



MISS BROOKS, “WOULD YOU STAND AND TAKE A BOW?”

Ileana L. Selejan

“FIRST TIME I EVER WORKED WITH A GIRL PHOTOGRAPHER,” Ed Sullivan exclaimed, “for she is one of the greatest in the business, *LOOK*’s Charlotte Brooks! Charlotte, would you stand and take a bow?” As the camera turns toward the audience, she rises with the applause and smiles. After Brooks’ brief appearance on the popular TV show on April 3, 1955, letters of congratulations poured in, people stopped her on the street.¹ As she later reminisced, it was “pure phony, pure promotion, but it was a certain amount of satisfaction to hear Sullivan talk about this girl photographer. . . .”² In other accounts, she would speak of the event as somewhat of an inconvenience—she was pulled away from a job she considered much more important than a moment in the spotlight.

At the time, Brooks was on the road with Duke Ellington and his orchestra, assigned by *LOOK* magazine to document their latest tour. Despite the hostile segregation of American life during this period, especially in the South, the band’s audiences were broad-based. Mindful of the marked differences between concert-goers, Brooks showed the orchestra’s masterful performances from a position of equality, syncopated beats carrying brassy sounds across strictly enforced color lines. She portrayed “The Duke” elegantly, whether in front of a crowd of tailored country-club members in Gainesville, Florida, or in the midst of students at Bethune-Cookman, a historically Black college in Daytona Beach (pages 12–13). She captured the musician’s intense concentration during long hours of rehearsal, as well as the band’s daily activities—eating, shopping, relaxing. One of her most iconic photographs shows Ellington playing ball in the parking lot of a segregated Florida motel (pages 14–15). In the picture, Ellington is poised, mid-swing, in front of his tour bus splashed with the phrase “Mr. Hi-Fi of 1955.” The word “Duke” appears right above his head like an advertising brand or a crown. The journey clearly had an impact on Brooks. And, as her contact sheets testify, this was the most thought-out shot from the several days she spent with the band. When the article on Ellington was finally published in 1957, the picture was included, though its diminishment in terms of scale and layout undermined the powerful statement it explicitly made.³

The civil rights movement was decidedly on the rise. Ellington had been criticized by members of the African-American community for not taking a more radical position on segregation—various chapters of the NAACP, for instance, had called on performers to boycott shows at locations with segregated seating.⁴ In response, Ellington argued that great music rather than confrontational rhetoric would most effectively advance emancipation. One can identify in Brooks’

photographic practice a similar stance. She conveyed her advocacy of social justice through a subtle, often understated, political voice, refraining from making direct commentary in her work. She understood the potential of the camera as a political tool, and used it in an investigative, observational manner to reflect and reveal society to itself. Throughout her career at *LOOK* and beyond, she delved into social justice stories as commanding as Ellington’s with empathy and clarity. Her sensitivity to discrimination may have been influenced by her personal experience, as she was exposed to prejudice herself due to her gender, sexual orientation, Jewish identity, and immigrant background.

The delay of a couple of years in the publication of the Ellington pictures was not uncommon for magazine assignments. Not infrequently, “jobs” were shelved indefinitely in the office archives, never making it to newsstands. According to longtime *LOOK* contributor Leo Rosten, for each issue editors considered some eight thousand photographs: “A photographer might shoot forty rolls of film (1200 ‘frames’) for a story that ended up using eight to twelve shots.”⁵ Such an expenditure of resources and time was justified by the editor-in-chief’s stated commitment to a magazine format structured around the photographic essay (the “picture story”), which took precedence over all other features. Though selective about images, the magazine published a total of 180,000 photographs over its lifetime.

Gardner Cowles Jr. founded *LOOK* in 1936 and released its first issue in February 1937 with the tag line “Keep informed . . . 200 Pictures . . . 1001 Facts!”⁶ He introduced the magazine’s purposes as informing and entertaining all audiences, with “reader interest for yourself, for your wife, for your private secretary, for your office boy.”⁷ Though *LIFE*, launched three months earlier by Henry Luce, far superseded *LOOK* in worldwide distribution, *LOOK* remained a fierce competitor for the thirty-five-plus years of the magazines’ concurrent histories. By the start of the 1960s, *LOOK* had gained a readership of a staggering 9 million. During the turbulent decades covered in its 903 issues, picture stories contributed greatly to the shaping of public opinion as the United States enjoyed a postwar economic revival, asserting its political and commercial dominance abroad.⁸

LOOK and *LIFE* were without doubt the most successful examples in a new genre in American publishing, modeled on popular European illustrated magazines such as the German *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* or the French magazine *Vu*. During the interwar period, picture magazines introduced innovative, modernist graphic design, and used photography extensively.⁹ Photojournalism became central to

the international media industry and, apart from a hiatus during World War II, until the mid-1960s guaranteed dependable income for numerous photographers, whether freelance or on staff.

In terms of graphic and editorial vision, in comparison with European picture magazines such as *Vu* (1928–40), *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (1924–33) or *USSR in Construction* (1930–41), *LOOK* is orderly and restrained. The visual experimentation of the prewar models—with their dynamic juxtapositions, interventions, and montages of words and images—gave way to the stable predictability and clarity of a grid of text and pictures, in which the text guides the reading of the pictures, and the pictures support the premises of the text. The photographer’s authorial role in the picture stories was shared with the art and editorial departments, and was often attenuated once the contact sheets were handed over. Images were selected, and enlarged prints were laid out on the storyboards to be augmented by headings, captions, and narrative text. The visual story was carefully crafted, and the temporal sequence of the original photographs was followed, revised, or ignored. The agenda of the text writer, also referred to as the producer, and the editors became decisive.

Though *LOOK* aspired to reach all audiences, with its general appeal and uncontroversial graphic identity, women constituted a large portion of its readership. Nevertheless, they were a minority among the professionals the magazine employed. In a field largely dominated by men, women additionally had to come to terms with policies that restricted their work even when they got it, one being a stark difference in pay.¹⁰ *LIFE* had featured a photograph by Margaret Bourke-White on the cover of its very first issue of November 23, 1936, yet her fame was the exception that proved the rule. Brooks being the only full-time female photographer on the staff at *LOOK*, her photographic peers were almost exclusively men, including Paul Fusco, James Karales, Arthur Rothstein, Stanley Tretick, Michael “Tony” Vaccaro, and John Vachon. Still, women staffers regularly crossed paths. Brooks collaborated in several instances with writer Patricia Carbine, who would later become one of the founding editors of *Ms.* magazine, and with editor Patricia Coffin, who took over the women’s interest sections of *LOOK* following the departure of Cowles’ ex-wife Fleur.

Brooks had been recruited in 1951 following a fortuitous call from her longtime friend and mentor Arthur Rothstein, the magazine’s technical director of photography. She was self-taught as a photographer, with a background in dance, psychology, and social work, and had honed her photographic skills in the 1940s while freelancing as a reporter for papers and magazines, sometimes picking up commercial jobs. Her self-described “sociological” perspective was shaped during these formative years by an apprenticeship with Barbara Morgan and the experience of photographing the small towns and countryside of New Jersey and New York State for the Standard Oil of New Jersey photographic project directed by Roy Stryker.¹¹

Brooks recalled her arrival at *LOOK*: “In the beginning they thought of me possibly doing women’s department stuff and food things. Generally speaking I did education stories, children’s stories, medical stories, and a lot of other things—they weren’t really sure at first how to deal with me, what to use me for, but writers as they got to know me would ask for me.”¹² Initially appointed to the promotions and advertising department, she was assigned stories in the realms of fashion, lifestyles, and everyday life. Her early assignments included features on foam rubber pillows, freezers, diets, miniature “forest gardens,” a dog show, a cat show, strawberry shortcake, teen competitors in the “World Champion Sandwich Eating Contest” in

New Jersey, nurses training for the Royal Canadian Air Force Para Rescue team, actress Anne Frances on location in Haiti, the filming of the children’s TV show *Space Cadets*, pet alligators, Gloria Swanson teaching yoga, and underwater photography. Many were never published. As the extant contact sheets and records show, Brooks often shot off-script, training her lens on stories that were happening at the periphery of her assignments. Already during these early years, she showed her attentiveness to social interaction, sharp powers of observation, and a distinctive sensibility eminently suited to human-interest stories.

By 1955, Brooks was an established contributor at *LOOK*. Along with entertainment celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball, and Audrey Hepburn, she had photographed prominent political figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower on the campaign trail, and Richard Nixon and his family at home. Her subjects would soon shift to reflect the ideological reorientation of the magazine, which in turn responded to broader societal changes, particularly in the areas of gender and racial dynamics. While the photographic rhetoric in Brooks’ earlier assignments is greatly subdued—possibly molded by the editors—a more overtly politicized angle emerges in her later work, which coincided with a period when the magazine was seeking to attract the younger, more progressive audiences that emerged during the 1960s.

The degree and nature of Brooks’ commitment to political and social concerns can be fully understood only by examining the entirety of her archive, not simply the 450 assignments shot over the course of her twenty years at *LOOK*. Yet even this directed and edited body of work shows her intense interest in social documentary and unbiased reportage, evident in images carefully balanced between the “decisive moment” and the cinematic continuum of everyday lives.

Charlotte Brooks at LOOK, 1951–1971 is focused on eight photo-essays—the first being the 1957 story on Duke Ellington (pages 12–15)—and a group of unpublished photographs (pages 36–37). Picture stories such as “A New Job for Joan,” 1963 (pages 18–21), “The Homosexual Couple,” 1971 (pages 26–29), and “The 50/50 Marriage: Is This What Women Want?,” 1971 (pages 30–33), concern critical

Minnijean Brown with her host family, the Clarks, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, 1958. Photograph by Charlotte Brooks



social issues such as civil liberties and women's rights. Others, such as "The Amazing Doctor Guion," 1961 (pages 16–17), "The Long, Lonely Wait of a Young Divorcée," 1966 (pages 22–23), and "La Lupe!," 1971 (pages 34–35), speak to the challenges women professionals faced in discriminatory environments and the achievements they were able to realize within limitations. And one, "Monkey Business," 1968 (pages 24–25), depicting a meeting of pet monkey owners, demonstrates the range of Brooks' assignments as well as her characteristic wit.

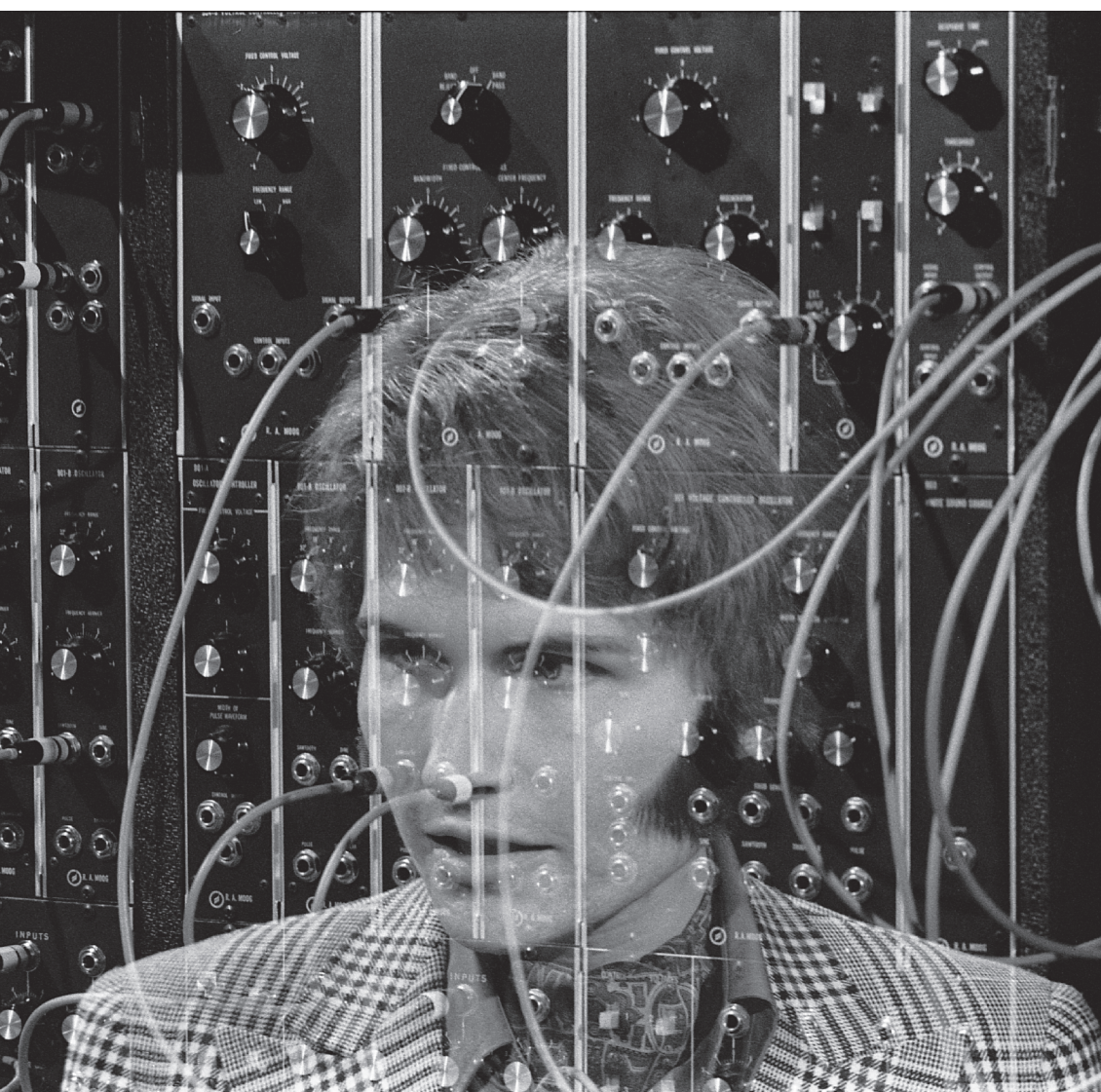
In the process of selecting representative photo-essays to be shown in *Charlotte Brooks at LOOK, 1951–1971*, noteworthy omissions were made. One of these is the story of Minnijean Brown, which bears powerful visual testimony to the young student's life following the aftermath of the violent incidents surrounding the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Five images were chosen from the thirty contact sheets to accompany Brown's account, published under the title "What They Did to Me in Little Rock" in *LOOK* 22:13, June 24, 1958. In many ways, the most fascinating stories Brooks witnessed are those that remain untold, even in published assignments. For the article "Moog Is More than a Vogue," by Christopher Wren, published in *LOOK* 34:7, April 7, 1970, Brooks addressed a quintessentially 1970s topic by profiling pioneering electronic music composer Walter Carlos and the Moog synthesizer. As with the majority of her stories, she provided extensive coverage—thirty-one contact sheets—from which two pictures were chosen to accompany the article.¹³ There was, however, another story embedded

Walter Carlos, 1969.
Photograph by
Charlotte Brooks (detail)

within this one. Carlos was transitioning between genders at the time, eventually undergoing reassignment surgery and becoming Wendy Carlos, who wrote the soundtrack for movies such as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, 1971, and Steven Lisberger's *Tron*, 1982.

Within the male-dominated world of photojournalism and commercial photography in the postwar United States, Brooks was a pioneer: she worked to refine an approach to documentary photography that was both politically attuned and socially engaged—a practice that resonated with the work famously undertaken by Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration and that of Margaret Bourke-White for *LIFE*. "In photojournalism," Brooks would claim, "the way I have practiced it, you don't always just come upon a situation—which is a story all by itself. You have to figure out how you're going to tell the story of what's happening."¹⁴ Despite its minimal textual record, the *LOOK* archive is an invaluable resource for the examination of Brooks' critical yet overlooked body of work. The material discloses how photographic vision and institutional agenda can intertwine to influence the shaping of national identity and critique the discrimination and bias that disfigure it. While Charlotte Brooks' pictures give evidence of notable advances in the recognition and securing of civic and human rights, her photographic legacy also serves as a reminder that substantial challenges remain present and manifold.

Ileana L. Selejan is the Linda Wyatt Gruber '66 Curatorial Fellow in Photography at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College and a specialist in postwar documentary photography.



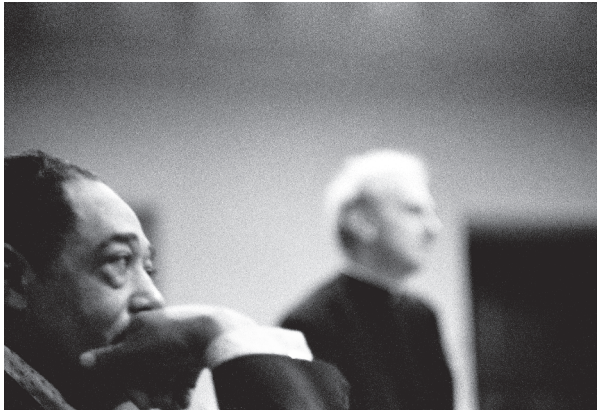
1. Brooks had photographed Ed Sullivan at length during the spring of 1955. The pictures appeared in a number of *LOOK* articles, and were featured in a two-part piece written by Eleanor Harris published in *LOOK* 19:7, April 5, 1955, and *LOOK* 19:8, April 19, 1955. One of the portraits was featured in color on the cover of the April 5 issue, under the heading "How Ed Sullivan Does It: A Personal Story about the Scowling Irishman."
2. Charlotte Brooks, interview with Beverly W. Brannan, December 1, 1998. Recorded Sound Reference Center, Library of Congress.
3. Charlotte Brooks and David Zingg, "Duke Ellington: A Living Legend Swings On," *LOOK* 21:17, August 20, 1957.
4. For a lengthier analysis of the subject, see Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 298–308.
5. See Leo Rosten, "A View from the Inside," in *The LOOK Book*, ed. Rosten, with a foreword by Gardner Cowles (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975), 24.
6. According to Gardner Cowles, "For many years, *LOOK* officially defined itself as 'The exciting story of people; what they do, what they feel, what they want, what they think—an ever-changing story told with warmth, understanding and wonder.'" See Gardner Cowles, *Mike Looks Back: The Memoirs of Gardner Cowles, Founder of LOOK Magazine* (New York: G. Cowles, 1985), 203.
7. "Look Out," *TIME*, January 11, 1937, 25.
8. The photographic archives of *LOOK* magazine consist of approximately 5 million items, mainly negatives, slides, and contact sheets, with little accompanying textual documentation, which were donated to the Library of Congress soon after the magazine closed in 1971. A smaller group of around 200,000 *LOOK* items thematically related to New York City was gifted to the Museum of the City of New York starting in the 1950s. In addition to Charlotte Brooks' records from *LOOK* (100,000 items, of which about 25,000 are unprocessed), the Library of Congress now holds her personal archive of about 13,000 items; these records could not be accessed before the present project was completed.
9. For a comprehensive source on the history of picture magazines in Europe and in the U.S., see Robert Lebeck, *Kiosk: A History of Photojournalism* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002).
10. On women photojournalists, see Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 3rd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 2010).
11. For detailed information on Brooks' biography, see Beverly W. Brannan's essay in this volume (pages 9–11).
12. Brooks, interview with Brannan, 1998.
13. Brooks, tape-recorded conversation with Julie Arden, n.d. Recorded Sound Research Center, Library of Congress, unaccessioned.
14. Brooks, tape-recorded conversation with Arden.

DUKE ELLINGTON: A LIVING LEGEND SWINGS ON

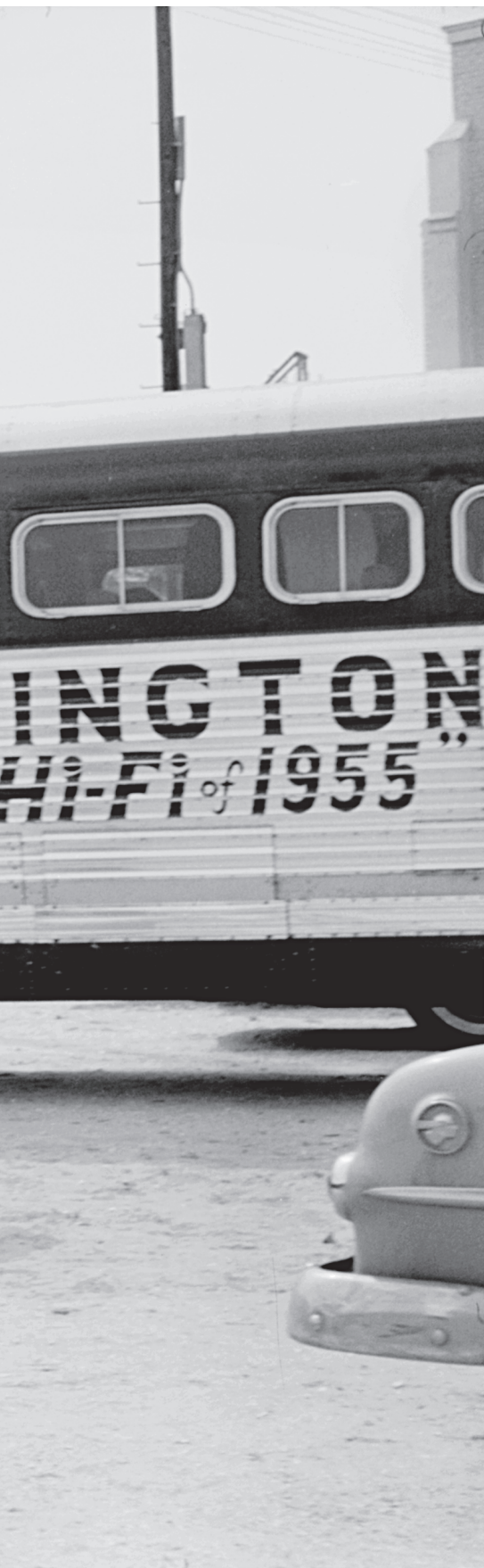


IN 1955, CHARLOTTE BROOKS accompanied Duke Ellington and his band on tour. Almost two years later, in April 1957 she joined the band once again, photographing them at various concert venues, during recording sessions, and while on set for the production of a CBS TV special based on Ellington's operatic "A Drum Is a Woman." The resulting pictures were published in a photo-essay produced by David Zingg for *LOOK* 21:17, August 20, 1957, under the title "Duke Ellington: A Living Legend Swings On" (in the editorial departments at *LOOK*, the terms "writer" and "producer" were used interchangeably, since both roles were often assumed by the same person, who directed the creation of the story throughout, while working in collaboration with an assigned photographer.)









With a focus on “The Duke’s” talent and his long-standing, highly successful career, the article touched only briefly on the conflicts and struggles he encountered due to pervasive racial discrimination: “One of the Duke’s least known facets is his deep scholarship in the field of Negro history. His library contains nearly 1,000 volumes on the subject, and Ellington has delved studiously into them all.” In contrast with the textual description, powerful commentary is made by the inclusion of a picture showing the band playing baseball—a favorite pastime—in the parking lot of their motel; visible in the background is the sign reading “COLORED . . . ASTOR MOTEL.” As the contact sheets from the job indicate, Brooks composed the shot carefully in order to effectively convey the political landscape surrounding the otherwise leisurely scene. In the photo-essay, the caption read: “Ellington is close-lipped on the subject of the band’s life in the South. ‘Anybody who gets all dressed up,’ he says, ‘deserves to hear some music.’”

