

“All these people ... worked all night, every night, crazily, obsessively”

An Interview with Sara Fishko, director of *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*

By David Walsh
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Today we are posting a review of *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, a documentary directed by Sara Fishko. The film, based on tens of thousands of photographs and thousands of hours of audio tapes made by photographer Eugene Smith at his dingy loft in New York City, sheds fascinating light on artistic life in the 1950s and 1960s.

Fishko is an executive producer and host at WNYC, a public radio station in New York. Her long-running program, *Fishko Files*, airs Thursdays. She has won multiple awards from the Radio Television Digital News Association (Edward R. Murrow Award), the Deadline Club, the Newswomen’s Club of New York (Front Page Award), the Associated Press and the New York Press Club.

I spoke to Sara recently by phone.

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David Walsh: Could you tell our readers how this project originated?

Sara Fishko: This all started when Sam Stephenson, a writer, teacher and researcher, who was living in North Carolina at the time, took a trip to Pittsburgh and stumbled into an exhibition of W. Eugene Smith’s photographs and was strongly taken with them. As a result of that, he wound up doing research in the archive of Smith’s photographs at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, at the University of Arizona.

In the archive, he came upon some boxes. Being a naturally inquisitive fellow, he said, ‘What are those?’ And they said, those are just some tapes. And as he told me, he then said, ‘I would like to see those tapes.’ They opened the cartons, and to his astonishment, there on the spines of these tape boxes, about 1,700 of them, were some of the most famous first names in jazz, such as Zoot [Sims] and Thelonious [Monk], and so forth.

Being a jazz fan, Sam recognized this as a possibly incredible discovery. He negotiated for the stewardship, so to speak, of the tapes and had them transferred to his then place of employment, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, where he spent about a decade digitizing the tapes, logging them and finding out precisely what was on them. In the process of doing this, he discovered all these riches, including the Thelonious Monk material.

There had been a certain amount of underground lore about the New York loft. People did know of it, they talked about it and they knew, for example, that Thelonious and Hall Overton had rehearsed in the loft for the Town Hall concert [1959]. Some of them might even have known that someone was taping, but they didn’t really remember who.

DW: Do you have any sense of what Smith intended doing with these tapes?

SF: That is one of the great mysteries of the project. He referred vaguely to a book he thought he was doing. But what was he going to do with 4,000 hours of audio tapes?

There are intelligent people—who think about culture in that era—who suggest he was an artist looking for another way to enhance or expand his work. He was trying to extend himself and find another path than photography. That’s possible.

DW: It seems one of the things he was doing was trying to register a definite moment in time or history, in its many aspects—to indicate what it was like to live at that moment in great depth.

SF: There is also the matter of the trajectory of Smith’s life. Before he’d arrived at the loft, he’d been in a horrific war and he’d been badly injured, not as a soldier, but covering it as a photographer, going aggressively after the story. Now he moves into a loft in the middle of New York and the story is right there in the building. I think he became interested in staying in one place and recording everything that was there, inside, outside, around the neighborhood. It was partly an artistic impulse, and it was partly an impulse to change his life.

DW: How did you become involved?

SF: I had been doing a lot of radio work associated not only with jazz, but also with this period in history. For whatever reason, I became obsessed with the postwar period and had done a lot of work about it.

At a certain point, Sam Stephenson was circulating in New York trying to let people know about the Smith material. He gave a talk in downtown Manhattan and present was a wonderful piano player named Dick Katz, who’s no longer alive. He had been a regular at the loft. His son, Jamie Katz, a jazz-lover and writer and editor, was there too and sensed I’d be interested. He phoned me the next day about the material.

I called Sam Stephenson up, and went over to where he was staying, and he played me some of the tapes on his computer, some of the Monk and other material, and it took about five minutes for me to say, ‘I’m in.’ I said I wanted to do a 10-part Public Radio series using these tapes. That was 2005 or 2006.

It was something of an empty promise at the time, but I was eventually able to make it happen with the help of my colleagues at WNYC. By 2009, Sam’s book [*The Jazz Loft Project*, Knopf] was published and my WNYC radio series [*The Jazz Loft Radio Series*] began on the same day in November. Later NPR ran four radio episodes nationally.

DW: Why do you think you’re obsessed with the postwar period?

SF: Everything in the world was changing at that time. As a means of understanding a trend, a movement, an artistic development, I tend to want to find the moment when it began and how it was that it emerged—and that kept bringing me back there. The period between 1947 and 1957 is a miraculous creation story, for better or worse, of just about everything we knew in the word of culture, art, music, fashion, politics—until perhaps ten or fifteen years ago, when something else arose.

But really that period is still central.

DW: There is this interesting comment by photographer Robert Frank about Smith: “He was an astonishing man, his passion and his belief in whatever he would do. Since then, I haven’t met anyone that comes near that passion and belief in what he does and what it should do and the effect of his work. He believed it would change the world, and nobody today of the younger people think like that.”

SF: Frank also told me he thought Smith wanted to reveal something that was private inside him that had nothing to do with photography, and maybe it was impossible to do that, maybe it had to be done with either music or words to complement photography. So as an artist, Frank could see that Smith might have wanted to go someplace else.

Gene Smith and Robert Frank were not so far apart in age. Smith was born in 1918 and Frank in 1924. But they represent two sides of a big split in photography.

Smith is the more established figure, working at *Life* magazine, an old-fashioned romantic, dramatic photographer. Frank is considered the more iconoclastic, modern photographer. To some extent that’s true, but if we look at it a little more closely, it’s more complex than that.

Smith, in fact, was doing something very modern here, maybe not in his photography as such, but in his life as an artist. It was in anticipation of so much that was about to happen with the recording of everything, with quarter-inch tape, audio ...

It’s generally thought that the split in photography took place around the time of the famous “The Family of Man” exhibition [at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, curated by Edward Steichen]. Smith’s famous photo, *The Walk to Paradise Garden*, was the last picture in that exhibition. Then soon afterward, along comes Robert Frank’s book, *The Americans*[1958], and, the argument goes, everything changes.

It’s true, but the argument has been too schematically made, it’s overdrawn, so that what’s missed is how much Smith was reaching for something beyond what he had been doing.

I think many of us were assuming that when this project hit the culture, people would re-examine Smith in a major way, that he would become of great interest to people. But such a revival didn’t happen at all.

DW: It’s a pretty foul atmosphere, in my view. There’s not a lot of official art world interest in photographers who did photo essays on black midwives, and Pittsburgh, and industrial pollution.

Smith had a mass audience at a certain point, with *Life*. He was almost the equivalent of a Hollywood studio director. He was attempting to do something interesting and complicated in front of this large audience.

The obsession with Pittsburgh fascinates me. He didn’t give up on the population, or merely find it grotesque and bizarre, as some did, even while he was living through this bohemian, apparently eccentric New York/jazz loft scene.

No matter how immediately discouraging his conditions of life may have been, he didn’t give up on the idea that photography and art could change the world. That’s what’s so breathtakingly inspiring and encouraging, despite all the pain that obviously came along with it.

SF: Another intriguing element is that music absolutely changed his life. He would not hold half the interest he does for us now had he not discovered music early on and just been completely consumed by it. He owned tens of thousands of records, at the end maybe 50,000. He listened all the time. It’s unusual to pursue both those sides, the eye and ear ...

Both photography and jazz seem to happen spontaneously in an instant, without much effort—that’s the magic of both arts. But what is so compelling about this *Jazz Loft* material is that it is the living, breathing proof of the fact that the opposite is true. All these people—the photographer and the jazz musicians—worked all night, every night, crazily, obsessively—it’s really all they wanted to do, and we had the pictures and audio to prove it. So one thing I tried to show in the film was how hard they worked to be ready for the moment of inspiration if and

when it did come.

DW: Have you always had this interest in jazz?

SF: When I was young I was studying to be a pianist, or so I thought, and classical music was my consuming interest. But I was always drawn to jazz, in fact as a teenager I had the fantasy that I might go to Canada to study at the Oscar Peterson School. He had a course of study for people who knew the mechanics of piano, but wanted to learn how to improvise and swing. It proved to be impractical.

I became involved in the film business and things changed. However, one of the first things I did when I took a pause from film editing and started doing my own radio work at WNYC was to go to Toronto to interview Peterson for radio on his 75th birthday. We had a fantastic time together and it turned into a good program—and I think at that point, I started an obsessive jazz period, listening, talking to jazz players and getting to know the history of the music, and it really got under my skin.

When the *Jazz Loft* project came along, it gave me another, much larger opportunity to understand jazz and immerse myself in the whole culture of that period, and for that I also did interviews with about 40 men and women in the jazz world—some known, some completely obscure.

I still wish I’d been able to get some training as a jazz piano player. But, you know, for whatever reason, it wasn’t really part of music education at that time in the US. Or at least it was very separate from classical—much more so than now. You had to be on one track or the other, and I was on a classical track. Most colleges at the time didn’t even have jazz programs or courses.

One thing of related interest: an example of how separate the two music worlds were is Hall Overton’s situation at the Juilliard School of Music. He wasn’t really allowed to teach jazz there—and some of the jazz players told me they’d have to sneak in on Saturday if they wanted to hang out with him there. But of course, that’s why he found the loft space and used it as his studio and hangout. So—at this point maybe we’re grateful.

DW: That leads me to one of the most fascinating sequences, the Thelonious Monk-Hall Overton collaboration.

SF: In regard to Overton and Monk, the sequence in the film debunks many misguided things that have been said. It’s interesting to have a record of what really happened, because there has been so much talk about that collaboration, and it has not always been seen as an equal one. It’s been seen as one or the other dominating.

Overton is another incredible figure. An ignored or neglected figure. Too little is known about him. There was an idea for a while that Overton just took Monk’s music and did what he wanted with it, but the tapes and photos make it clear there was an extreme effort to be true to Monk’s originals. To see the depth of the collaboration and the affection between the two, the atmosphere of the collaboration, to hear musicians talk about it ... is extraordinary. And the musicians, like the late Phil Woods, and Robert Northern, have such vivid memories of those rehearsals.

Jazz musician Jason Moran told me about that pairing: “They need each other. Hall Overton has no idea how Monk comes up with these harmonies and these clusters of notes next to each other, and Monk, I’m sure he has an idea how to arrange it, but he also has to show Hall this stuff so that Hall can plant it on the other musicians, so there’s like a need for each other which makes a great collaboration...”

DW: One remarkable thing is that you never use the phrase “white musician” or “black musician” once in the film. In the age of identity politics mania that’s an almost provocative act.

SF: That approach wasn’t 100 percent well received. Although there wasn’t too much commentary. One critic simply said, perhaps incredulously, “Race is not mentioned in the film.” It is what it is. I didn’t think it had a place in this particular film.

DW: The loft was at its peak of activity, at least for Smith, from 1957 to 1965 or so. This is the era of the Cold War, the end of McCarthyism, but still anti-communism is a state religion, the threat of nuclear war, also the

era of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* [the novel published in 1955, film released in 1956], Madison Avenue, large corporate bureaucracies, conformism, the rush to suburbia. But of course Smith rushed from suburbia to the center of the city.

SF: Yes, he goes the other way.

DW: He's going the other way in more than one sense.

SF: He flew out of his beautiful stone house in Croton-on-Hudson and comes to the worst dingiest, creepiest place he can find. Although different strains were clearly operating.

DW: Yes, exactly, he's prefiguring other strains or currents. It's also the period of the mass civil rights protests, and eventually the anti-war protests and everything else explosive we know that will come along in the next decade.

SF: He was considered by the musicians at the loft to be a very brilliant, professorial, wonderful human being. Smith and Overton were these two brilliant characters inhabiting this building. They were part of the attraction of the place.

DW: Smith participated in the Photo League, which the FBI called "subversive and anti-American" and a "Communist" front. Eventually, it dissolved under the pressures of the Cold War. Smith wasn't ever that close to the Communist Party, was he?

SF: No, I don't think so. The only thing I have to offer is a story. As you may know, Smith became president of the Photo League, which was indeed listed as subversive by the Attorney General's office. According to a biography of Smith, he agreed to become president in 1947 right after that list appeared—to contradict the listing and any suspicions about the organization! He said, "I became president because I felt they [the attorney general's office] were wrong, and I was clean enough to be practically untouchable." His close colleague, photographer Walter Rosenblum, said later he felt Gene was not a particularly political person—or not, I would add, any more or less political than any Popular Front intellectual in that period. Classic mid-century left-leaner, I would say. Though not typical in any other way.

DW: You mentioned how many of the musicians and others at the loft, including Smith, had been through World War II and how that experience helped shape them.

SF: That was pointed out to me by someone who was working with me at the time. I heard the same story over and over again in the interviews we did. It was a generation of men who went to war. They emerged still as young men, perhaps a little delayed in starting their careers, whatever they wanted to be doing, and they somehow found their way to music and to New York. It led to an episode of the radio series that was about that fact, that virtually everyone in that quintessentially New York loft was from somewhere else.

DW: And presumably if you've gone through that experience and you're a certain type of personality, and certain opportunities are open to you, you want to inhabit a space where the opposite of war and violence and ugliness and cruelty prevail.

SF: Yes, and that may or may not be related to my theory about Gene Smith, that he wanted to be where the story was and have it available to him without taking huge risks of the kind he had taken before. I'm not saying this was a lazy choice or a retreat—not at all!—but he certainly wanted something different.

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