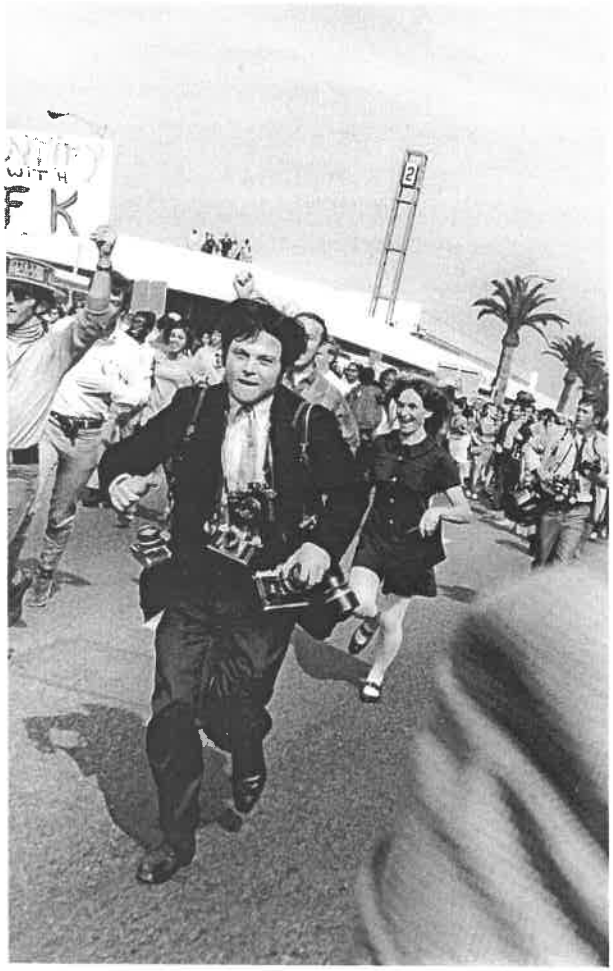
ACTIVISTS AND ICONS

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF STEVE SCHAPIRO



Steve Schapiro covering Robert F. Kennedy, 1966. Photo by Flip Schulke.

Steve Schapiro's 1960s photographs reflect and challenge the divide between ordinary and extraordinary people. These images of activists and icons ask us to question who should star in American history. Politicians, celebrities, and civil rights leaders deserve attention for shaping legislation and popular culture. But these celebrated figures often had to catch up with campaigns led by unnamed people. In years of unprecedented prosperity, it was these civil rights activists who confronted powerbrokers and tastemakers to demand a more authentic and participatory democracy.

Schapiro's interest in activists comes from his curiosity about each person's creative capacity. Born in New York City in 1934, Schapiro grew up photographing his Bronx working-class neighbors. At Bard College, he considered becoming a novelist, but realized his talents lay in crafting narratives with his camera. He set out to become a photographer for *LIFE*, the premier photo journal magazine. His first major breakthrough came from his work on all-but-forgotten itinerant agricultural workers in Arkansas. *The New York Times* printed one of these photographs on its cover in 1961. Soon Schapiro had assignments for *LIFE*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, and more. It was during this 1960s "golden age" of photojournalism that Schapiro earned the reputation as one of the nation's finest freelance photographers.

Schapiro got posh assignments to photograph famous people, but he continued to document the less prominent in obscure and sometimes dangerous places. Schapiro stated, "For me there's no difference between photographing a celebrity and a migrant worker. You're always looking for a picture with emotion, design and information." In November 1962, Schapiro was electrified by a James Baldwin essay in *The New Yorker*. "Letter from a Region in My Mind" was a primer on the long Black Freedom Struggle and an autobiographical call to arms.

Schapiro interpreted Baldwin's message with his camera, proposing a story to *LIFE* that allowed him to travel through the South on the author's month-long speaking tour. On this trip, Schapiro documented the civil rights movement with care and intimacy, unlike others who arrived just after a pivotal moment and left once they got a shot for that day's assignment. Following this trip with Baldwin, Schapiro took on assignments in Alabama, Mississippi, and other southern locations from 1963-1968, exquisitely documenting one of the most vital social movements in American history.

ACTIVISTS

Schapiro's photographs of the southern civil rights movement reveal more complicated people than media outlets typically portrayed. Schapiro could anticipate what editors wanted to publish, fulfilling their expectations for "hero shots" (a reference to the photo selected by an editor) with artful and moving photographs. These widely disseminated images captured leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis, as well as key mobilizations—from the 1963 March on Washington, to the 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, to the aftermath of Dr. King's 1968 assassination. But Schapiro also took photographs that got less attention, capturing moments of activists training and deliberating, engaging in exhausting day-to-day organizing, and making broad demands. These images reveal a profound Black Freedom Struggle in pursuit of social transformation, not polite assimilation into white society.

Civil rights activists understood how the media could amplify their movement, and their street theater was designed for documentation. In the early and mid-1960s, demonstrators knelt, held hands, and prayed in public to emphasize their non-violent intentions and cast their opponents' hatred as immoral. Indeed, photographs of these protests (including many by Schapiro) drew many Americans into the movement. But Schapiro's photographs, some unpublished until recently, also show African Americans as ecstatic, dignified, and unapologetically Black. Schapiro's civil rights photography provides a three-dimensional portrait of a beautiful and terrifying struggle that produced social change but did not achieve its full agenda.

Some of these activists have rightly become icons of the civil rights movement. But even as icon-making commemorates worthy figures, it can also flatten them. The images of icons all around us—on t-shirts, posters, and coffee mugs—tend to invoke simple tales of heroic individuals. Rosa Parks was tired and she sat down on a white-designated bus seat. Martin Luther King, Jr. articulated a dream of equality at the Lincoln Memorial. Creating icons can distort the very people they seek to commemorate. Schapiro's civil rights photographs defy simple morality tales by framing a broader struggle for human dignity. They bear witness to collective struggle, restoring the icons to their context and evoking urgent visions for justice more than fifty years later.

ICONS

Many of the politicians and artists that Schapiro depicted were influenced by the dynamic movements of the 1960s. They used their fame to critique social norms. James Baldwin, who had become a celebrity after publishing *The Fire Next Time* and taking part in Schapiro's *LIFE* photo essay, dedicated himself to racial justice and used his status and his typewriter to highlight Southern activists. Baldwin and his allies reached politician Robert F. Kennedy, whose civil rights advocacy had become a full embrace by the time of his 1968 assassination. Muhammad Ali was arguably the most important Black icon in 1960s America and around the globe. His membership in the Black separatist Nation of Islam placed him beyond Baldwin's interracial democratic civil rights vision. Yet Ali similarly applied his iconic status to influence the antiwar and Black Power movements of the late 1960s.

Other icons believed that their art could open American culture to a wider spectrum of people and ideas. They bent and broadened gender and sexual identities, an issue that the 1960s mainstream civil rights movement did not address outright but that activists such as Baldwin knew was bound up in anti-racist demands. Schapiro also photographed people who critiqued the very idea of an icon. Perhaps farthest afield but nonetheless representative, Andy Warhol created multiple screen prints of products, celebrities, and even images based on familiar civil rights photographs from the mass media.

Schapiro's icon and activist photography is interconnected. Both strands of his work reflect his compassion for the widest spectrum of humankind and his desire to document freedom in the making. These images make the viewer feel, question, and learn from people who had the audacity to think they could strengthen and even liberate the nation's soul.