOTOGRAPHS

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY GARY MONROE
PUBLISHED: NOVEMBER 7, 2018

South Beach was remarkable when I photographed there, which was almost daily from 1977 to 1986. Actually, it was for a longer period, but that decade constitutes my being fully turned over to making visual sense of life there, which was unlike life anywhere else. Of course, Jewish communities existed from coast to coast, but South Beach, located on the tip of the island of Miami Beach, was cocooned and isolated. Few tourists had reason to go to South Beach then.

I am from there; I was born and lived there. When I wasn't there I was likely photographing in Haiti; otherwise I was walking the streets of South Beach endlessly. Old-world Jewry thrived with a tropical twist. It was where Jews came to be together in their latter years. In its way, it was a sacred place. These were the Jews of the Greatest Generation, Holocaust survivors among them; refugees from the cold northeast; working-class retirees. The average age was well into retirement. It's hard, if even possible, for a twenty-something (me, then) to have accurately gauged the average age of its residents, yearlong and seasonal, but I'd have said eightyish.

My plan was to spend a decade living within that community and photographing what I sensed would be the final years of a remarkable epoch, so I returned home to South Beach after graduate school at the University of Colorado at Boulder and got to work. Ten years later, the Art Deco movement, along with other forces, including *Miami Vice*, the Mariel boatlift, and

plans to redevelop Sixth Street South to Government Cut, contributed to economic development, causing the demise of the old-world traditions before attrition would have taken its toll.

The lifestyle vanished like it had never happened. In fact, every year of that decade, I photographed the New Year's Eve parties that hoteliers had thrown for their guests along Ocean Drive and Collins Avenue, and by the eighth year I noticed the celebrations becoming fewer and less celebratory. This was a barometer for the vibrancy of South Beach Jewry. The last year I did this was in 1988. By then there were just three parties, and they were very lackluster. No longer did local politicians pander for votes by dishing out Dixie cups of vanilla ice cream and singing in Yiddish at the tiny bandstand by the beach at Ninth Street.

I felt alone in my sense of loss. It seemed no one else cared much. There were still social organizations there, but my interests were something else . . . sentient, spiritual, knowing from the inside. I am a conservative Jew. My bar mitzvah was at Temple Emanu-El with the reception at the Fontainebleau Hotel. Growing up, the Seifs were my neighbors. Cantor Seif was the most recognized *mohel* (ritual circumciser) in all of Miami, so I had Orthodox awareness. However, the real influence was in the air: it was the place itself that was unequivocally defined by a rare ethos.

I do not think of myself as a documentarian, nor do I possess journalistic interests. Further, I am loath to refer to myself as an artist. I was there and responded to what I deemed interesting, with each release of my Leica's shutter as a sort of affirmation. I've long been amazed (horrified, actually) by those who found my photographs "funny," who found so rich a humanity a source of amusement. That's fortunately been the least of responses, but nevertheless puzzling. Perhaps it is because we see the elderly as if they are of another world, alienated from our fast-paced, self-absorbed, youth-oriented culture. Maybe it's because of a fear of our own mortality. In a way, though, the elderly Jews of South Beach did live in another world, by circumstance and by choice. The subsequent generation of Jews and certainly the one succeeding them—mine—are by and large Americanized Jews. We are assimilated. These photographs give testimony that the aged can remain vital. These people are the ultimate survivors, who lived life fully to the end.



Sunrise Swimmers, 1978

People congregated regularly at Tenth Street Beach to begin the morning in a therapeutic ocean. This practice ceased in 1981, soon after the Mariel boatlift. At that time South Beach offered the cheapest real estate in Greater Miami. So refugees located there, and crime soared. Then the elderly were easy pickings. They no longer made their ways to the beach for sunrise.



Morning Prayer, 1982

There was considerable orthodoxy in South Beach. Many of the hotels along Ocean Drive, Collins Avenue, and Washington Avenue converted card rooms and social halls into makeshift *shuls* (synagogues) to accommodate their clientele's needs of twice-daily prayer. The *shuls* are gone, replaced by bars and restaurants and clubs.



Men Playing Chess by Earl LePan Mural, 1978

Here Orthodox men play chess in front of an Earl LePan mural. LePan painted murals in a few South Beach hotels.



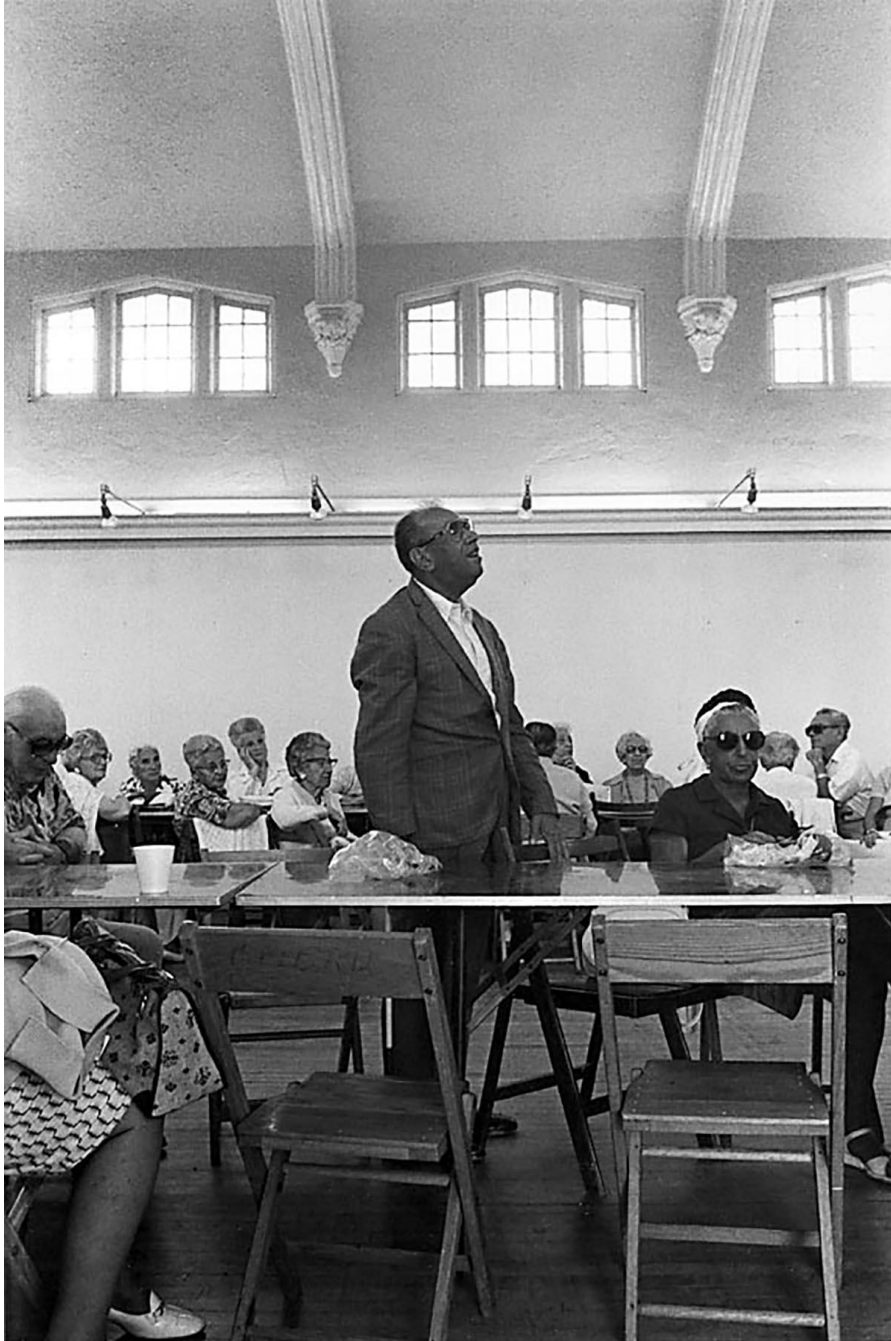
Couple with Daughter in Lummus Park, 1984

South Beach was a place of camaraderie, where the elderly practiced religious traditions and enjoyed one another in a relatively closed community. It was indeed a lively, joyous place. But there was another side: poverty, illness, loneliness, and wartime suffering were also parts of the reality.



Woman with Caregiver, 1984

The high-rises along West Avenue and Bay Road went up in the 1960s. These, like residences on the islands and above Lincoln Road, weren't quite in sync with what we think about when we think about the South Beach of that time, if we think about that lost community at all. We think instead, rightly, of what characterized that remarkable community: the ending of a historic lineage whose roots extend back to Czarist pogroms and through the Nazi holocaust, to Ellis Island and throughout the northeast, until winding down here, making South Beach the last resort. Indeed, in spite of social services, few could afford caregivers. Here, a couple shops along Washington Avenue.



Meeting of the Miami Beach Guild for the Blind, 1977

Support groups were common in South Beach. The people were also politically active, with Zionism being a battle cry. The Miami Beach Guild for the Blind met at the 21st Street Community Center, in a fine Mediterranean-designed building, located at the north end of the Miami Beach Convention Center on Washington Avenue. On Tuesday and Friday evenings, the area by the building was blanketed by hundreds of elderly people dancing away, often to a live band that played in a band shell, which overlooked the terrazzo dance floor.



People Socializing in Lummus Park, 1984

Between Fifth Street and Fourteenth Street is Lummus Park, a stretch of greenery that separates the beach from the hotels along Ocean Drive.



Lone Swimmer, 1980

A man swims parallel to the shore at Ninth Street. (I often entered the ocean with my Leica, chest deep.)



Women Leaving the Beach, 1977

The iconic coral rock wall that is between Lummus Park and the public beaches remains in tact today, but it somehow looks different. The enhanced landscaping, the increased sidewalk activity across the street, and the preponderance of cars vying for spots, or just preening for attention, no doubt contribute to the perceptual difference. That and everyone is young.



Woman Sitting in Hotel Courtyard, 1980

Much time was spent, it appeared, waiting. As vibrant a place as South Beach was, there was also a sense of loneliness, of solitude and reflection.



Woman Watching Television, 1983

In a Washington Avenue hotel, a woman sits alone watching television.



Man Covering a "Graven" Image, 1983

In a makeshift *shul* at the Tudor Hotel, an Orthodox man, finding the framed print not fitting for a place of worship, covers it before a Friday evening prayer service. Sabbath begins at sunset on Fridays and extends to sunset on Saturday.



Lobby of Aster Hotel, 1984

Solitude aside, South Beach was a vibrant social place then. Activities and clubs abounded, and lobbies were places to socialize, or wait for a meal if the hotel offered them.



Woman in Dining Room of the An-Nell Hotel, 1984

Some hotels offered meal plans, a leftover function from the more halcyon days of American-plan vacations to Miami Beach. Rooms were without kitchens, although some had kitchenettes. There were other communal activities, including bingo, live vaudeville-type entertainment, and the lighting of *Shabbos* candles which Orthodox Jewish women light on Friday at sunset. Fire marshals prohibited this ritual being done in one's room, so at certain hotels it was done in the lobbies.



People Attending a Seder Dinner, 1980

People partake in a Seder dinner for the Passover holiday at the Blackstone Hotel. South Beach was indeed a Jewish place. Although not the only one of its type in America, it was certainly the primary tropical version. It was isolated, and culturally rich. It was not uncommon to see a man or woman with a few numbers tattooed along their forearms, but this wasn't a topic for discussion. Grandchildren, Israel, and the daily news were more topical points.



Man in His Room at the An-Nell Hotel, 1984

The interior of South Beach was lined with street after street of modest apartment buildings, from Washington Avenue all the way west to Biscayne Bay.



Round Dance at Pier Park, 1977

Round dances were held weekly at Pier Park. The park was demolished long ago, along with the fishing pier. Women in South Beach outnumbered men.



New Year's Eve, 1983

With the proverbial foot in the grave, it is noteworthy, if not moving, that these elderly people who had seen and often endured too much, would greet both the days and the new year joyously, with optimism and a zest for life. Most hoteliers threw New Year's Eve parties for their guests, making South Beach especially lively that night of the year.

Gary Monroe, a native of Miami Beach, received a master's degree in fine arts from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1977. Upon returning home, he photographed the old-world Jewish community that characterized South Beach. Since 1984 he has photographed throughout Haiti, and later looked at tourism across Florida, especially the "rite of passage" of vacationers at Disney World. He also wanders aimlessly to photograph in other countries—Brazil, Israel, Cuba, India, Trinidad, Poland, France, Russia, and Egypt, to name a few. Recently he has been looking at the landscape, especially the transformation of place as a result of corporate-driven planning. His website is www.garymonroe.net.



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