



PHOTO BY ROBERT JAMES CAMPBELL;
CITY OF BURLINGTON, VT.

A snapshot of cool jazz

Robert James Campbell died homeless, leaving behind a treasure-trove of photographs from a transitional era of jazz in New York. Jessica Ferber's new book preserves the story he captured.

BY BRIAN R. PAGE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Portland is almost synonymous with coffee shops. So it shouldn't have been of special significance to meet Portland author Jessica Ferber at Ford Food & Drink. However, this is a special spot for Ferber because that's where she did much of the writing for her new book, "Rebirth of the Cool: Discovering the Art of Robert James Campbell."

Robert James Campbell was a photographer who captured the New York City jazz scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After a series of misfortunes, including physical and mental health problems, Campbell ended up homeless, a virtual unknown. He died in 2002 in a Vermont homeless shelter, leaving behind a massive and chaotic cache of photographic negatives and prints. These materials ended up in the custody of Ferber, who spent years making prints – and sense – of the collection. The result of her labor is now available, published by powerHouse Books.

The title, "Rebirth of the Cool," pays tribute to the seminal 1957 Miles Davis phonograph recording, "Birth of the Cool." Those album tracks marked a major transition point in jazz music from the bebop style to what is known today as cool jazz. Robert "Bob" Campbell saw it all and now, from the other side of the grave, is showing us what he witnessed.

In a conversation with Street Roots, Jessica Ferber recounts how this snapshot of cool jazz was saved from ending up in a landfill.

Brian R. Page: *Did you have any idea what you were getting into when this started?*

Jessica Ferber: Not the faintest. No, I really didn't. I didn't have any solid information about who Bob was. The lead that I got was from my roommate at the time. We were living in this apartment in Burlington (Vt.). I was on my lunch break. I was working at a photo processing place, and I came home to get something to eat. She was on a run. She came in, ran up the stairs, poured herself a glass of water, ran back down the stairs, and had the door open again, and she said, "Hey, Jess, you should call Professor Higgins. He's got this dead homeless guy and something about jazz photos. Call him." That's all I heard up front. And so I called my professor, and then



PHOTO BY BRIAN R. PAGE

Author Jessica Ferber discusses her book "Rebirth of the Cool: Discovering the Art of Robert James Campbell" at Ford Food & Drink in Portland. Top: Chuck Berry performs at the Newport Jazz Festival in Rhode Island in the late 1950s.

he directed me to the Committee on Temporary Shelter. What they do is offer temporary housing for people who are either marginally employed or homeless to help them get on their feet. And so I went there and met with them and had a quick interview; and that same day I drove to the property manager of the apartment that Bob was living in. And I picked up about six to eight huge cardboard boxes full of photos. That was how it started, and I had no idea what was in the boxes. They were moldy and smelly.

I took them all home and put them in my bedroom and then woke up the next morning. I felt a little uncomfortable. The funny thing is: I was going to call and decline the project because I felt like this wasn't right, and their office was closed for

lunch, and then I wound up having that weekend to kind of sit there with it and started looking through it. And I was immediately in the thick of it.

B.R.P.: *What did you find?*

J.F.: A whole lot of nothing at first. A lot of negatives were matted together. I thought whatever is in here is going to be trash. But then in another box I found some contact prints and paper materials. And I found the contact prints of the Modern Jazz Quartet, and that was the first thing I found that made me think there was more worthwhile material.

B.R.P.: *Until that point, you didn't know that this was jazz related and significant?*

J.F.: No. I knew that it was jazz related, but I didn't know the era. It took me years to identify people (in the photographs). I went through a long research process and had people who were historians confirm who I thought might have been somebody. Our generations are 40 years apart, and I was never around for that kind of jazz. I had taken a jazz history class after I had graduated, coincidentally, so I had some knowledge. I'm not a jazz aficionado, but I really loved the story of jazz more than the music itself. So I started recognizing people from my textbook. I also got the Ken Burns box set (on the history of jazz), and it was like, "I know I've seen that guy; I've seen that face." I was coming from zero. I had no

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