

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1987



STEREO WORLD



No. 471. Burying Hill, Plymouth, Mass.

Stereotombs • Beached Whales • Anaglyphic Ads

THE MAGAZINE OF STEREO PHOTOGRAPHY

PERSONALITIES IN PERSPECTIVE— GORDON PARKS

by Steven Schwartzman

Gordon Parks, the youngest of fifteen children, was born on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas, where his family eked out a meager living from the land. Gordon's father spoke very little, but Gordon's mother instilled in him the creative drive that has stayed with him all his life, even though she died when he was still only sixteen: "My mother had freed me from the curse of inferiority long before she died by not allowing me to take refuge in the excuse that I had been born black."

Though he made no excuse for his color, Gordon still had to struggle constantly against the prejudices of his time, prejudices that usually meant blacks got a very poor education. Because he had no money, Gordon never finished high school, working instead at a series of menial and less than salubrious jobs. At the same time, though, he read books avidly in public libraries and composed many songs, which he wrote down in notebooks.

Gordon Parks took up photography in the 1930's, influenced by the now-famous Farm Security Administration photographers who portrayed American life during the Great Depression. His own early pictures were more practical, however. He took fashion photographs for a department store in Minnesota. When Marva Louis, wife of the heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, saw and liked some of those pictures, she helped Gordon get work in Chicago. Soon he was earning a pretty good living doing portraits of society women, both black and white.

In 1941, after an exhibit of ghetto photographs in Chicago's South Side, Gordon Parks won a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in Photography. The Fellowship provided enough money for him to give up his fashion work and pursue the kind of photography that really interested him. He spent a year working with one of his idols, Roy Stryker, who was in charge of photography for the Farm Security Administration in Washington. After World War II he continued his realistic photography, both with Stryker and on his own. A breakthrough came when *Life*

magazine agreed to publish Gordon's essay on a Harlem gang leader. He soon joined the *Life* staff and spent the next two decades as a photojournalist for the magazine. One of his best-known essays from that period reports on the life of Flavio, a semi-crippled 12-year-old boy in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, whom the photographer helped financially.

For a long time I passed it off as a sort of professional restlessness. But, in retrospect, I know that it was a desperate search for security within a society that held me inferior simply because I was black. It was a constant inner rebellion against failure. I was a poor



Gordon Parks, February 10, 1985, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas, © 1985 S. Schwartzman.

Gordon Parks' activities have hardly been limited to photography. His autobiographical novel *The Learning Tree*, published in 1963, was quite successful, and was followed three years later by his non-fictionalized autobiography *A Choice of Weapons*. Gordon Parks was the first black person to be signed as a director by one of the big Hollywood studios, Warner Brothers-Seven Arts. The first thing he produced was a film version of *The Learning Tree*. He has combined the visual and the verbal in his books *A Poet and His Camera* (1968), *Whispers of Intimate Things* (1971), *Born Black* (1971), *In Love* (1971) and *Moments without Proper Names* (1975). He has also composed a piano concerto and several piano sonatas.

Commenting on the diversity of his creative activities, Gordon Parks once said:

black boy who wanted to be somebody. So I created desires until I was drowning neck deep in them before I would attempt to swim my way out...I was forced to rid myself of the insecurities that the lack of education brought me. But, in retrospect, I honestly say that I enjoyed the uncertainty of the broader and more precarious adventure."

Gordon Parks was in Austin, Texas, on February 10, 1985. He spoke to a large audience at the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in conjunction with a retrospective exhibition of his photographs there. The stereo picture accompanying this article was taken inside the museum.

