THE UNSEEN PHOTOS OF
JOE ALPER
1961-1965

dylan before
DYLAN

Wall Of Sound Gallery
Wall Of Sound Gallery is proud to present, for the first time ever and as a European exclusive, the “DYLAN BEFORE DYLAN” exhibition with the historic photographs by Joe Alper. Like last year with the Art Kane show, the editing, the restoration of the original negatives as well as the printing have been made at our gallery, in Alba, with the loving supervision of Edward Elbers, manager of the Joe Alper Photo Collection LLC.

May 1961. Bob Dylan barely turned 20 and has arrived in New York four months earlier. After roaming all around America, from his native Minnesota through Iowa, South Dakota, Kansas, North Dakota, New Mexico, and taking on an unspecified number of identities (“You can go anywhere when you’re somebody else”), he starts building a reputation in the folk clubs of the Greenwich Village, like Gerde’s Folk City. Since the Twenties the Village has become the mecca for any bohemian, poet, artist and misfit looking for freedom from conventions and bad traditions. At the time the Village is also one of a few interracial melting pots.

Being a huge fan of Woody Guthrie, the great folk legend who’s dying at the Brooklyn State Hospital, Dylan sports a business card that says “I ain’t dead yet”, signed WG. But, as his friends way back in Minneapolis would say, he’s standing at the same mystic crossroads where they say thirty years earlier Robert Johnson has sold his soul to the Devil in order to become a music genius. How could you explain otherwise Dylan’s stunning metamorphosis when, during the same Spring, he’ll return home for a brief visit, with a surprisingly new voice and a sudden mastery with the guitar?

Truth is, that time had erased every trace of his past and the future is just pure imagination. “I didn’t have a past to talk about, nothing to go back to, nobody to count on”, Dylan says to director Martin Scorsese in his No Direction Home film. “Only folk music could communicate to me something that was in synch with my feelings towards life, people, institutions, ideologies.”

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of Blowin’ in the Wind

At that time everything that counted for me was learning as many folk songs as possible, but the majority of the people I knew thought it was stuff from the past, really archaic. I don’t know why, but to me it seemed that those songs were nailing the present better than anything else”.

In the same month of May 1961, in Branford, Connecticut, where Dylan is due to perform at the Montowese Hotel, there’s also a photographer waiting for him. His name is Joe Alper. 37 years old, a jazz and folk fan, Alper is already shooting a variety of important record covers for artists like John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus and Pete Seeger, but never fails to shoot and support, with a fervor shared with his wife Jackie, the young upcoming folkies that get to perform in the local clubs and cafes, like the historic Caffe Lena in Saratoga Springs.

The Alper’s are in the right milieu. Jackie works as secretary to the legendary ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax and, like Joe, is a close friend of Pete Seeger, another hero of folk music and civil conscience. Joe has only recently devoted himself to photography, certainly to follow his passion for music, but also hoping to find a way out from his dramatic financial situation. Unfortunately a more serious problem is looming large: his battle, just begun, with ADPKD is bound to end tragically with his death in just a few years, in 1968.

Alper often follows Dylan with his camera, at the Indian Neck Folk Festival in 1961 or more north, in January 1962, at Caffe Lena or at the San Remo in Schenectady. On these occasions Dylan will gladly stay at the Alper’s house in Brandywine Avenue. Therefore the historic value of Joe’s photos of Dylan at this early stage in his career is invaluable, not only because they record fundamental passages, from his first steps until the electric revolution at Newport 1965, but most of all because they show an artist unprepared, informally, without the masks he’s already wearing in the same period when posing for other photographers like Barry Feinstein, David Gahr, Ted Russell or John Cohen. Captured in an unusual domestic bliss, often with his fiancée Suze Rotolo (the same immortalized by Don Hunstein on the cover of the *Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* album), or playing with constructions with Alper’s kids, or singing for Pete Seeger and an asleep Rev. Gary Davis at Gil Turner’s wedding (another key figure in the recording studio with producer Bob Thiele, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie with Quincy Jones, Ray Charles in a rare image of him singing on stage sax, Charlie Mingus with Max Roach, Herbie*’*s Wolff, Joe Zawinul, Mississippi John Hurt and Elizabeth Cotton, Big Joe Williams. Alper’s camera makes the intensity of these artists’ performances and their magnetism palpable, capturing them in a dimension that – be it the stage of the first big folk and jazz festivals of the time, or the aseptic intimacy of a recording studio – seems even more miraculously friendly and livable. This is a unique record of an unrepeatable era when, as Dylan puts it, “the performers I saw and I wanted to be shared the same thing: it was in their eyes and it seemed to want to say: ‘We know something that you don’t know’. That’s the kind of performer I wanted to be”.

Atsushi Nishizawa, Wall Of Sound Gallery
Ramblin’ outa the wild West,
Leavin’ the towns I love the best.
Thought I’d seen some ups and down,
‘Til I come into New York town.
People goin’ down to the ground,
Buildings goin’ up to the sky.

BOB DYLAN, *Talkin’ New York.*
... and all that jazz, blues, folk...
32. MAX ROACH and CHARLIE MINGUS, Newport Jazz Festival, 1962.
33. THELONIOUS MONK, Newport Jazz Festival, 1965.
34. MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT and ELIZABETH COTTEN, Newport Folk Festival, 1964.
35. MUDDY WATERS, Newport Jazz Festival, 1965.
37. NINA SIMONE, Newport Jazz Festival, 1962.
38. DUKE ELLINGTON, Newport Jazz Festival, 1962.
40. RAY CHARLES, 1963.
41. MILES DAVIS, Newport Jazz Festival, 1966.
42. SONNY ROLLINS, 1961.
43. ROLAND KIRK, Newport Jazz Festival, 1962.
44. JOHN COLTRANE, Newport Jazz Festival, 1965.

Alternate frame to the one used for the Impressions album cover.
45. THELONIOUS MONK, Newport Jazz Festival, 1965.
46. JOE ZAWINUL recording Ben Webster's Soulmates album, 1963.
47. DIZZY GILLESPIE and QUINCY JONES in the recording studio, 1965.
48. JOHN COLTRANE and producer BOB THIELE recording the John Coltrane And Johnny Hartman album, 1963.
49. CHARLIE MINGUS in the studio recording Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus, 1963.
Joe Alper’s images of folk, jazz and blues greats have been published on countless record covers, magazines and books. Musicians appreciated his talent in not standing in the way of the audience with his imposing height (7’5’’), or choosing in time with the music, or even avoiding to shoot during the most delicate music passages of a live performance (the 35mm Minoltas that Joe loved and used were quite noisy at the time).

Black and white images shot exclusively in available light, the intimacy of many photographs due to Joe’s admiration for his subjects and their art, captured in moments of intense emotion and copious sweat, his darkroom technique and his use of unconventional print sizes – everything confirms Alper’s greatness as an artist photographer. If you own folk, jazz or blues records from the Sixties, you quite likely already own a piece of his work.

His career ended prematurely when he died at only 43, after having just established a photo dept at SUNY, the University of Albany. Joe Alper also taught photography at the Nova Gallery in Sarasota Springs, at EMCA in Schenectady, at the Union College, and has been an art lecturer and consultant at State University in Albany. In 1962 he also won the International Jazz Photo Competition in Poland.

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Established by photographer Guido Harari, Wall Of Sound Gallery is a small time capsule where the collective unconscious can reconnect with the visual emotions of 60 years of music. Here aficionados and collectors can appreciate and purchase their favorite images in numbered and signed editions, as well as a great selection of rare books and original poster art. The love and passion for music, photography and, why not, great wine and food can now converge in the city of Alba, the magic heart of the Langhe area of Piedmont. All our photographs can be ordered via our website and will be shipped worldwide with a courier.