

STEVEN  
KASHER  
GALLERY

the guardian

## KING IN NEW YORK: DOCUMENTING MARTIN LUTHER KING'S CONNECTION WITH THE CITY

By Nadja Sayej, February 1, 2018



This year marks the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination, one of the darkest moments in American history.

Continuing throughout Black History Month, the Museum of the City of New York is taking a unique look at the life of the civil rights leader in an exhibition of 45 black-and-white photographs that unveils King's relationship with New York.

"It illuminates a dimension of King that is often overlooked in his relation to New York and the city's role in the black freedom movement," said Whitney Donhauser, the museum director.

The exhibition traces King's sermons in Harlem churches, his preparations backstage at Carnegie Hall and speeches at the United Nations, and his quieter, off-the-record moments with supporters, friends and fellow activists, including women, who were much less photographed in political circles at that time.

According to the exhibition curator Sarah Seidman, the exhibition is meant to show a lesser-known side of King, who was well connected with locals and held some of his most powerful anti-war rallies in the city.

# STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

“This exhibition looks at his views on global politics, the war on Vietnam, foreign policy issues, poverty and capitalism thoughts throughout his life,” she said. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence New York City offers a more nuanced and complex look at this radical figure.”

The photographers who captured King include Harlem photojournalist Benedict J Fernandez, Fred McDarrah, a photographer who shot for the Village Voice, and Builder Levy, a street photographer who was known to have an eye for social justice.

Among the highlights are photos of King at his earliest guest sermons at the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine in 1956, and one at the Park Sheraton hotel in midtown Manhattan in 1962.

Despite his close association, King never lived in New York City – he was born in Atlanta and spent time in Chicago – but the exhibition suggests he was accepted by New Yorkers as one of their own.

“He was in awe of New York and that sentiment was returned,” said Seidman. “He spoke to New Yorkers as they were; activists and people in a global city, and it’s part of a much larger black freedom struggle, which is highlighted here, as well.”

One photo from 1964 shows King petitioning a press conference at Gracie Mansion, where then New York mayor Robert Wagner was speaking. King was asking for Wagner to create a committee to investigate police violence after a teenage boy in Harlem was shot by an NYPD officer. That same year, Wagner awarded King the title of “an honorary New Yorker”.

The exhibition is divided into three sections; King on the New York Stage, which focuses on his public persona in the city; King on the Global Stage, which shows how he was able to reach a global stage through New York; and Remembering King, which traces how New Yorkers mourned his assassination in Memphis in 1968.

“New York City was really the site of his anti-war activism,” said Seidman. “He felt the war impacted African Americans and how we need a revolution of values.”

In several photos, King is mobbed by supporters, just one small face in a sea of people. It offers a window into what his busy day-to-day. “King struggled a lot with his celebrity because it garnered resentment from other leaders of the civil rights movement,” said Seidman. “He looks sombre in a lot of these photos, which was inherent to him as a person.”

In some photos, his facial expressions reflected his message. “So many of his speeches were uplifting and positive, but not all of them,” she said. “His speeches in New York City were offered as warnings, and that is reflected in his look.”

While the city offers the backdrop for some of King’s most memorable speeches, it also sheds light on how he found like-minded people in a revolutionary time. “He challenged the status quo,” said Seidman. “His legacy is continuing to be fought and we want to make sure he’s properly celebrated and the breadth of his knowledge is acknowledged.”