



SIGHTS, SOUNDS, AND SOUL

BEN PETRY



Twin Cities through the Lens of Charles Chamblis

"THE SMELL OF THE CAMERAS; that's a memory that sticks with me," said Reva Chamblis about the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about her father. "I walk in a room and I could smell film and the cameras and the dust collecting on them."

Stacked on shelves and cupboards, blanketing floors and furniture, and even sticking out of pots on the stove, Charles's ever-growing camera collection amused visitors to his North Minneapolis apartment. Invariably, he would greet Reva with a warm smile and a hurried, "Okay, give me a second; let me move some things."

Reva's parents divorced when she was two years old, but afterwards the family remained close. At gatherings, Jeanette Pierson would always call her ex-husband with a request that moved his soul like the interplay of violins in a symphony: "Charles, I want you to come over and take a picture."

The effect of a request like that—to stop a moment in time—and a desire to breathe passion and feelings into a camera to achieve that moment were weighty matters for Charles from the instant he received his first camera (a

one-step Polaroid) as a gift in the 1960s. "Am I going to have a garden this year?" he wrote in a note to himself in 1982. "I take pictures of people—that is a garden to ME."

BORN IN 1927 IN PITTSBURGH, Charles learned to "hustle" and be independent early. He spent most of his childhood without his mother and experienced what he called "hard times," leaving much of the detail to the imagination. As a teenager, he went to live with his mother but ended up running away when the reunion did not work out. He then spent time in a boy's home. At some point during this trying odyssey, Charles, who liked drawing and dreamed of becoming an artist, lied about his age to get placed in an art school.

Marriage to Jeanette brought him to Minneapolis in 1958, and her gift of a camera was the beginning of his life in photography. The fruit of that gift—close-ups

Ben Petry, the curator for Sights, Sounds, and Soul, is an exhibit developer at the Minnesota History Center. He thanks Reva Chamblis and Roosevelt Gains for delightful talks about Charles, whose appointment books, quoted in this article, are in the private collection of Reva Chamblis.

FACING: *The Pictureman*, Charles Chamblis, about 1973.

ABOVE: *Lake Calhoun*, Minneapolis, 1985.



Reva Chamblis, Charles's daughter, graduating from the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, 1986

that speak, moments that sing, and doors that open again—was donated to the Minnesota Historical Society in 2001 by Reva Chamblis: more than 2,000 images including portraits, weddings, family gatherings, models, musicians, nightclub scenes, and events from around the Twin Cities.

The first exhibit of Charles's work, *Sights, Sounds, and Soul: Twin Cities through the Lens of Charles Chamblis*, features 70 to 80 of those images as well as a selection of loaned objects and some from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. Accompanying many of the images are personal stories, ranging from those of musicians like the legendary Willie Walker and Roberta Davis, sharing aspects of their lives on and off the bandstand, to former grocery store owner Leroy King, telling about his family business and its impact on his north Minneapolis neighborhood.

Charles, who had a knack for being “everywhere” in the cities, could converse on a range of topics as easily as he could smile and his camera could click. His generosity stood out even more. “You hear this said about a lot about people, but Charles *actually would* give you the shirt off of his back,” said his close friend, Roosevelt

Gains. That kindness extended to clients short on funds. Charles would say, “It’s O.K., catch me next time!” or often forget the charge altogether. Photography was his sole occupation. He had to “hustle” to earn a modest living and stay in front of film, photo-processing, and used-vehicle purchases and repair costs (all ubiquitous in his notes).

But Charles gained a different kind of wealth—that “people garden” he loved—and the simultaneous opportunity to feel what his eyes saw. “I can take a better

picture,” he said, “if I know what I’m looking at.” His appointment-calendar jottings, beginning in the early 1970s, are word pictures of the joy—“Sooooooo carried away with the subject that you looose your perspective!”—and soberness—“There’s only one game in town and that is reality”—captured by his lens. At those two poles—and on all things in between—his subjects spoke loudest. “A photographer has to respect human nature.” He allowed people to be themselves.

CHARLES PASSED AWAY IN 1991, leaving a legacy in pictures like no other photographer, particularly of the Twin Cities Black community. “I think in his own sense, my dad was planning on documenting this period. He was pretty upset when he got sick” [with a rare blood disease, diagnosed in 1985], Reva said. He continued working into the late 1980s, until he could no longer physically endure another professional shoot. “There was so much more he wanted to do. . . . He saw something in every picture.” □

All photos are in MNHS collections.



Sights, Sounds, and Soul will be on view at the Minnesota History Center from April 26, 2014 until February 16, 2015. For more information, visit www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/exhibits/chamblis.



Toya White and son, Steven Edgar Jackson, about the time of his second birthday (June 23, 1979), Lake Calhoun, Minneapolis.

"I bought Steven a new, little outfit and told him 'I'm going to give you the biggest lollipop and we're going to have a BIG day! I look up and who do I see? The Pictureman with a huge grin saying, 'I gotta get this picture! I gotta get this picture!'"



Work came with tantalizing perks. Willoughby Black (right) is saying to Charles—and anyone else interested in homemade barbeque sauce, “This is what I’m talking about!” Minneapolis, about 1975

While stopped at a traffic light at Lake Calhoun, Chamblis *had* to take this photograph of an accommodating couple: head-turning youth, vibrant colors, and the concerto of pistons from the 1982 Honda CX500T Turbo must have compelled it. Quickly the camera is raised and pointed out the driver’s window, the light changing from red to green. In a moment the bike is gone.

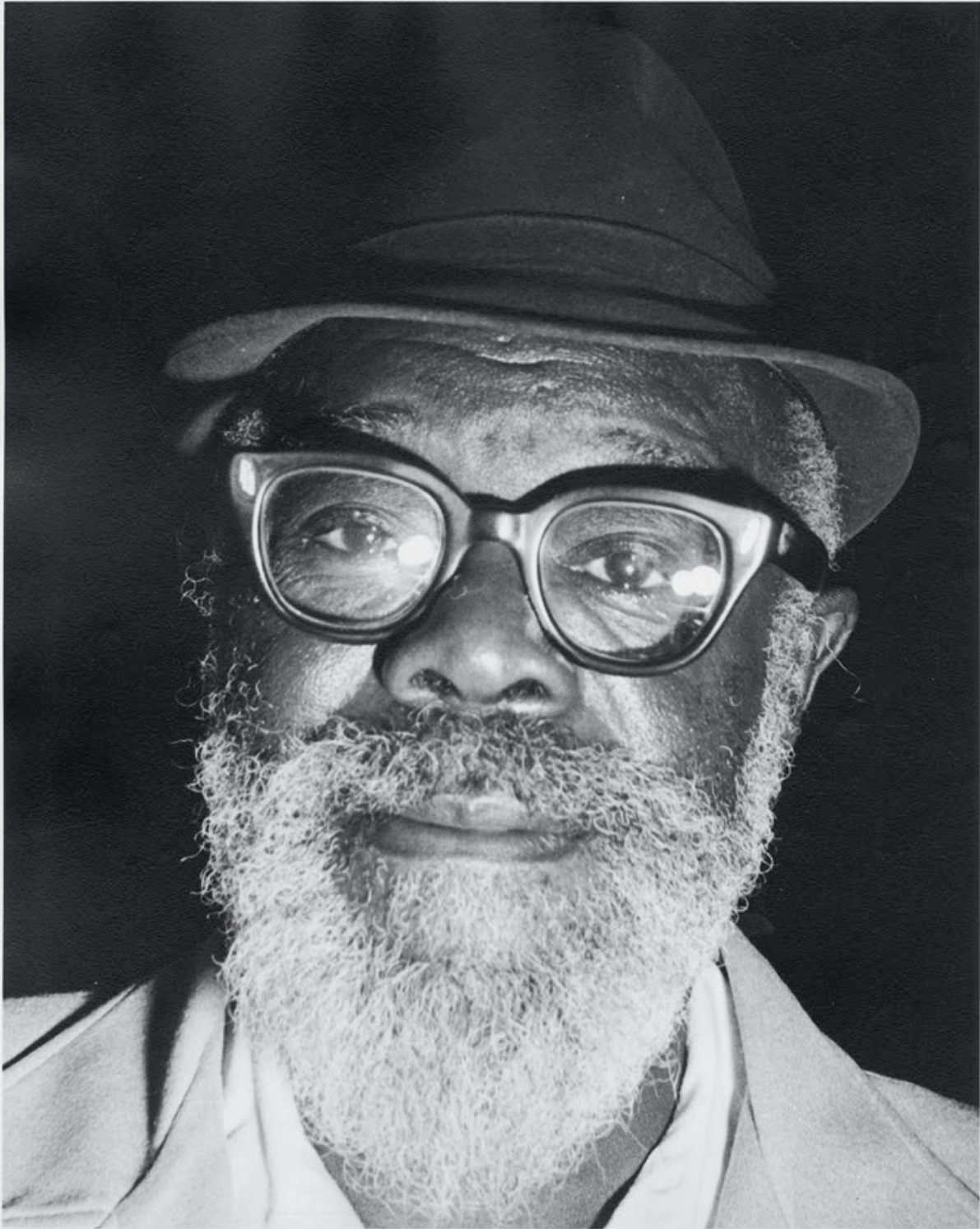




Rosina Hood (fur coat) and Kevin LA Jenkins (holding camera) perform a skit, Hotel Radisson, Minneapolis, about 1978. "Rosina and I switched and I became the model," recalled Kevin. "Before, fellas were basically just escorts that looked good: walk the girl down, then let her go and she does her thing. Well, my group decided, 'If the women can turn, why can't we?'"



Event held at The Way, 1913 Plymouth Avenue, Minneapolis, about 1976. Founded in 1966, The Way fought against racial disparities and advocated for youth through a variety of programs, including education, employment, sports, and music. In 1985, a year before the organization lost its funding, Hobart Mitchell Jr., president under director Harry “Spike” Moss, said, “Any Black person is vulnerable when he won’t say, ‘Yes sir, no sir’ to the establishment.” (*Star Tribune*, July 12, 2002, quote)



A homeless man standing outside the
Great Northern Market on Minneapolis's
Hennepin Avenue, about 1975



Chamblis's flash simultaneously catches a disco ball and Cyndy Booker in her element, Fox Trap, Minneapolis, about 1979



“Angela knew no strangers,” said Fleta Ireland, Angela Burkhalter’s close friend. At her passing in November 2011, *Insight News* remembered the former communications administrator, fashion model, and celebrated Miss Black Minnesota (1979) as a “fierce fighter for human rights and dignity, and . . . health and wellness.” Angela was one of Charles’s favorite people to photograph.



“Everybody hung out at Lake Calhoun on the weekends back then,” said northside barbershop owner Brian Davis. Sun-kissed photographs abound in Charles’s collection—from high-socked roller skaters and “players” posed with their just-waxed vehicles to “remember that day” moments like this one, about 1981.



Minnesota Vikings great Chuck Foreman and his son, Jay Foreman, line up before biking around Lake Calhoun, about 1983. “I thought it was so cool to ride in that Wagoneer. I’d always look for those white walls and the wood grain when my dad would pick me up from school.” Jay became a three-time national champion at the University of Nebraska and played eight years in the NFL.



Paul Johnson and members of Runway, Taste Show Lounge, Minneapolis, about 1982. Paul joined Runway after the breakup of Haze, an influential '70s group that wrote its own material and made it to the brink of success, opening locally for the Jackson 5 in 1975. Having black members prevented both Haze and Runway from playing white venues. "Music is music," said Paul. "We didn't look at it as an indicator of color."



The popular Flyte Tyme dressed as Parliament-Funkadelic, Fox Trap, Minneapolis, about 1979. Clockwise from upper left: David Eiland, Tony Johnson (helmet), Garry "Jellybean" Johnson, David Johnson, Cynthia Johnson, James "Chipmunk" Anderson, and Terry Lewis (middle, arms outstretched). Members of the band went on to extraordinary success.



The Valdons, Dick's Jet-A-Way Club, Minneapolis, about 1970. Left to right (bottom row): Napoleon Crayton, Monroe Wright, Clifton Curtis, and Bill Clark; Donald Breedlove and the Navajo Train band (top). Said Wright, "We put on a powerful show. . . . It could be 35 below and there would still be a line to see us."



Leroy King, his wife, Minerva (now deceased), and his sister, Louise, King Supermarket, Minneapolis, about 1975. The first supermarket in the neighborhood, King's prided itself on going the second mile in serving the community. Even if a blizzard virtually shut down the city, Minerva and Leroy said, "We gotta get to the store."



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