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HE WAS THE VISUAL VOICE OF THE VILLAGE VOICE

By Dwight Garner – Critic's Notebook – September 6, 2018



The cameras that Fred W. McDarrah carried — a boxy old Rolleicord, and later a battered 35-millimeter Nikon S2 — weren't special. Nor was he, not in his own mind. He was a bit of a square, he admitted, and an unlikely chronicler of the bohemian world he saw coming into view in Greenwich Village in the mid-1950s.

What McDarrah (1926-2007) had was a drive to document, in galleries and lofts and cafes and bars, the painters, musicians, critics, bookstore owners and Beat-era poets and writers he sensed were making a new world, one that would spark the counterculture of the 1960s. "I was a groupie at heart," he wrote later. "I wanted to be part of the action. My camera was my diary, my ticket of admission, my way of remembering, preserving, proving that I had been there when it all happened."

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McDarrah was the first staff photographer at The Village Voice, America's Ur-alternative weekly, founded in 1955. He'd been roommates with Dan Wolf, one of the paper's founders. Wolf had seen the kinetic photographs McDarrah was taking when he wasn't at his day job in advertising on Madison Avenue.

McDarrah would go on to work for The Voice for 50 years. I wrote frequently for the paper in the late '80s and early '90s, but I met him only once. He was as unpretentious as they come. His mailbox at The Voice was marked "McPhoto."

A new book that collects the best of his work, "Fred W. McDarrah: New York Scenes," is one that some people, myself very much included, have been awaiting for a long time. Its publication will be accompanied by an exhibition of McDarrah's photographs at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan, which will run from Sept. 20 through Nov. 3.

It's a book like few others. McDarrah had an inflamed curiosity, great feelers and an ability to capture liquid moments. He was in the right place at the right time, for sure, and caught a subculture in situ. He also had hustle. "When the chance came for him to make the most" of his moment, the historian Sean Wilentz writes in his excellent introduction, "he didn't blow it."

It was grim news when The Village Voice closed for good last week. This book is a reminder that the paper had a visual style as well as a literary and journalistic one. That style was largely McDarrah's: candid, skeptical, fun-loving, humane.

Some of these photographs are well known; poster-size versions have been stuck with Fun-Tak to dorm room walls since forever. Exhibit A: A photograph of Bob Dylan on a park bench in the winter of 1965, squinting into the sun, his lips chapped, offering a salute. (This book includes a McDarrah photograph of Dylan singing with Karen Dalton at Cafe Wha? when he was 19 and had moved to New York two weeks earlier.) Exhibit B: Allen Ginsberg in what he called his "Uncle Sam hat" at an anti-Vietnam War rally in Central Park in 1966.

Others you sense you've seen before and, lo, you have, like McDarrah's photograph of Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Noam Chomsky and others setting off on the 1967 March on the Pentagon. This photo would later appear on the dust jacket of Mailer's "Armies of the Night" (1968).

Many others should be famous. These include desolate and haunted photographs of Robert F. Kennedy and Jack Kerouac, the geekiest picture anyone ever took of Leonard Cohen, and the poet Frank O'Hara looking impishly angelic, as if freshly fallen from a Michelangelo fresco, on closing night of the original Cedar Tavern in 1963.

There's a photograph of an unshaven Dustin Hoffman on West 11th Street, taken in March 1970. There's a cop behind him. McDarrah didn't snap this image because he was chasing celebrity. He took it because the Weathermen had blown up the building next door and Hoffman was out in the street. McDarrah knew about the bombing almost instantly because his son was in a nursery school three doors down. He'd been called to pick him up because of the blast.

Women in the Beat era were often viewed, to quote the title of Joyce Johnson's indelible memoir, as "Minor Characters." They are not minor characters in McDarrah's chronicle. He pays special attention to the women artists, Alice Neel, Lee Krasner, Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou, among others.

McDarrah was also an essential chronicler of the dawn of the gay rights era. He attended protests small and large. He was there the warm night in 1969 when the Stonewall Inn was raided by the police and protests ensued. Years later, at an event marking the 25th anniversary of Stonewall, McDarrah was asked why he took only 19 photos that evening. "Who knew?" he replied, to laughter in the room.

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“Though not gay,” Ginsberg wrote about McDarrah, “a hard laboring family man, he’s made photo records of gay parades for decades — sign of a real artist’s inquisitive sympathy, intelligent democracy.”

There’s much more in this book, which moves as if in panorama from the late ’50s, when the Abstract Expressionists and New York School painters wore skinny ties and dark suits — yes, that’s Jasper Johns playing Skee-Ball in a bar in 1959 — through photographs of John Belushi and Jann Wenner at Studio 54 in 1977.

You sense McDarrah’s heart wasn’t in these final images. There are fewer photographs from the late ’70s than from earlier eras; the pickings, for a learned and well-read observer, were slimmer.

Two photographs from the late 1970s do eat into your retinas: images of Donald J. Trump and his father, the developer Fred Trump. With his dyed eyebrows and mustache, his acutely white teeth and his tuxedo, Fred Trump resembles a cut-rate magician who’s wandered into the Sherry-Netherland. The junior Trump throws a sleepy lothario’s glare, that of a soft lion too sated to eat you.

There are other things to say about McDarrah. His street photographs rival those of Helen Levitt. He was a riveting working photojournalist. His 1967 photograph of a bloodied and chained LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), who had been beaten while in police custody during riots in Newark, is one for the ages.

To the details in “Fred W. McDarrah: New York Scenes,” attention has been paid. Mr. Wilentz’s introduction is a seamless blend of the personal — his father, the Greenwich Village bookstore owner Eli Wilentz, was a friend and collaborator of McDarrah — and the historical. An afterword, credited only to McDarrah’s estate, fills in the grainier details of the photographer’s legacy.

Best of all are this book’s captions, edited by Richard Slovak. They are compact but resonant. They take you places you don’t expect to go. Beneath a photograph of the New York Mayor John V. Lindsay during the 1968 sanitation strike, for example, we’re reminded that Memphis called a sanitation strike of its own, inspired by this one. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis in support of it when he was assassinated.

The captions nearly always tell you whose loft you are seeing — you want to be able to pinch and expand the details — what bar you’re in, who’s there, and when possible what later happened to the people in the image. There is a lot of circumambient madness that the captions help pin down. They’re models of the genre, history in capsule form.

About his photographs from 1959, McDarrah wrote: “Everybody is young, proud, and beautiful; we are all frozen in time.” His subjects may be frozen yet they continue to impart all manner of frissons, comic, tragic and otherwise.

“I wonder if you’re like me,” Denis Johnson wrote in “The Largesse of the Sea Maiden,” his posthumous book of stories, “if you collect and squirrel away in your soul certain odd moments when the Mystery winks at you.” McDarrah caught more of those moments than any photographer has a right to.