



## STEVE SCHAPIRO Profile

- Born in New York in 1934, Steve Schapiro began taking photos at the age of nine, when he picked up a 127 Kodak at summer camp.
- With ambitions of being a writer, he switched to photojournalism and began his freelance career in 1961, after training with W. Eugene Smith at his fabled Jazz Loft in Manhattan.
- In the 60 years since, Steve's photographs have been published on the pages and covers of *LIFE*, *Look*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *People*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *Paris Match*, *Sports Illustrated* and many other international titles.
- He is best known for his coverage of the US civil rights movement, including the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march led by Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign, which ended with the candidate's assassination in June 1968.
- During the 1970s, Steve worked as a stills photographer on the legendary Oscar-winning movies *Taxi Driver*, *The Way We Were* and *The Godfather*.

[www.steveschapiro.com](http://www.steveschapiro.com)

# Steve Schapiro



Now 87, **Steve Schapiro** is one of the last surviving photographers of America's 'golden age of photojournalism'. Keith Wilson hears how he learnt his craft from W. Eugene Smith, became immersed in covering the civil rights movement, and why he always carried five Nikon cameras when shooting for *LIFE*...



# THE N-PHOTO INTERVIEW

In America, the 'golden age of photojournalism' is a phrase commonly attributed to the post-World War II era up to the early 1970s, but especially during the 1960s, when people relied on the press photographer to be their witness to the news of the day.

Historic and tumultuous events, such as the war in Vietnam, President Kennedy's assassination, the civil rights movement, and even the outer-worldly optimism expressed by the Apollo space programme, were the preserve of the still image in an era when television was still struggling with small fuzzy screens and wire antennas. Of course, that all changed (and has changed many more times since), but more than 50 years later it is almost impossible to find an image from today's press photography that etches into the human conscience with the same degree of impact as the photographs from this era.

Sadly, the ranks of photographers from the golden age are thinning every year, so to be able to speak to one who has shadowed the fateful footsteps of Robert Kennedy on the presidential campaign trail, or Martin Luther King on his march from Selma

to Montgomery, is an opportunity not to be missed. Like Samuel Pepys with his diary, the camera of Steve Schapiro has recorded historic moments that could easily have been missed and for which few other records exist.

Back then, news was not recorded by a live real time image feed on a rolling 24/7 channel. Instead, our visual proof that any of these events happened at all depended upon the click of the camera shutter pressed by Schapiro, or his fellow news-hungry photojournalists.

Furthermore, the young Steve Schapiro was trained by one of the true legends of American photojournalism, W. Eugene Smith, renowned as the 'father of the photo story' for his precisely framed picture essays, so brilliantly ascribed to the pages of that great weekly magazine *LIFE*. With such an influential mentor, surely it was only a matter of time before Schapiro followed in his footsteps...



**He also stood up for himself so that when *LIFE* wanted to take control of the layout, he refused to do it**

**Previous page:** During a break in filming of the 1974 movie *Chinatown*, Jack Nicholson, nose bandaged after a notorious knife scene, pokes out his tongue at Steve Schapiro's camera. In the background is the film's director Roman Polanski, who used the knife.

**Below:** Black suits entering Montgomery. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King (front row, second from right) leads the marchers from Selma to the Alabama state capital in 1965.



**How did you get to study under W. Eugene Smith and what do you most value from all that you learnt from him?**

I didn't study with him for a long time. He gave a course for six photographers, which we did at The Loft (821 6th Street, Manhattan), which is where he lived with the jazz people on the floor above, and he taught me a number of things. Some of the things he taught me were based upon humanity and what was important in photography. He did, as you probably know, create a lot of pictures that weren't quite real. For example, the *Country Doctor* (Smith's 1948 photo essay for *LIFE*). Do you know about that?

**Well, I know the pictures, but not the background.**





The background is that the photograph that got a lot of attention – because it really showed what the country doctor's life was like – was a picture of him in his kitchen, which I'm sure you've seen.

**Yes, standing in the kitchen with a cup of coffee...**

It was late at night, and he's there, he still has his mask on, and it looks like the most candid photograph that you've ever seen. But in order to get the picture, the man was much taller (than Smith), so the doctor was actually crouching there, and Eugene Smith was going around him, shooting from every possible angle to get the shot that he wanted. But what was important to him was that he created an image that people responded to, and told them →

**Above: Marchers in the rain. Part of the group of activists who participated in the Selma marches of 1965 to protest the blocking of black Americans' right to vote.**



## 60 YEARS OF NIKONS

**STEVE SCHAPIRO HAS BEEN USING NIKON CAMERAS EXCLUSIVELY SINCE 1961...**

**I have seen a photo of you running when you were covering Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign, and you have five cameras around your neck!**

That's the way I worked for *LIFE* magazine. Two for black and white, two with colour film, and one for the 180mm lens. On the others, I had a 35mm or 28mm, a 50mm or 105mm. I used the 28mm or 35mm, and 105mm primarily.

**And you instinctively knew which camera to reach for?**

Well, you don't have time to juggle cameras when you're covering events. You just can't know where you spend the time juggling. I've used Nikon cameras since 1961 to the present, exclusively. I started working with the S rangefinder cameras – Nikon S, S2 and S3 – and did all my work for *LIFE* with those cameras and telephotos, all Nikon.



# THE N-PHOTO INTERVIEW

what a person who did this kind of work was really like.

It was the same thing with *Spanish Village* (Smith's photo essay first published in a 1951 issue of *LIFE*), where a lot of it is set up. With Albert Schweitzer, he decided that Schweitzer was just like Christ, and Christ was a carpenter, so he put a saw into his portrait of Schweitzer. So those things were one aspect of him.

## He was a little crazy?

Let's not say crazy, let's just say extremely eccentric. We were at his studio in the middle of the night where he was calling up a publisher to see if they would publish one of his books, which was the worst possible time you could do something like that, but at the same time he was brilliant in every way. He also stood up for himself, so when *LIFE* wanted to take complete control of the layout, he refused to do it. And since his photography was so good they inevitably always gave in to what he wanted in the end.

## He was a photographer with strong principles...

He really stood up for the principles that he believed in, where he felt he could tell a story. *LIFE* was at its height at that point in terms of photography because they did these long stories, it did these essays, and by doing these essays it really told you much more.

Another thing that I learned from W. Eugene was that if you're doing a portrait it is often much better to have two photographs in your portrait than just one, in the sense that if it's just one picture and someone sees it, no matter what the expression of the person, they've already seen the image. However, if they have to go back and forth between two pictures, that makes it a better piece of imagery.

## Can you give me an example from one of your assignments?

I can give you an example which is in the book I did, *The Fire Next Time*, which I worked on with James Baldwin. I did an essay for *LIFE* magazine on James Baldwin, back in late 1962, about the black situation in America at the time. He had written an essay for *The New Yorker* and I was quite taken by it, I thought it was



a strong essay, and I asked *LIFE* if I could do a photo essay on Baldwin. He agreed, he was in Paris, he came back and I spent more than a year travelling with him in the South.

In that essay, you will find a picture of Baldwin holding an abandoned child on his lap, and in the back there is a tapestry of Christ. So, in that particular instance, if you just did the picture of Baldwin, but without the boy and the background, it would be an okay photograph, a good one even, but the shot of him with the boy has been used on the cover of many magazines. However, by adding the tapestry also, you add so much more to the picture than just a straight portrait – you can really come back to the picture. It's been used so much more than it would have been and it says so much more about what that house was like as well.

**You immersed yourself heavily in documenting the civil rights movement in America back then.**



**I always felt that the important things in a photograph were emotion, design and information**

**Above: Muhammad Ali watching TV in his car at home. In June 1963, Schapiro was assigned by *Sports Illustrated* to spend five days at home with an 'up and coming' 21-year-old boxer, then known as Cassius Clay.**

**Right: Portrait of black American civil rights leader Martin Luther King during the Selma march.**

## How dangerous was it for you to cover as a photographer?

Well, for some reason, *LIFE* hired a stringer to travel with me and we were in Oxford, Ohio, where the activist Bob Moses, who'd just died, had set up a training session for the summer of '64, where people would go in and assist (the black community to register for the vote).

What was happening when you tried to vote, even if you were a college grad, they'd say, "Oh no, I'm sorry, you missed this question. I'm sorry, we can't let you register." The plan was to bring students from the north, people from the south, ministers and others, to assess them about what they'd be up against. He had started a training session in Oxford, Ohio, and just as I was about to leave Oxford, we heard that three civil rights workers (James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman) heading towards Philadelphia, Mississippi, were missing. They had been going there to look at a burnt-out church (Mount Zion Methodist Church) and so we immediately decided that we should do this. We went past the burnt-out church and drove into the town, which was a small Mississippi town, and I saw this heavy-set trooper a distance away – I started photographing him. And he came towards me, he came closer and closer, finally came right up to →









me as we were sitting in the car, took the camera out of my hands, pulled the film out of it, threw it on the ground. We realized (later) how lucky we were, because he was one of the ringleaders in the killing of the three activists.

**It must have been incredibly tense the whole time?**

It was a little tense, that we can certainly agree on.

**I read that you have photographed some of the Black Lives Matter marches in 2020. Didn't you get a sense of déjà vu?**

Yeah, but most interesting is the picture I'd taken out of the 1965 Selma march. It's this middle-aged woman holding this sign saying "stop police killings", and that's still so relevant to today that you just see the connection instantly.

**Yes, totally. The Selma march was close to 60 years ago, so do you feel that your photography or that of others has helped?**

Yeah, I think what Charlie Moore (photographer Charles Lee Moore) did and the pictures of Birmingham, the dogs and the hoses (used to attack black activists), changed America. America had an idea of

what was happening in the South but they didn't see it first-hand, and seeing those pictures changed that. Those essays (in *LIFE* magazine) were a very successful event in the golden age of photojournalism. Today, the use of photography to me has changed. I always felt that the important things in a photograph were emotion, design and information, with emotion coming first – that's from W. Eugene Smith.

**You were fortunate to work during the 'golden age of photojournalism', but what made it so? Was it because the '60s was such an historic decade?**

I was lucky. It was an historic decade but you also had magazines where people got their information, however those magazines all (eventually) folded – *LIFE*, *Look*,



**If you are doing a movie you're a little ahead because you know what's going to happen in the next five minutes!**







Left: Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders at the start of the 54-mile-long march from Selma to Montgomery.



## A FLY ON THE WALL

**In an interview from 2017 for a retrospective exhibition of his work in LA, Steve revealed some of the ethos behind his photographs of people...**

"What I try to do is give you a sense of the person, but it can vary, very much, from photograph to photograph, and I usually don't set up. Usually, I don't do studio shoots, but it's with a person in a real situation, and that's generally where I've gotten the best photographs of people. I really enjoy being a fly on the wall and waiting for that moment about someone –

particularly in a portrait that conveys something.

I felt really at ease most of the time when I photographed, primarily because I think when you're a photographer and you smile at people, they feel good about it. Most people don't mind being photographed unless they feel that you're going to do something to harm them in some way, or make fun of them, or talk down to them. So, basically, if you're just matter-of-fact photographing people in terms of who they are and what they're doing, I don't seem to feel that you'll have trouble."

magazines like that – and so people had turned to television to give them the news that *LIFE* had once given them instead.

**But you still worked in black and white even when the era changed to mostly a colour medium?**

I shot in colour too. The first thing that started me in photography was looking at clouds, and then in the last years that we've had, pre-COVID, I live on the 11th floor, facing Lake Michigan. I've taken pictures, so many different pictures of Lake Michigan, showing the changes in water and ice, and things like that, and they're all very good pictures.

**In 2013, you said digital cameras wouldn't last forever because people were using their phones. Do you still stand by that?**

I think digital cameras are obsolete in the sense that iPhones have taken over, and so the popular compact camera industry now has definitely diminished, because one can do that with their phone. The nature of photography has changed because shooting emotion does show you the best in black and white, and the black-and-white palette is different to the colour palette, so you can do really good pictures in colour and really

good pictures in black and white, but not maybe at the same time.

**When *LIFE* folded, how did you make the move to shooting film posters and movie sets?**

When *LIFE* folded, I had to make a living and the country was going gaga over celebrities. I did the first *People* magazine cover. *People* magazine decided between two of my pictures as to which to use as the first cover. One was Barbara Streisand and the other was Mia Farrow in *The Great Gatsby*, and Mia Farrow won. Mia Farrow became the first cover of *People* magazine (4 March, 1974).

**I didn't know that. Did you enjoy photographing the stars? There were some great films that you worked on: *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy*...**

Well, *The Godfather* family album and *Taxi Driver* and other works like that, yeah, it was fun to cover. There's no real big difference between shooting documentary or the other; you're looking for the spirit of the person, or the spirit of the event. If you are doing a movie you're a little ahead, because you know what's going to happen in the next five minutes! **N**



Above: Portrait of one the many Selma marchers.

Opposite: A still of Marlon Brando as mafia leader Don Corleone, from the Oscar-winning film *The Godfather*.

**Next Month**  
Isabelle Bacher,  
Arctic landscape  
photographer