

# A portrait of photographer Robert Frank

By C.W. Rogers  
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*Don't Blink*—Robert Frank, is a very personal and generally engaging examination of the life and career of the acclaimed photographer and filmmaker. The new documentary, by longtime Frank film editor and collaborator Laura Israel, was made with the active participation of the artist himself, now 91 years old and still active. It was recently screened for several weeks at the Film Forum in New York City.

*Don't Blink*, despite flaws that are perhaps the result of too close a relationship with its enigmatic subject, nevertheless manages to stitch together a rough biographical composite of Robert Frank's artistic and at times tragic personal life. It combines a fast-paced edit of his photographs, interviews, footage from his numerous experimental short films, an account of his involvement with the Beats, captions and news clippings, all of which is backed by an energetic soundtrack that features The Kills, Patti Smith, Yo La Tengo, Tom Waits, Lou Reed, The Rolling Stones and more. A highlight of the film is its discussion of *The Americans*, Frank's 1958 book of photographs that is widely considered the most important book of its kind published in the 20th century.

Robert Frank emigrated to the United States from Zurich, Switzerland in 1947 at the age of 22, and adopted New York City as his home. His father, Hermann Frank, was a German-born Jew who settled in Zurich with his wife Rosa in the early 1920s. In the period leading up to the Second World War he became officially stateless after losing his right to German citizenship under the Nuremberg Race Laws. The family escaped the brunt of the horrors of the Holocaust in the safety of neutral Switzerland, but the young Robert Frank was certainly affected by the barbarity of the war and German fascism.

He arrived on the shores of the United States as a trained photographer and found in New York City a metropolis bursting with life and social ills, with millions of people hustling to make a living and struggling to make ends meet.

Later that same year Frank met renowned art director Alexey Brodovitch of *Harper's Bazaar* and began photographing fashion and still life for the magazine. Over the next several years he would meet and befriend Walker Evans, a legendary photographer of the Depression. He found additional work at the *New York Times*. He traveled and produced photographs from Peru, London and Wales. By 1955, with the assistance of Walker Evans, Frank applied for and received a Guggenheim Fellowship grant, enabling him to begin his travels around the United States for work on what would become *The Americans*.

During a nine-month period in 1955 and 1956, Frank drove across 30 states, traveling some 10,000 miles and shooting 767 rolls of film—over 27,000 frames—to produce in the end the selection of just 83 essential photographs in his celebrated book. The photographer explains that it was necessary “to look for faces, not landscapes,” an indication of his concern with social questions. “It's a sad comment

on America, what a sad country it is, and the kind of hopeless feelings it has, unjust,” Frank explained in an interview in Paris more than five decades later, in 2009.

*The Americans* “changed the nature of photography, what it could say and how it could say it,” according to critic Sean O'Hagen, writing in the *Guardian* in 2014. The book captured a version of American society in 1956-57 that collided headlong with what had become the official American narrative of prosperity in the “Golden Age” of American capitalism in the years of the postwar boom. Robert Frank's photographs were a remarkable departure not only from the photo-journalistic salves of comfortable American life depicted in the pages of *Life Magazine* at the time, but also from the more formal social documentary images of his friend and mentor Walker Evans. Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha described seeing *The Americans* for the first time as a young art student. “I was aware of Walker Evans's work. But I felt like those were still lifes. Robert's work was life in motion.”

Up to this point, photojournalism relied heavily on captions to explain to the viewer a detailed version of what he or she was looking at, but now the photograph stood on its own, on its own blank page, left to evoke a feeling. This became something of a mixed blessing in the subsequent development of art and photography, but in Frank's work at the time it became a powerful tool. The subjects of *The Americans* were auto factory workers in Detroit, transvestites on the streets of New York, segregated passengers on a trolley car in New Orleans, Southern blacks attending funerals, and wistful cowboys. There were political rallies and Fourth of July celebrations with American flags appearing often and forlornly. There were Americans busy at life—eating in diners, sleeping in parks, driving their cars down empty expanses of highway, riding in elevators and streetcars, and hanging out in rough bars.

Though the United States after the Second World War witnessed a general rise in living standards and a partial improvement in conditions of life for a broad segment of the country's working class—particularly in contrast to the extreme social distress of the Great Depression, still raw in the consciousness of the American population as a whole—there were also untold numbers who had benefited hardly if at all, and to whom Frank was clearly drawn. In his photographs of “ordinary” Americans throughout the country, there was conspicuously something a little off, something disquieting. There was an outsider's view of a social malaise and deep alienation that defined much of the period.

“To look at poor people and how they try to survive. What a lonely time it can be in America—what a tough country it is. And for the first time I saw how black people were treated. But it didn't make me hate America, it made me understand,” Frank said about *The Americans* in 2005.

By the early 1960s the book began gathering praise and acclaim,

after initial excoriating reviews and charges that it was “anti-American.” One critic described the photographer as “a joyless man who hates the country of his adoption.” Another characterized the photographs as “meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness.” Curiously, according to Frank it was the growing momentum and success of *The Americans*, not the early attacks it had faced, that caused him to put down the Leica and change course. “Once respectability and success become a part of it, then it was time to look for a new mistress,” he stated back in 1969. Much of Frank’s work over the ensuing decades was in the field of short experimental films.

There was perhaps more involved than the search for new challenges. Frank had shown a side of America that was overlooked by polite society, but he wasn’t at all sure that anything could be done about this status quo, and wasn’t sure what he had to add to the subject. His work was increasingly characterized by a general lack of direction and coherency, something he shared with the writers of the Beat Generation, particularly Alan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who became close friends and collaborators of Frank throughout the 1960s and afterwards. As Frank himself states at one point during the documentary about his Beat friends, “They didn’t know where they were going but they were moving forward, or in whatever direction they chose.”

The Beats lashed out against conformity, against what they saw as social stultification in the years during and after the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s, but their radicalism remained on the surface and took a pessimistic path. They saw *The Americans* as having managed to capture the spontaneity and movement of a work of poetry or prose. Kerouac, who volunteered to write the introduction to the book, said, “Robert Frank ... with that little camera ... sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film.”

*Pull My Daisy*, the first and best-known of Frank’s films, was completed in 1959, just one year after the publication of *The Americans*. It stars poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky and Gregory Corso and is inspired by an incident in the life of Beat icon Neal Cassidy and his painter wife.

A notorious film project of Frank’s came about when The Rolling Stones commissioned him to travel with them and shoot a documentary of their Exile on Main Street tour of 1972. After the film’s completion, the band decided that the content was too lewd and incriminating to be shown to American audiences. To Frank’s disappointment, a court order was obtained essentially banning its distribution. It could only be shown a couple of times a year in an “archival setting” and only if Robert Frank was himself in attendance. The film, titled “Cocksucker Blues,” is still under court order to this day.

Frank is a famously difficult personality. The film captures a good deal of this, particularly evident in his standoffishness and impatience in interview footage from several decades ago, where the artist loudly complains about what he considers often repeated stupid questions. But one of the film’s strengths is also the manner in which he is humanized as a complex artist, with a deep and generous sensitivity to his surroundings, notably for the people, fellow artists, friends and family whom Frank approaches with kindness, respect and a disarming sense of humor.

He married fellow artist Mary Lockspeiser, the mother of his two children, in the early 1950s. This marriage ended in 1969 and he remarried in 1971, to sculptor June Leaf. As the film shows, Leaf’s influence on Frank’s life and work was of immense importance. At

Frank’s urging they traveled to the small mining and fishing town of Mabou, Nova Scotia and bought a small house overlooking the ocean. He began making photographs again in earnest in the early 1970s, while continuing his film and video projects, which more and more took on the feel of home movies and personal confessionals.

Frank endured enormous personal losses. His daughter Andrea was killed in a plane crash over Guatemala in 1974, and around the same time his son Pablo was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Much of Frank’s focus in his work at this time took a personal turn as he dealt with his grief. From the start of his relationship with June Leaf the couple were almost never apart, and they seemed to complement one another as partners and artists working on their own projects.

In the short film *Life Dances On*, in 1980, Frank focuses on the now alarming deterioration of his son Pablo as he slips deeper into mental illness. *Home Movies*, from 1985, shows Pablo now living in an institution as things get progressively worse. Pablo ended up taking his own life in 1994 at the age of 44, and Frank would later describe his own guilt in not being able to care for him: “A person like that depends on the love of his parents, and that he didn’t get quite enough of.”

Frank’s photography from the late 1970s onward developed in an experimental direction very different from that of his early work. From his remote home in Canada he began photographing personal objects and seascapes, utilizing Polaroid film (particularly black and white Polaroid positive/negative film that would produce a black and white negative), and began scratching and writing words into the film’s emulsion. “Sick of Goodbyes” was scratched into a Polaroid negative of a view of the sea from his window, as an ode to his daughter Andrea.

*Don’t Blink—Robert Frank* provides a rare glimpse into the life of the very private photographer and filmmaker. Frank’s best-known work, *The Americans*, is the most interesting and insightful part of the new documentary. The film is worth seeing for that chapter alone.

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