



In Conversation with Bruce Davidson

by Philip Gray

Bruce Davidson photographed by Emily Davidson

● **What first inspired your lifelong enthusiasm for photography?**

My first encounter with anything to do with photography was when I was just ten years old. I was waiting to play basketball in a local alleyway when a friend asked me if I wanted to go over to his basement to watch a photograph being developed. I didn't even know what that meant but once in his dark and damp basement I watched him put what I thought was a sheet of blank paper in water and up came an image: I was hooked. It wasn't long before I managed to

persuade my mother to set up my own darkroom in an empty closet. By age fifteen I was allowed to go into the city by myself taking my camera.

● **You won your first photographic award in 1952 and your work was being published by 1955. Then in 1958, aged just 25, you became a member of Magnum Photos agency. This must have had an enormous influence on your photography.**

Magnum offered me a 'climate' in which I could develop: photographers such as Cornell Capa, René

Burri and Micha Bar-Am became my early mentors, and part of my life. It was Capa who helped me gain an early commission to produce the 1960 England/Scotland book. He told the editor that if he left Bruce Davidson alone he would get a wonderful set of pictures: I think it worked.

I also worked on many photo shots with Henri Cartier-Bresson and learned a great deal from him. It was HC-B who taught me to be disciplined in my work as well as respectful of those I was photographing.

● **You are noted for asking permission when taking someone's photograph on the street. Is that an example of the discipline and respect in your work?**

In the case of the subway project I had three mandates. I would usually try to ask someone if I could take their picture, then stand back and hope I hadn't broken the mood. That wasn't always possible of course so at other times I would have to just take the picture anyway. The subway I was photographing was in a pretty run-down state in those days and working with a camera and flash made me very conspicuous. Once people began to find out I was working on a photographic project most of them seemed fine with what I was doing. But just occasionally I needed to adopt my third method of working: I would time the closing subway doors carefully so that I could take the shot then 'run like hell'.

● **One feature common to many of your famous portraits from the 'sixties is the way you were able to get your sitters to relax and trust you. In particular, I am thinking of one shot of Sammy Davis Junior taken in his dressing room in 1965.**

Perhaps that's because it was the time when I was known for my work documenting the Civil Rights movement. It was also the time when picture magazines were extremely popular, so stars and other personalities were very keen to see their photographs in print.

● **Labels such as 'street photographer' may not always be particularly helpful, but you have been referred to as a 'humanist photographer'. What do you think people mean by this?**

It was an important part of the Magnum mandate that the photographs we took should communicate aspects of life by being both probing and understanding. In 1959 I worked on the Brooklyn Gangs project. I met young people who seemed to be abandoned by society; even the Church didn't seem to offer them anything. I felt their despair. Photography isn't about taking pictures. It's also about confronting the world, but without being sentimental about it. This is what Capa referred to as 'concerned photography'.

● **Do you still remember your first Leica?**

Oh yes. My first Leica was also my first love. I had a date with with a girl in my photography class at Rochester Institute of Technology. She had a copy of *The Decisive Moment* and I remember sitting side by side while we looked at each picture in detail. I decided to buy a secondhand Leica and try to take pictures like Cartier-Bresson - hoping she would fall for me. She ran off with one of her teachers while I was left with HC-B!

● **Have you been an advocate for Leica rangefinder cameras ever since?**

Photographically I grew up using a Leica and it became an extension of my seeing. I have always liked the fact that it is a small, quiet and quick camera. I have had to use many other cameras on different projects over the years but I still come back to my Leica. I once went on a photographic trip with a friend who was using a 10x8 Plaubel. My Leica felt quite puny next to that, particularly when using a light a compact 28mm lens.

There have been times when I felt I needed to take a break from documenting humanity. I turned to photographing the landscapes of the Black Hills National Forest outside Los Angeles - using a tripod-mounted 5x4 Linhof. That was a lot of fun.

● **I can hardly ask you to name just one favourite photograph but what is the most memorable project you have worked on?**

They are all my children but perhaps the most memorable was the long-term Civil Rights movement project, from the freedom marches of 1961 to the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965 and the rise of Black Power. It was all shot with the Leica.

● **And finally, what about your current Leica of choice?**

That has to be my MP. It's light, completely mechanical and superb - and it's in that bag by my feet as we speak.



A comprehensive selection of Bruce Davidson's photographs can be viewed on the Magnum Photos website at pro.magnumphotos.com (select Bruce Davidson from the list of photographers)

Current editions of books by Bruce Davidson include:
England / Scotland 1960, published by Steidl, 2014
Los Angeles 1964, published by Steidl, 2015
Outside Inside, published by Steidl, 2010
Subway, published by Steidl, 2011
Black and White, published by Steidl, 2012
In Colour, published by Steidl, 2014

Other books about Bruce Davidson's work include:
Bruce Davidson by Carlos Collonet and Charlotte Cotton, published by Aperture, 2016