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THE URBAN LENS: BILL HAYES CAPTURES NEW YORKERS AS THEY
ARE – HEARTBREAKINGLY REAL

By Hannah Frishberg, May 25, 2018



6sqft's series The Urban Lens invites photographers to share work exploring a theme or a place within New York City. In this installment, Bill Hayes shares photos from his book "How New York Breaks Your Heart". Are you a photographer who'd like to see your work featured on The Urban Lens? Get in touch with us at tips@6sqft.com.

A writer, Guggenheim Fellow, photographer and, since 2009, a New Yorker, Bill Hayes is quite familiar with the beautiful and painful ways New York City can play with the human heart. He recently published a book of his many portraits of the city's inhabitants, "How New York Breaks Your Heart," showing in black and white and living color some of the city's many faces, all very real and alive and core to this city's aura. We spoke with Hayes, a West Village resident, about the book, the city and its people.

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Why'd you move to New York?

My move to New York was triggered by tragic circumstances in San Francisco. I had a longtime partner who died suddenly, and I realized I had to start fresh in a new city, so I bought a one-way ticket. I was already established as a writer – I'd published three books – but photography was something I was ready for. I'd see photographs in my mind as I walked down the street. So, I didn't imagine I'd do the amount of work I'd done or have a book and a show but I just kept taking pictures and for a long time I'd never shown anyone, but by the time it came to putting together this book I had 20,000 to choose from.

But really, this was a way to explore New York, my new hometown. Some of the neighborhoods, I would hop on the subway and get out some place – Washington Heights, Brooklyn, The Bronx – and just walk around. I'd approach a person or a family or a couple and say, can I take your picture? And that's been my method.

What are some of the ways New York has broken your heart?

It's broken my heart but also mended it and opened it. I think one's heart can be broken even by beauty. There's so much beauty in the city, it can be almost painful sometimes. I'd say my heart gets broken once a week, but also really opened up and mended. I'm often asked, "What do you love about New York so much?" Because there's so much about living in New York that's hard: I just love New Yorkers. It may sound cliché but it's true. When I have been at my most brokenhearted or lonely I tell myself to get out of my apartment and take a walk, because something interesting or good always happens.

I think anytime you fall in love, whether with a person or a city or something you're passionate about, there's a risk of getting your heart broken or bruised, and that's part of the experience. I hope that's what the book of photographs is about. The diversity of the city is what I hope I've captured in "How New York Breaks Your Heart."

Was it difficult deciding which photos to print in color and which in black and white?

I make that decision when I edit my photographs. So when I'm out on the streets of New York, I have my Sony camera programmed so I can see things in black and white through the viewfinder, but it's really only when I get home and look at the image in black and white and color that I decide. I actually feel like color is a higher bar to meet, like a photo has to beg to be in color. One example is that photograph of Ilona, the elderly woman with bright orange hair wearing turquoise and green. That was a photo that I tried in black and white but it just begged to be in color.

Where did you find Ilona?

I found her exactly in that spot, as I do with most of my subjects. I was walking around the city, I walked through Jackson Square Park, and she was sitting there exactly like that. She was really a vision. She's well under five-feet tall, very tiny – a vivacious elderly woman. I just walked right up to her and said exactly what I was feeling, which is exactly what I do: You are fabulous, can I take your picture? She said of course. Ilona is a little bit of an unusual case because we did stay in touch, I've photographed her three or four times since then.

Do you ask all of your subjects before you take their photo?

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In almost every case, like 98 percent of the time, I ask first. That has been my approach since the very beginning. I began taking photos when I moved to New York in the spring of 2009. I knew what kind of photography I wanted to do—portrait photography. It's a combination of respect for the subject and it's kind of a creative challenge too, because the subject is aware that I'm taking their picture. There's an implicit involvement, trust, but I also have to work so quickly to capture an open expression without it turning into a posed picture. Fifty percent of the time people say no [to having their picture taken], and I respect that, I understand that, and I've probably missed a great number of pictures because of that.

Do you feel nostalgic for New York's gone, grittier days?

From a young age, I had a time machine fantasy of what period in the history of the world I would go to, and it was always NYC in the 1970s. Partly that's because I grew up in a small town in Washington State on the opposite side of the country, but we subscribed to New York and Look magazines in the '70s and I was very inspired by those images of New York. I'd take all kinds of black and white street photos.

Tell me about the black and white photo of the boy in front of the bus?

He's a young man about to board a bus. I had an appointment in Midtown and I decided to walk home instead of taking the subway. I came upon this crowd of young musicians. I saw this young man and I said, can I take your picture? And he just locked eyes with my camera and held that beautiful gaze.

I wasn't trying to sequence the photos in exact chronological order, so I wanted the reader, as you page through the book, to have this feeling of almost taking a dream walk through New York City with regard to time or season. Some pictures look like they could maybe be from the 1970s and some could've been taken yesterday.

Are there any things on New York City's streets you don't like to photograph, and consciously avoid taking pictures of?

To be honest, I don't tend to take pictures of children. There are a few family pictures. Certainly, because I would not want to do that without a parent's permission. Also, if you ask a kid, can you take a picture, they say sure and they give the practiced, posed camera smile they give their parents, and that doesn't interest me. Sometimes I take those pictures and then they don't work out; that's a decision I make when I'm editing. I may think I have a great picture and then I look at it and say no, it's really too self-conscious, and there's a fine line between self-conscious and openness.

Do you find Manhattan the most inspiring borough in NYC, or just the most convenient?

I can't say it's the most inspiring, they all inspire me differently. It's where I live, it's where I take a lot of pictures in the book. Just by virtue of living here. It's always fun to explore the boroughs.

You told the Brooklyn Daily Eagle that at first you only took photographs for yourself and Oliver Sacks – who did you take these photos for? And did you somehow find a way to abstractly incorporate Oliver's memory?

I feel like the book is in some ways almost a sequel to this memoir I wrote which was published a year ago, and the memoir takes you up to the day after Oliver's death. So in a lot of ways "How New York Beaks Your Heart" is about dealing with all of those feelings and the city being there to console. If you open yourself up the city opens itself up to you.

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There definitely is a narrative to the book. I think as I started to show the photos to people they became not just for Oliver but for anyone who has the romantic view of New York that I have.