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CELEBRATING SURVIVAL

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CHESTER HIGGINS

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ART NEWS

CELEBRATING SURVIVAL



A 25-YEAR VOYAGE OF
DISCOVERY TOOK PHOTOGRAPHER
CHESTER HIGGINS
TO MORE THAN 30 COUNTRIES
IN EUROPE, AFRICA, THE CARIBBEAN,
AND NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA.
"IT'S AN ODYSSEY," HE SAYS
OF THE RESULTING WORK,
"A SEARCH FOR AND
AFFIRMATION OF
MYSELF"

BY A. D. COLEMAN

I didn't go to school for photography; I learned from old men," the photographer Chester Higgins, Jr., says a few minutes into our conversation in the staff lunchroom at the *New York Times*. Now 50, with hints of gray visible beneath his colorful African crown cap, he names P. H. Polk, Arthur Rothstein, Cornell Capa, Romare Bearden, and Gordon Parks as those who tutored him informally over the years; he cites W. Eugene Smith as his "emotional idol" in the discipline of photojournalism; and he notes his sense of connection with the "lyricism" of Henri Cartier-Bresson.

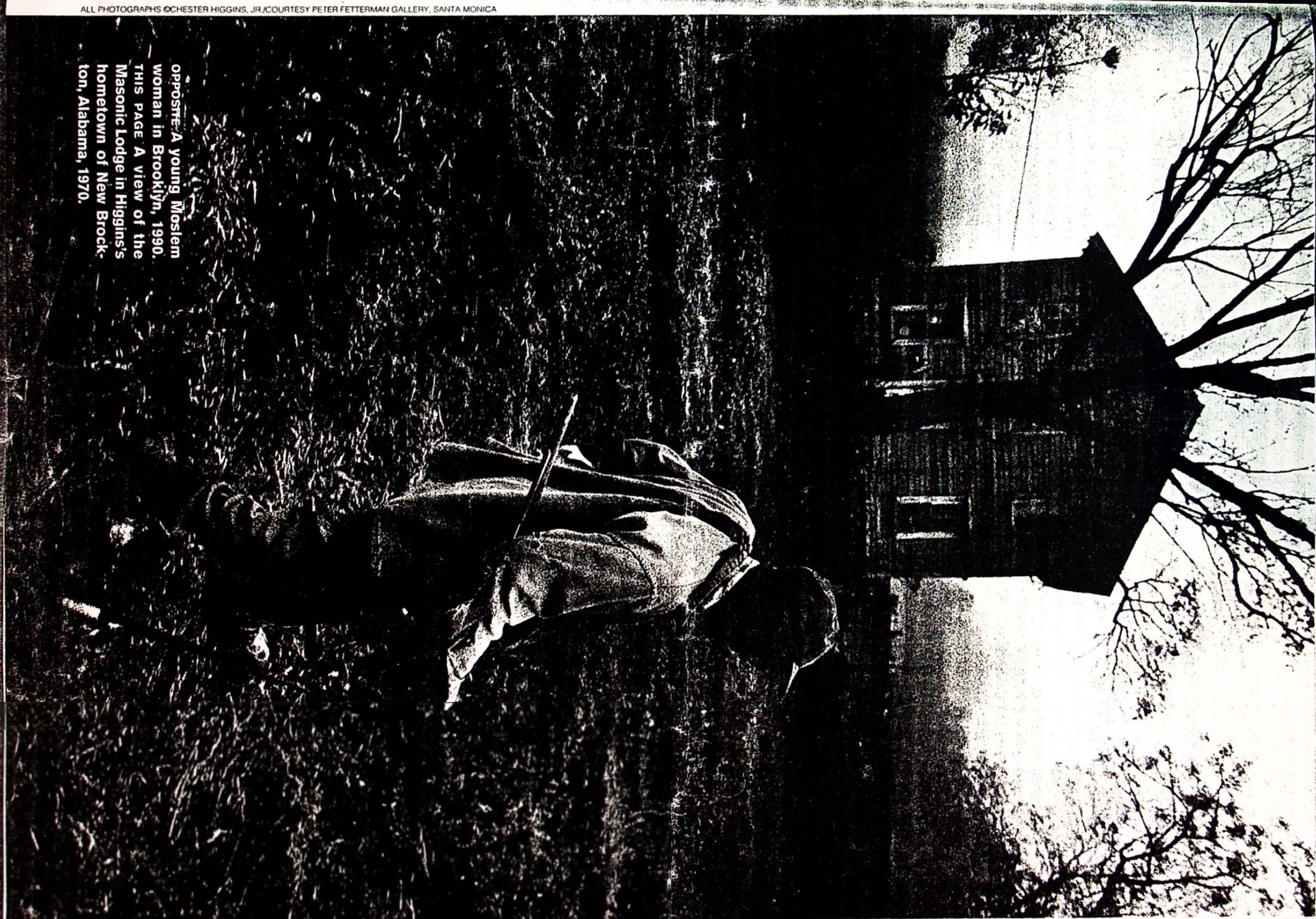
Few people I've met seem so intent on honoring their forebears, mentors, and models as does the affable, mild-mannered Higgins. His eye to the past correlates with a career-long drive to reconstruct—and even, to some extent, construct—the lineage of African Americans and to investigate the broader historical phenomenon of what he has come to call the African diaspora.

The most recent result of these labors—"Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa"—takes the form of a massive exhibition that made its debut at the International Center of Photography in New York City in October 1995, drew some 20,000 visitors during its run there, and is currently on a national tour under the Center's auspices. It's now on view (through the 23rd of next month) at the Smithsonian Museum, Center for African-American History and Culture, in conjunction with another traveling exhibition by Higgins entitled "Invoking the Spirit: Worship Traditions in the African World." The handsomely designed, oversize book version of "Feeling the Spirit" (Bantam, \$50 hardbound) has already sold over 30,000 copies.

In some circles, it's considered fashionable nowadays to treat the demise of traditional documentary photography—or, at least, its presumably thorough "discreditation"—as a given. In fact, the form has never claimed a longer roster of committed practitioners, nor attracted so many viewers. Reports of its death, like that of Mark Twain's, have been greatly exaggerated. To be sure, the public response to "Feeling the Spirit" serves as evidence of that, and also as validation of the accessibility of the work of a man who, in describing himself, says modestly, "Essentially, I'm a social anthropologist with a camera."

Higgins, a *New York Times* staff photographer since 1975, went in search of his roots (he traces himself back to a once-enslaved Civil War veteran), ended up looking for present-day Africa, and found it everywhere. The resulting pictures—annotated with informative, somewhat autobiographical texts by the photographer himself—celebrates this extraordinary survival, exploring the endurance and transmutation of African sensibility in countries around the world. Inevitably, they also mourn the destructive aspects of that forced dispersal and, at the same time, quietly but firmly accuse.

But Higgins proves himself less interested in placing blame than in locating and cherishing the persistence of core elements of African culture. In this study, these range from images of the crossed arms of a skeleton uncovered in 1992 in a 17th-century African burial ground in lower Manhattan to pictures of Vodou, Candomble, and Santeria ceremonies in the Caribbean, and on to images annotating traditional African customs around the world. He is equally intent on placing the experience of African Americans within the larger context of their kinship not only with uprooted and expatriated blacks all over the globe but also—as in pictures that portray Moslem and Ethiopian Ortho-



OPPOSITE: A young Moslem woman in Brooklyn, 1990.
THIS PAGE: A view of the Masonic Lodge in Higgins's hometown of New Brockton, Alabama, 1970.



dox worshippers in both the U.S. and in Africa—with those who still inhabit their original homelands. “My life mission as a photographer is more political than esthetic,” Higgins admits, “though I understand and appreciate the esthetics and work hard to master them. My visual talents are harnessed to a mission: to document the lives and times of people of African descent and to highlight the decency, dignity, and character among my people that go unexplored in the major media. It’s an odyssey, a search for and affirmation of myself.” Though more quietly radical in his methodology than Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Higgins, like them, defines the situation of African Americans as an international rather than a merely domestic issue. “It’s a world message,” the photographer says.

Also like King and Malcolm X, Higgins began his life’s work close to his home—in New Brockton, a small village in southeast Alabama. He never studied photography formally; he majored in business management (with a minor in sociology) at Alabama’s Tuskegee University. His first encounter with the medium came during his student years. Working on the campus newspaper, he met P. H. Polk, one of the major early figures of African American photography. “P. H. Polk put my first camera in my hand,” recalls Higgins. “I come out of the tradition of Tuskegee photographers—Polk and, before him, C. M. Battey. Mr. Battey was Mr. Polk’s teacher, and Mr. Polk was mine.” After Tuskegee, Higgins came to New York, where in 1969 he met Arthur Rothstein (once with the Farm Security Administration) at *Look* magazine. Rothstein promptly took him under his wing, critiquing his work regularly and sending him off to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to study Old Master paintings. “My first lessons in how to see,” says Higgins of the long hours spent at the museum.

Higgins thrived under his tutor, who introduced him to another photojournalist who subsequently became the director of New

York’s International Center of Photography, Cornell Capa; together, they brought Higgins into the New York photography scene. Artist Romare Bearden, notes Higgins, “was another great teacher. He helped me develop an understanding of and appreciation for the Dutch masters—Rembrandt, Van Eyck. I used to go to his apartment for about 10 or 12 years. On Saturday mornings he’d hold court. As a black intellectual, I learned how to plumb those issues of identity—because that’s what my work is really about—from Bearden, and also from [photographer, writer, composer,] Gordon Parks.”

Higgins met Bearden when he asked the older artist if he could take his portrait for his 1974 book, *Drums of Life*, which documents the lives of black men throughout the United States. (Higgins’s first book, *Black Woman*, appeared in 1970.) In the meantime, he had made his first visit to Africa, in 1971. “The trip really opened my head up, that there was a different reality of African people other than I knew in America,” says Higgins. “It was the first time that I was not a minority.”

In 1975 Higgins joined the photography staff of the *New York Times*, often taking on assignments about black subjects that other black staffers turned down as secondary stories. It’s always preferable, he argues, to have such stories told by “a be-

longer rather than a nonbelonger.” Moreover, Higgins wanted to be heard. “I can make pictures in Alabama that show the decency, dignity, and character of people of African descent, but everyone in Tuskegee agrees with me. The reason I left Alabama to come to New York is that world opinion is being formed by the mass media that’s centered here,” he explains. “I wanted to be in the midst of that. I wanted to be on the national stage of this debate. I wanted my ideas, my way of seeing, within that currency of thought. If there’s a story to be done, I want to do it. I can go out and try to make a difference with my images, so I do.” Regardless of whether he’s photographing for the *Times* or for





CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE LEFT
A service at New York
City's Commandment Keeper
Synagogue, 1989; a woman in
Saint Lucia, 1992; Higgins on
location in Ethiopia, 1993; Egg
vendor along commuter rail
tracks in Ghana, 1974; and the
Door of No Return in the
House of Slaves in Dakar,
Senegal, 1972.



his own projects, the ongoing challenge, he says, is "learning to see other people through their own eyes."

Working with what he calls "a sense of urgency," impelled by the awareness that whatever he's looking at may not exist a decade later, Higgins describes himself as a fisherman, photographing "without knowing what the end result may be," checking periodically to see "what I've been able to snare in my net," finding, every now and then, that his catch contains the raw material for one project or another.

Which is to say that he did not set out to document the African diaspora, but instead, to his surprise, one day found himself knee-deep in doing so. In the late 1970s, Higgins—with writer Orde Coombs (his collaborator on *Drums of Life*)—researched and organized a book entitled *Some Time Ago*, a portrait in photographs of black life in the U.S. between 1850 and 1950. Meanwhile, he had returned to Africa numerous times (as of today, he has made at least 17 visits). But Higgins cites the year 1983 as the point at which the present project revealed itself to him as a work-in-progress. "That's when I identified the project in my own head, saw the potential of it, and realized I had a lot of gaps to fill." He credits Cornell Capa with forcing that recognition by asking him to define what he was doing and then insisting that he justify the use of the term "diaspora"—most commonly used for the Jews' departure from Israel—to describe his subject.

The result, "Feeling the Spirit," is Higgins's most intricate project to date—one that took him to over 30 countries in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and North and South America. Whether one calculates it to have begun with his early work at Tuskegee in the second half of the 1960s (the book opens with a picture of his great-aunt Shugg) or with his first trip to Africa in 1971, a 25-year personal voyage of discovery comes to fruition here. There is nothing comparable to it in photography: others may have investigated aspects in greater depth, but no one before Higgins has attempted anything of similar scope.

The photographer takes us from a view through the Door of No Return in the House of Slaves—the captives' last vision of Africa from the port of Dakar in Senegal—to scenes of his hometown in Alabama, from Paris to Martinique to Ethiopia. He reveals how what Bearden called "the persistence of ritual" manifests itself in both the mundane and the exalted—in work, worship, music making, and other aspects of everyday life.

"Feeling the Spirit" will continue to travel for several years. Higgins's hope is that it will eventually be shown abroad as well. Asked if he is considering taking "Feeling the Spirit" in other directions, he answers, "I have enough material"—an archive of 275,000 images—"that I can easily do a CD-ROM. Until now, my plate has been full. It's just a matter of time and the right opportunity. I'm sure it will come."

Meanwhile, in addition to his ongoing work for the *Times*, Higgins is pursuing a project devoted to Egypt, though its exact shape has not yet revealed itself to him; he's made seven trips there so far. "I study Egyptology very hard. But I don't know when I'm going to be able to turn around and do that book about Egypt. I don't know yet whether it's a book about the East African corridor—Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia—or the patrimony of African people, or the patrimony of spirituality. But I keep working. I keep digging," he says. "One day nuggets will appear to me, and it will come to me that this is what I should do, this is what can be done—like an epiphany." ■

A.D. Coleman is the photography critic for the New York Observer. His most recent book is *Tamished Silver: After the Photo Boom* (Midmarch Arts Press).