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New York Today: Documenting Protest

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By DEREK M. NORMAN FEB. 26, 2018



LeRoy Henderson, a Civil Rights era photographer, at his Brooklyn home. Credit Andre D. Wagner for The New York Times

We're in a new era of activism — with Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, anti-Trump protests and the Women's March — and though these events draw hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, most of whom are carrying a camera phone, it can take a seasoned professional to convey their spirit.

With Black History Month drawing to a close, we spoke with LeRoy Henderson, a photographer who witnessed the events of the civil rights era and is among the few photographers of that generation to have captured them.

Mr. Henderson's five-decade career included covering the 1964 rally at the 369th Regiment Armory in Harlem, a clash between Black Nationalists and members of the Nation of Islam, after Malcolm X's break from that group.

And he shot photographs of the civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy, a minister and a close friend of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., speaking in Central Park.

His portfolio also includes portraits of Rosa Parks, Jesse Jackson and Coretta Scott King.

“I purposely sought out to be in these places because I wanted to document everything I could about my time,” said Mr. Henderson, 82, who was born in Richmond, Va., and has lived in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn since the late 1960s.

His photos have appeared in galleries and exhibitions, including at the Smithsonian Institution and the Brooklyn Museum, and more recently appear on the cover of a history book that explores the social perspective of that era.



Mr. Henderson’s work from the 1960s and 1970s. Credit Andre D. Wagner for The New York Times

“There’s a double-duty,” Mr. Henderson said of attending demonstrations as both a citizen and a documentarian, “because you’re there and want to be a part of these things, but you need to be selective in what you shoot.”

That work continues, said Mr. Henderson, who has more recently documented pro-immigration demonstrations, Black Lives Matter gatherings and the inauguration of the country’s first black president.

“People out there are fired up and they’re vocalizing it; things are still ongoing,” he said.