

Life Through the Lens

Richmond native and acclaimed photographer LeRoy Henderson's images provoke, inspire and reflect who we really are.

by Samantha Willis
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LeRoy Henderson's photographs are searing and unforgettable. In one, Coretta Scott King sits surrounded by her young children. Her face, with its wide, beautiful planes and serene eyes, looks a bit subdued. It's July 1968 at the Poor People's Campaign rally in Washington, D.C., three months after Coretta's husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been shot to death. Another image, taken more than 30 years later, shows L. Douglas Wilder smiling and triumphant at his inauguration as the first black governor of Virginia — and of any state in the country. In a third, a smartly dressed preacher and his wife stand before the Bethel Baptist Church in Unionville, peering through time.

The photos are part of Henderson's vast portfolio of civil rights, anti-war and street-style photography, moments he's captured through the lens over a 50-year career. As the country roils with rage and disbelief over the deadly shootings of two black men by police officers less than two days apart and the killing of 5 Dallas police officers by a sniper at a Black Lives Matter demonstration, and as riots fueled by racial tension and despair erupt around the

country, Henderson's photographs are a mirror. Look at them and they remind us that we've been here before, enveloped and blinded by a thick fog of prejudice, injustice and violence. Maybe we aren't as far removed from the turbulence of '50s and '60s as we'd like to believe; but if we prevailed before, we can again — Henderson's pictures prove it. His roots are embedded deeply in Richmond's North Side, where he grew up in the tight-knit Washington Park community.

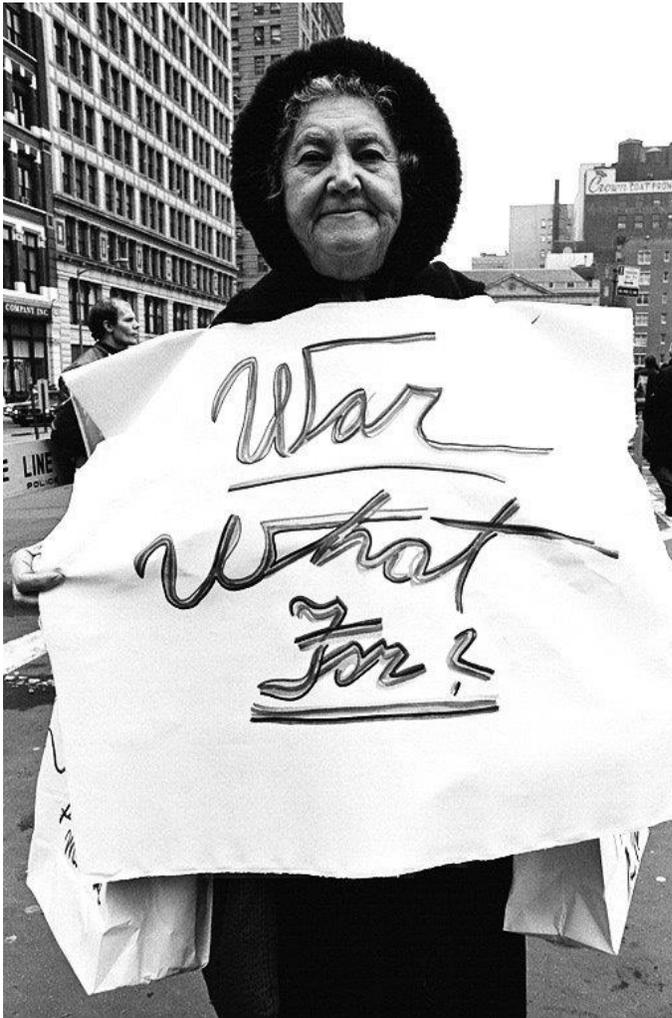
"We knew everybody in every house on every street," he says during a recent visit back home for a family reunion. "We were a very close, loving community."



LeRoy Henderson in Glen Allen. (Photo by Julianne Tripp)

Though he was primarily interested in fine art as a youngster (and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Virginia State University and a master's degree in fine arts from Pratt Institute), his childhood experiences with his grandmother's stereoscope viewer stoked his interest in protest and anti-war photos. "It had all these interesting scenes of Europe after the war, it was fascinating. And it gave you a three-dimensional view of the world."

For decades, Henderson's pictures documented protests against global conflicts, from the Vietnam War to the Iraq War. "War, what for?" reads an elderly woman's hand-painted Vietnam War protest sign in a 1967 image, her face stern but not unkind. Henderson also captured in stark relief the rising tide of the Civil Rights Movement. A 1967 black-and-white image shows Black Panther Party leader Stokely Carmichael speaking at the City College of New York, his eyes shaded behind dark glasses, mere months after the organization was founded as a militant alternative



to MLK's nonviolent, "love-thy-enemies" style of civil rights activism.

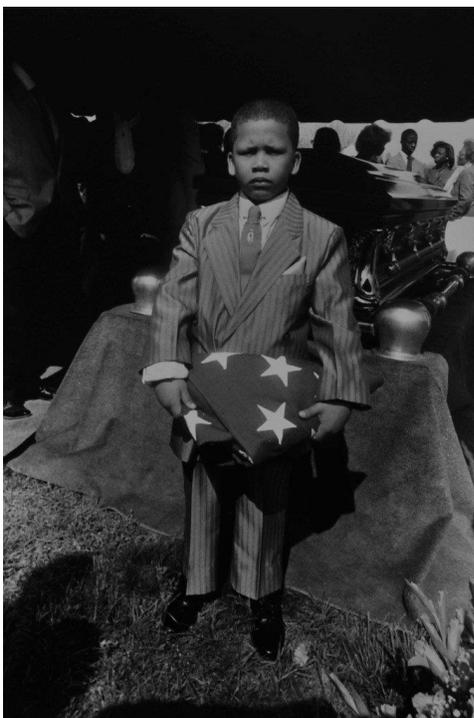
In another of Henderson's shots from the Poor People's Campaign rally, two little girls, prettily adorned in beribboned dresses and frilly socks, pick their way through a filthy camp where hundreds of America's poorest residents had planted themselves at the nation's capital ahead of the rally. It was a demand "that the government address itself to the problem of poverty," King said about the Poor People's Campaign in his last Sunday sermon, his final initiative before his assassination. The people could not — would not — be ignored. Henderson says it's one of the best pictures he ever took.



Young girls make their way through the temporary housing camps at the Poor People's Campaign Rally in Washington, D.C. in July 1968. (Photo by LeRoy Henderson)

"I love it because, here you have these two, cute little girls. But then you look around them," he says, sweeping his hand through the air. "They are wading through filth. It was a muddy encampment, a shantytown. People were living in lean-tos. Such a contrast, those little girls and the conditions in the Poor People's Campaign camp!"

The Virginia Museum of Fine Art featured several of his civil rights photographs in its spring 2014 exhibition, "Posing Beauty in African-American Culture" and "Signs of Protest," also featured in 2014. VMFA's Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Dr. Sarah Eckhardt says Henderson, like all the best documentary and street photographers, captures the emotional significance of a scene in a single compositional frame. "He understands the historical importance of what's happening, but he's viewing it through an artist's eye." She refers to title of Henderson's photos, "Untitled (Boy with Flag)" which was featured in "Posing Beauty," as an example of his artistry through the lens.



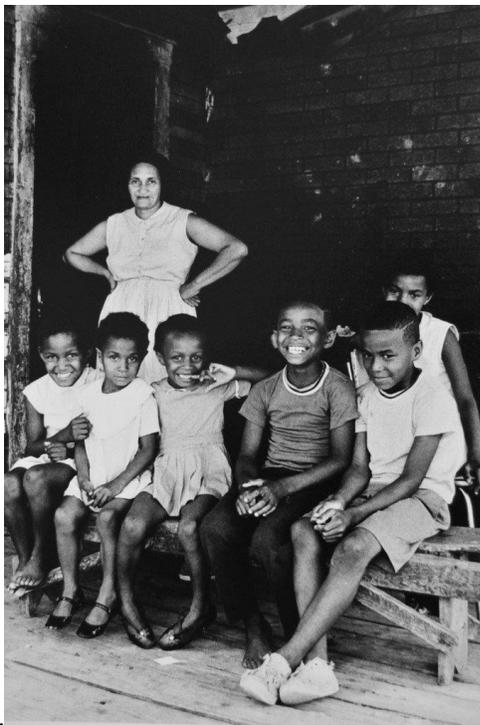
“The play of shadow and light is very interesting. [Henderson] obviously knelt down, so he’s really on the boy’s level; the viewer is looking him in the eye. People often think of photos as instantaneous, but really, there’s a lot of art in them.”

Henderson’s memories of growing up in Richmond reflect a view of the city we don’t see enough, one devoid of the racial vitriol that came to define us for decades, one wherein a young black boy was sheltered at that time from the prejudice constantly lobbed against people who looked like him.

“I never, ever felt put down or discriminated against in Richmond, in Washington Park. There was the undercurrent of [racial tension], sure, but we were a solid community. We cared for each other, we protected each other. I never had any fear,” he says.

His view is especially refreshing because we still struggle to swallow the bitter aftertaste of our past — whether we like to admit it in polite company or not. Sometimes, in our haste to forget painful history, we mistakenly assert that our society is now “post-racial,” that we’ve somehow transcended the rocky race relations our parents and grandparents endured. But there is still racism and prejudice lurking in Richmond, and we don’t have to look too hard to find it. The Ku Klux Klan, identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “the most infamous — and oldest — of American hate groups,” recently ramped up its recruitment efforts in central Virginia, its Imperial Wizard telling a local news station the group dropped flyers in the “Richmond, Tri-Cities, and Henrico County area.” We are, thankfully, making progress toward being a balanced, fair and harmonious community, but there is still much work for all of us to do.

Richmond infused in Henderson not only confidence, but an affinity toward all kinds of people, a certain sensitivity to and respect for the humanity in everyone. That attitude reflects plainly in his documentary-style photography. In his 1960s photo dubbed “Mrs. Jackson & Children, Somewhere on Route 33, Louisa, VA,” the matriarch stands with hands on hips, her lips pressed into a tight smile as most of her six children grin into the lens. Only the son on the far right wears a pensive smile, like his mother’s. The picture asks, “Who are these people, and what’s their story? — like so many of his photos do



"Mrs Jackson & Children, Somewhere on Route 33, Louisa, VA." Year unknown. (Photo by LeRoy Henderson)

While many of Richmond's most treasured artists influenced Henderson (he was the friend and



Richmond artist and suffragist Adele Goodman Clark painted this portrait of Henderson as a young man. (Photo courtesy LeRoy Henderson)

muse of artist and suffragist Adele Goodman Clark, who introduced him to lithography and painted a portrait of him that now hangs in his sister's home), Richmond's black photographers made an indelible mark in his mind, especially the family-owned, Jackson Ward studio founded in 1899 by George O. Brown.

"The Browns were the ones who took the portraits of black people, in a dignified and beautiful way. Everybody knew about the Browns, and you'd look for their watermark at the bottom of pictures. They definitely stood out as important," he says.

When speaking of Richmond's black photographic legacy, Henderson also points to his contemporary and friend, the late Louis Draper, whose work was featured in a solo exhibition, "Retrospective," at Candela Books + Gallery in 2014.

"Louis was one of the founding members of Kamoinge," the first black photography collective in America. "He was there in '63 when it all got started. His work deserves greater acclaim." The VMFA must feel the same way: The museum announced in March that it had acquired 35 of Draper's photographs and his complete archive. In January 2019, it will become the first major museum in America to present an exhibition of Draper's work.

Henderson has been a transplant Brooklynite for years, but he keeps an eye on Richmond's evolving art scene. "Even from a distance, I get the sense that Richmond has matured, artistically, and is still growing. There are many wonderful galleries that feature local artists' work, and VCU has one hell of an arts program."

He came home earlier this year to participate in the RVA Street Art Festival, co-organized by muralist Ed Trask, who says he was honored to include Henderson's work. Henderson photographed the mural art on buildings at the more-than-a-century-old GRTC bus depot, before its new developers painted over the art in May.

Those photographs, along with others Henderson shot during the 1960s, were enlarged and displayed prominently throughout the Manchester-based festival.



Perhaps you were one of the many Street Art Festival guests who Trask says asked him about Henderson and his work, and that's exactly why Trask invited Henderson to take part.

"I don't think enough Richmonders or people in general know about him," says Trask. "He was there during some really pivotal times in the Civil Rights Movement, and he captured all of these crucial moments. So to me, it was really important for people to find out about LeRoy. My hope is that his art's presence at the Festival sparked something in people."

Richmond will draw Henderson back again later this month: He can't miss the "Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott" exhibition opening at the VMFA on July 23 because, he says, Parks was his friend. "I remember one time I called him and woke him up after he'd been shooting all night somewhere," he says, briefly covering his eyes in mock embarrassment. "I'm very glad and proud to see his work coming to my hometown."



Photographer LeRoy Henderson in Glen Allen, June 25, 2016. (Photo by Julianne Tripp)

Our most basic human emotions — fear, rage, pain, joy, love — reveal themselves through Henderson's photographs. In times both common and historic, his pictures serve as a visual record of America. They offer glimpses into the lives of people whose names we'll never know. If we look hard and deep, we'll see ourselves reflected — black, white, of every nation and creed, all of us. We are all imperfect beings trying to find our way, his photos suggest, and here we are, at our best and our worst. Look at us. They show us who we were, and who we can become. More than a passion, Henderson's art is his duty and calling.

“A photographer’s job is to see the beauty and the importance in everyday moments. It’s up to me to see every moment for what it really is.”



Anti-Vietnam War demonstration in New York City, 1967. (Photo by LeRoy Henderson)