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Lens

Photographing Ordinary Life in Passing

LeRoy W. Henderson Jr. has traveled up and down the East Coast, stopping alongside rural roads in his native Virginia, at rallies on the National Mall and on bustling New York City street corners.



Dining car on a train. 1968. Credit LeRoy Henderson

By Antwaun Sargent

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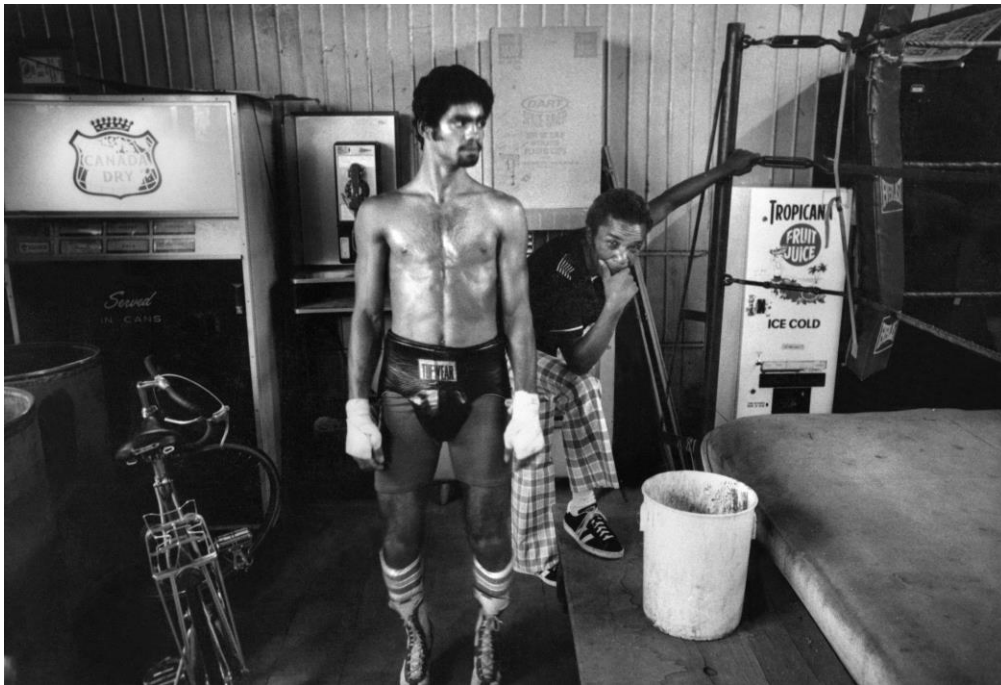
LeRoy W. Henderson Jr. likes to capture life in passing, turning the street into his open-air studio. For more than four decades, the African-American photographer has traveled up and down the East Coast, stopping alongside rural roads in his native Virginia, at rallies on the National Mall and on bustling New York City street corners. Mr. Henderson has dedicated himself to showing the range of experiences of ordinary people, where the everyday is frozen in black-and-white, as the dramas of race, religion, social change and a day's work play out in the frames.

"I just wanted to be out there where things were going on, so I just went out in the street and started shooting," said Mr. Henderson, who bought himself a Kodak Brownie Hawkeye camera for his 12th

birthday and later studied photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. “I was looking for visual drama, something in the midst of the ordinary to catch my eye.”



A storefront Baptist church in Brooklyn. 1977. Credit LeRoy Henderson



Fighter with a trainer at Old Gleason Gym in New York. 1979. Credit LeRoy Henderson



Poor People's March on Washington. 1968. Credit LeRoy Henderson

Mr. Henderson, 82, initially found “simple drama” in the city’s antiwar protests of the late 1960s. One of his early photographs is a striking shot of a white teenage girl hoisted atop the backs of a crowd of her peers, marching down Madison Avenue. Disillusioned by the war waged in their names, she waves a large American flag in protest. In those early days, Mr. Henderson’s eye was drawn to “the kind of interesting stuff that might be happening on the periphery of the event.” In a May 1968 photo, he captured Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Whitney Young in a quiet moment, chatting among themselves. They had gathered on the National Mall for the Poor People’s March on Washington, a month after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Mr. Henderson, who has worked as a professor of photography at various local universities and as a photojournalist, has created impressionistic and poignant images that record history — both personal and national — with great intimacy. His social reportage is a part of a renowned African-American tradition of chiaroscuro image makers that includes Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, Ming Smith and the emerging photographer Andre D. Wagner. A 1970s image Mr. Henderson took in an old storefront church of three black women moved by the Spirit, is heightened by his dramatic play with light and shadow. Likewise, the darkness that covers the eyes of a distant cousin clutching a folded American flag at his father’s funeral, underscores the bewilderment of colossal loss and coming-of-age too soon.



Vice President Hubert Humphrey talking to Coretta Scott King at the Poor People's Campaign Solidarity Day in Washington, D.C. 1968. Credit LeRoy Henderson



Muhammad Ali at a news conference with Don King and the Jackson 5 at the Plaza Hotel, New York City. 1975. Credit LeRoy Henderson



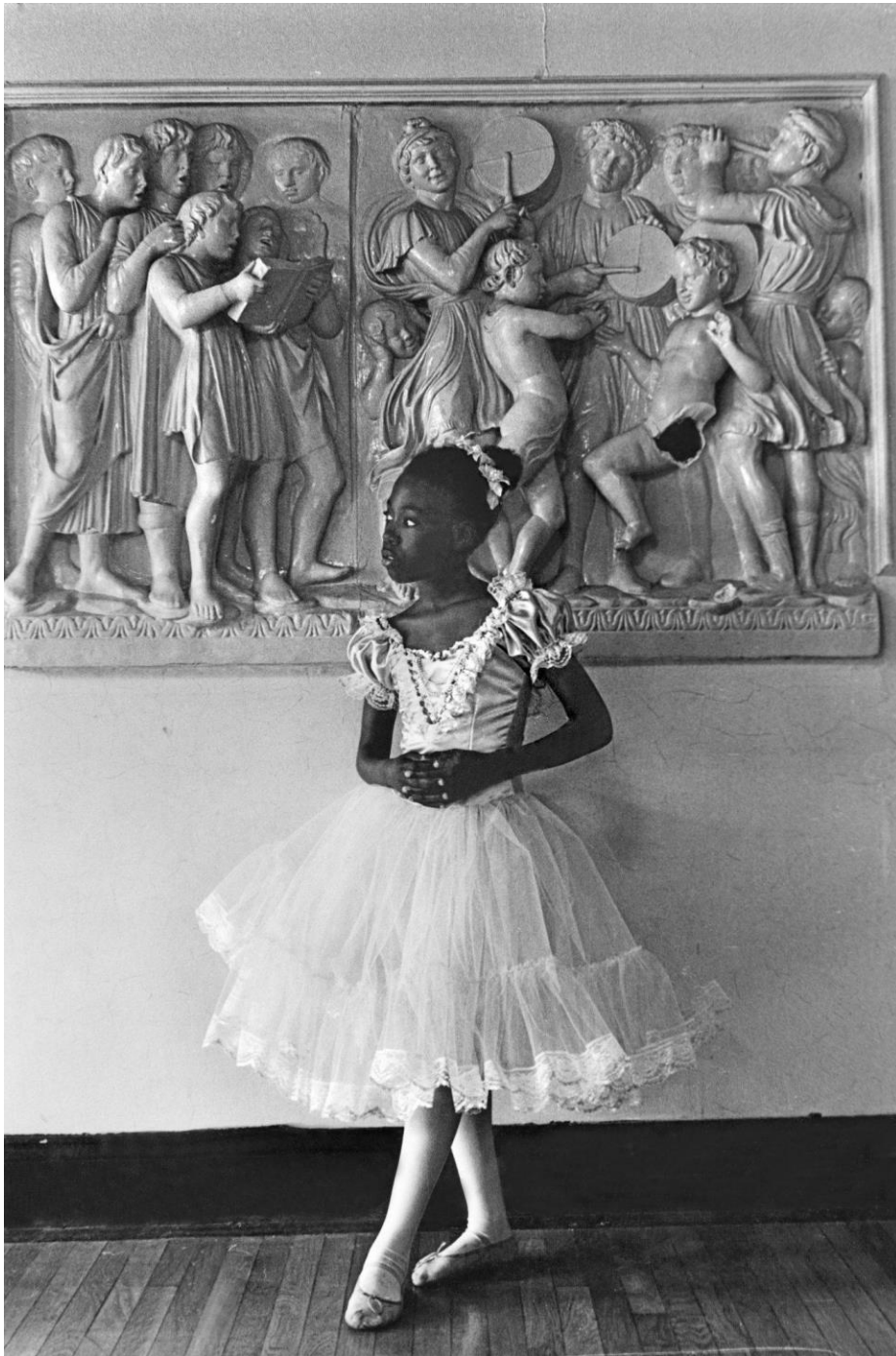
A Vietnam War protest in New York. 1967. Credit LeRoy Henderson

The events Mr. Henderson captured were so puissant, he believed he didn't "need color to tell their story," said Mr. Henderson, who also tells stories in color. "Color would be an embellishment, it would not be a necessity," he said. "Black-and-white itself is a powerful medium. In your mind's eye, you know that there's color and all, but you don't need to see color. These images capture something else, a mood."

Over the years, Mr. Henderson's photography has grown broad in gesture, humming with sublime symbolism: a woman with her hands on her hips who stands watching over her brood on a porch in midcentury Virginia is a vivid image of a mother's love; a black ballerina in repose before a traditional frieze is a contrast in beauty, then and now; and a picture of Muhammad Ali at a news conference surrounded by the Jackson 5's star presence, is an outsize sign of black power. Exposing the contractions of wealth is a somber 1968 scene of a lone civil rights protester sitting outside a sea of tents at "Resurrection City," the encampment the Poor People's Campaign set up in the shadow of the Washington Monument to shame a nation.

Mr. Henderson sees these photos as "a part of the American landscape," that make a statement linking past and present. "It's just capturing the things you see in the street that could be very easily overlooked by most people," he said. "Most of us, we're not looking for photographs as we walk around. But my motivation as a photographer and an artist is to be able to see the things that other people don't see."

He added: "It's almost like fishing, you've got a fishing line in the water and you really dig in and see what you can catch. You're always on the prowl looking for stuff in the midst of the great and big environment."



Dance recital in Brooklyn. 1992. Credit Leroy Henderson



Anti-Vietnam War rally in New York. 1967. Credit LeRoy Henderson



A rally for Congressman Adam Clayton Powell in Harlem. 1960s. Credit LeRoy Henderson



Mrs. Jackson and children in Virginia. 1968. Credit LeRoy Henderson



A woman with a child at Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn. 1990s. Credit LeRoy Henderson

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