

New Photos Shows Different Side of Annie Leibovitz



AP

Photographer Annie Leibovitz at her exhibit in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Shirley Griffith.

JUNE SIMMS: And I'm June Simms. This week on our program, we visit a new exhibit of work by photographer Annie Leibovitz. Then, we tell you about a collection of works by women performing traditional American music. And, later, we go under the streets of New York City to hear the work of subway musicians.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Annie Leibovitz has been a photographer for forty years. She is famous for her photographs of people, especially famous people. She says she will continue doing portraits of people, but also wants to take other kinds of photos.

A new exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington shows a different side to her work. She spent two years taking pictures without any people in them. Many are photos of places in the United States where famous people lived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are photos of

homes and personal items that belonged to people including artists, scientists, photographers and a president. The exhibit is called "Pilgrimage."

Ms. Leibovitz explains that from two thousand nine to two thousand eleven, she took photos of places that moved her emotionally. She says the collection represents a renewal of her spirit. Her lover, the author Susan Sontag, died of cancer at the end of two thousand four. Ms. Leibovitz had financial troubles and almost lost control of her photo archives.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ: "There's some searching going on. I discovered some things about myself which were really comforting."

Ms. Leibovitz says she was inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe, the twentieth century artist. She traveled to New Mexico to photograph the houses where O'Keeffe lived and a box of handmade pastels that she drew with.

Ms. Leibovitz also captured images of items that belonged to President Abraham Lincoln. These include his hat and gloves from when he was assassinated in eighteen-sixty-five.

Andy Grundberg curated the exhibit for the museum.

ANDY GRUNDBERG: "What she's really trying to do is evoke the presence of people, in a way, despite their absence."

He calls the exhibit "a portrait of Leibovitz."

ANDY GRUNDBERG: "This is a way of understanding how Annie Leibovitz thinks about the world through the pictures that she's taken of people and places that are important to her."

Annie Leibovitz told reporters that she had not planned to focus on people from the past.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ: "What really drew me to them, I think that they stand out. I thrive on history. I love it."

One person she focused on was Annie Oakley. Annie Oakley was famous in the late eighteen hundreds for her shooting skills. She appeared in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Annie Leibovitz photographed Annie Oakley's boots and one of her shooting targets.

She also went to Graceland, Elvis Presley's home in Tennessee. There, she took a picture of his motorcycle. The rock and roll great died in nineteen seventy-seven.

To honor Ansel Adams, the famous landscape photographer, Ms. Leibovitz took a picture of his darkroom. Ansel Adams was known for his photography of the wilderness in the American West. He was also a leader in the nature conservation movement. He died in nineteen eighty-four.

Annie Leibovitz also took photos similar to his pictures of Yosemite Valley in California.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ: "The best homage you can make was photographing that valley that he saved."

The "Pilgrimage" exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum continues through May twentieth.

(MUSIC)

JUNE SIMMS: American roots music is the collective name for traditional forms like old-time country, blues and folk music. Some of the best-remembered roots musicians include men like Lead Belly, Muddy Waters and Doc Watson. Now, a woman in the Pacific Northwest is trying to get people to think more about female roots musicians.

On a recent day, Dyann Arthur and her husband, Rick, were at the Old-Time Music Gathering in Portland, Oregon. She walked around the performance hall and compared the numbers of male and female players in different groups.

DYANN ARTHUR: "This one's pretty well integrated, and then there are some of them that are primarily the guys."

Ms. Arthur plays piano and guitar but earned her living from mortgage loan banking. She recently retired. So did her husband, a pilot. They talked a lot about what they would do in their retirement. They wanted something meaningful that combined music and travel.

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: The result was a trip through thirty of the fifty states. They recorded performances of women making traditional music. And, says Rick Arthur, they also asked the women about their histories as musicians.

RICK ARTHUR: "They don't have mentors. They don't have an image to see themselves in that position. Early on we took that as kind of a philosophical goal to produce those types of images that women could identify with."

The work developed into the MusicBox Project. So far this nonprofit effort has collected material on more than eighty American roots musicians.

DYANN ARTHUR: "All forms of music. We like to say A to Z, Appalachian to Zydeco."

One of the artists is vocalist and guitarist Lauren Sheehan of Portland.

(MUSIC)

Ms. Sheehan trained as a classical musician in the late nineteen seventies. Then, one day, she borrowed some vinyl records of folk music from her college library.

LAUREN SHEEHAN: "When I heard that breadth, I sought out folk festivals even more. That was because there was an archived piece of real music that spoke to me."

The music included recordings from the nineteen thirties, collected by the Library of Congress.

Now, through the MusicBox Project, Lauren Sheehan's own music is in the American Folklife collection at the Library of Congress. The Arthurs donated a copy of their collection to the library.

LAUREN SHEEHAN: "I am only a little drop in the bucket of oral tradition, but I am a drop in the bucket, and wonderful players have passed stuff on to me who have now died. All this being in the Library of Congress is so cool because other people can hear that."

Dyann Arthur, the co-founder of the MusicBox Project, says part of her mission is to present examples for future generations of women.

DYANN ARTHUR: "With the educational piece that we hope to do as this thing goes forward -- I would say three to five years out -- is going to be allowed to go into the schools in a format that says, 'Look at that saxophone player. There's another one. I can do that, too.'"

The Arthurs also have a YouTube channel with more than three hundred performances. You can find a link at voaspecialenglish.com. Dyann Arthur is currently editing some of that material into a documentary.

(MUSIC: Allison Krauss)

JUNE SIMMS: The New York subway system is one of the largest public transportation systems in the world. Each week more than eight million people travel around the city on the subway. But riders can find more than just transportation below the streets of New York. Many subway stations are like free

concert halls, with almost every kind of music competing with the noise of the trains.

Rawl Mitchell is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago. He began playing the steel drums in the subway in the middle of the nineteen nineties.

RAWL MITCHELL: "The people do appreciate the music. They stand around listening to the music and if it pleases them, they applaud and put their money in the case or whatever. They usually clap and say, 'You know, it's nice'."

A singer and songwriter named Rosateresa has been performing in the subway almost as long.

ROSATERESA: "My mission is to sing like the jilguero. The jilguero is a Puerto Rican bird -- I'm Puerto Rican -- that wakes up the sun."

Players like Rawl Mitchell and Rosateresa perform on their own. They are not part of the transit system's official "Music Under New York" program. That program offers one hundred fifty weekly performances, including American bluegrass and African kora music.

The only money the musicians earn is whatever the people listening choose to give them.

(SOUND)

On this day, Patricia Vital and Tom McNichols are finding a small but supportive audience. They are members of a group called Opera Collective. They say they love performing opera in the subway, even though they do not earn much.

TOM McNICHOLS: "Music in general is not for the money, and music under New York is definitely more about making opera more accessible than it is about making a living."

Folk singer Wendy Sayvetz has performed in train stations for more than twenty years. She has also performed at the White House. She says people who think subway musicians do not like being subway musicians are wrong.

WENDY SAYVETZ: "What they don't get is that we actually love this gig."

In fact, Ms. Sayvetz and a partner are developing a musical play about subway musicians.

WENDY SAYVETZ: "It's not about 'Oh, we don't have to play in the subway anymore.' We want people to go, 'Oh, subway music is the best thing!'"

You can watch a video about subway musicians at voaspecialenglish.com.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Our program was produced by Brianna Blake and June Simms with reporting by Deborah Block, Tom Banse and Carolyn Weaver. I'm Shirley Griffith.

JUNE SIMMS: And I'm June Simms. You can find transcripts and MP3s of our programs at voaspecialenglish.com. And, while you're there, check out the new relationship advice blog for English learners -- where you give the advice. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.