

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

JAMEL SHABAZZ INTERVIEW  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Jamel Shabazz**  
**Photographer**  
**Interviewed by John Maggio**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 31 minutes and 59 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Jamel Shabazz  
Photographer

## **Interest in photography**

01:00:15:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was raised in a household with photographs. You know, my father was a professional photographer during his time in the Navy, you know, so he had a vast library of photography books and there was always photographs around. He was constantly taking images. In addition to the fact that my uncles, they had all served in the military as well. And back then the camera was something that it seemed like every serviceman had. So within our family household, all the uncles had the photographs. So I was always intrigued very

early on as a young child, seeing these powerful images of not only their time in the military, but the family history itself going back generations.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And then my father had a signed copy of a book called *Black and White America* by Leonard Freed sitting prominent on our coffee table. And it was something about that book that really resonated with me. You know, it had incredible black and white photographs from Harlem to the segregated South. And it really spoke to me at a very young age. I was about eight years old at that time. So it's through that book that kind of like opened up my eyes to the power of photography. And as time would progress, I became very intrigued with *Life* magazine and *National Geographic* while I was still pretty much in my single digits. So that language of photography really spoke to me when I was young.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

The main images that really resonated me... Because the war in Vietnam was going on at that time. It was images from war that really got to me. Because, you know, being raised in the 1960s, there was a lot of war movies on at that time, so I was very interested in that. And it was just something about the war in Vietnam that pretty much graced the cover of *Life* Magazine. But what really showed me the power of images was these really basic images. And I believe it was back in 1969, *Life* Magazine did a feature called "A Hundred

Killed” and it dealt with soldiers that died in Vietnam-- “A week’s Kill,” matter of fact. And it dealt with the men that died in Vietnam during a week.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And it was just those high school photographs of young men across the color line that had died in a week in this very unpopular war that kind of like resonated with me. And then going back to the work of Leonard Freed. It was his images from prison, Angola State Prison at that time, that resonated. The very first photograph in the book was an African American soldier serving in Germany back in the early 1960s. And was something about that image that kind of like spoke to me because at that time I had two uncles that were in Germany. And then one that really resonated was a gentleman with a newspaper that stated, “We Must Have Justice.” And he was in Midtown and he's holding up this photograph and inside the cover of the newspaper, it had a dog being held by a policeman, I believe in Alabama, being sucked on a... That dog was being used to attack a young man. Then I started to see the Civil Rights. So those images pretty much stayed in my head for many years.

01:02:59:04mother

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

My father always bought home magazines all the time. Now my grandmother who lived in the same community, she had a backlog of just *Life* magazines going way back, both *Life* Magazine and *Look*. So whenever I went to her home, I was always fascinated with just looking at these back issues of the

magazine and just getting a larger gauge of what was going on in the world. The images in which I was seeing in *Life*, I wasn't learning that history in school.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I became really interested in this powerful language of photography through publications, such as *Life*, *Look*. It was a Saturday evening post. I became introduced to the work of Norman Rockwell. And even on *National Geographic*. So those publications were always around, even in going to the local barbershop, which I found great delight in doing, those magazines were always there. So to me, going to the barbershop was like going to the library. And then as time would go on, I would go to libraries looking at these magazines again. So they really spoke to me and they allowed me to get a better understanding of what was going on in the world in real time.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

My father had collected a lot of images. He was the family photographer, so there was always well structured albums. He took great pride in putting these albums together. You know, I mean a lot of-- He was very delicate in it. The images were situated properly and we were raised in seeing those images and understanding the importance of the history. And it seems like every elder in the family held an album. Big albums, as big as, at that time, yellow pages. And I remember just always looking at them and trying to learn more

about them. And what was very interesting about the photographs, particularly the ones of my relatives that have served in the military, they would date it.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So you would see the date to get a reference, and then some would even have indications that they were taken in the Philippines or in Burma. And I was very intrigued behind that. So the albums were there and I realized the importance of preserving the history of the family because those albums they sat prominently on the table, and they meant a lot. And they went back, as far as I can remember, going back into the late 1800s. So I was very intrigued behind that and wanted to know more about my family history through these albums. So I knew at that point that they were very important and they should be preserved. And I understood that I played the role in not only being in these albums, but having a responsibility to make sure that this history is passed on to the next generation.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Subconsciously, a lot of seeds were being planted in my mind at that very young age. Mind you now, I'm still in my single digits. I'm about maybe eight, nine years old. And it was just something about everything that was going on that really inspired me to want to know more about what was happening. Again, I go back to the war in Vietnam because for me, the very first movie my

father ever took me to see was *The Green Berets* (1968) with John Wayne. And that kind of like gave me some insight into what was going on. Because we heard about this ugly war and the men in my family, we get together, they were all veterans, they would speak about war and it was grown folks conversation. So I wasn't really privileged to hear it, but I would sit off to the side and listen to them. So I was very interested in what was going on in Vietnam.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And what's interesting about how that would impact me is that later on in life, I would go into the military and I will learn more about Vietnam and the war. But a body of work that is very close to me to this day are Vietnam veterans. So I spent about 40 years trying to understand who were these men that many of them were drafted in the 1960s and '70s. I wanted to know who they were years later. So it was a part of my life's mission to photograph them and find out more about the war and what it was about.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

In addition to the protestors that protested the war back in the 1960s, I sought them out, and that helped to just give me greater clarity on how these images impacted me. Because to a great degree, I was traumatized by the things I was seeing and hearing about the war. Even within my community, I remember a lot of men going to and returning from war, and I wanted to

know who they were. It became like a 45 year journey to try to find out what was happening and to photograph them. And it gave me a sense of closure, too because no one really was explaining to me what was going on in Vietnam. My father never talked to me about it. I was just seeing these images of suffering and war and I just wanted to know more about that. So I'll say that practically everything that I saw photographically would inform my career. When I saw travel pictures from different regions of the world, I wanted to go to those places because the photographs I saw with my father being in the Navy, he traveled throughout the Mediterranean and I wanted to follow his footsteps. So as I got older, I would go to Germany, I would go to Italy, the Netherlands, London. A lot of the places that he went to, based off of just seeing these images of his youth.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was about 15 years old when I actually picked up my camera, and my mother had a Kodak Instamatic 110 and 126. And I was inspired by a friend of mine who had photographs and he was actually a gang member and I saw his images and I immediately stated to myself, I want to be a photographer and I want to shoot photographs just like this. I remember going home and my mother always had cameras laying around with film in them. And I remember picking up her 110 camera and going to my junior high school and photographing my friends. And it became like magic to me. Looking through that viewfinder allowed me to look into another world. I called it having like a

third eye, and I was able to see things that a lot of people weren't seeing. And it gave me a voice at a time in which I struggled with speaking. I had a slight stuttering problem, so my voice was kind of like limited, but it was something about photography that gave me a voice and now a purpose.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was just 15 years old at that time. And back in those days, we would process the film at the local drug store. I remember taking that first roll there and it was like magic seeing it like maybe a week later, going to pick up the film and looking at these beautiful portraits that I took. Because over the years, prior to physically picking up a camera, I was being fed images in my mind. So I already knew composition and lighting from what I was seeing. So my first batch of pictures was pretty good and which I still have to this very day. So it was 15, so it's been 45 years now.

### **Early years**

01:09:08:13

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I grew up in South Brooklyn, a community called Red Hook Houses, not too far from here. And it's a predominantly African American and Latino community. This is back in the 1960s. And to me, it was a really wonderful space because we had a number of really beautiful parks. We had an Olympic size pool and stadium. We had community. There was a lot of men and like



my father, most of the men in the community were veterans of both Korea. The older men were in World War II and it was family. I have cousins that lived in that community. For me, what I appreciated, my cousin was my best friend. He was my age. We had our dogs. He had a Doberman, I had a German Shepherd. And we weren't too far from Gowanus Canal. I remember we would often take our dogs there.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And to me, the Gowanus Canal was a gateway to a larger world. So as a young child, I would see the ships coming in and out. And I just had this fantasy about one day having an opportunity to see the world through this canal. It was a really good time. I like to refer to it as a time of innocence.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

The type of way I was raised, a lot of that was really kept from me. Until about the 1960s now, I went to Catholic school, it was predominantly Irish and Italian. You know, I saw no racism and discrimination. A lot of things were really taken-- I wasn't exposed to things that were going on. Most of what I learned came from my own independent research, you know, and what I was seeing on the news. It allowed me to see that there was things going on outside of my community. Within my community, everything was fine. But when the local news came on, I had an opportunity to see the assassinations of Kennedy.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Robert Kennedy vividly and Martin Luther King and just civil unrest around the world. But locally, everything was fine. As children, we didn't know about any of those things. It was always kept away from us until the news came on.

### **Early influences**

01:11:03:01

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

This particular person, his name was Sundance and he was a friend of my good friend. And he brought me to his home one day. He said, "I have somebody I want you to meet." And I remember going to his home in Brooklyn and he's about maybe two to three years older than me. And he had these powerful, these large photo albums, like yellow pages of his local gang. And unlike the traditional gangs that we are accustomed to seeing, guys with cut off Jean jackets and fur collars, this particular gang, they were called The Jolly Stompers. And they were very dapper in their dress. They were a cross between Caribbean and African Americans. So they brought those two cultures together. And these guys were very debonair in their dress. They wore Italian knit sweaters, Kangol hats, Beaver hats.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

They were very erect, dignified men. And it was just something about those images that really resonate with me. I had never seen photographs like that before. I mean, in a sense, they remind me of the photographs from the old album covers of The Temptations and the Four Tops the way these guys were dressed. And those images really spoke to me because these guys were a little older than me and we admired them. They dressed in a way in which we wanted to dress.

01:12:08:04

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So in seeing these pages and pages of these gang members, poles erect and back then they weren't throwing up any signs. They were just standing perpendicular. And the women next to them were— were dressed very fresh. The men, for the most part, wore shoes. And I was intrigued behind it. I've never seen anything like this before. And I just said to myself, I want to create images like that, just like that, in that same type of matter of men standing posed, looking directly in the camera, you know, representing pride and dignity.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I immediately went home and took a camera and returned to my junior high school probably the next day. And I started photographing my friends in almost the same exact manner.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Everyone was open at the time, because back in those days, unlike today, no one really had a camera. So I was like the only person that had a camera, and I just recognized them and it gave me a voice and they were more than willing to be my subjects. Back then it was interesting too, because they would chip in and we will buy a film. We would also chip in and get the film processed. So at the same time they were paying to participate in my project. And in many cases they would get a copy of the photograph. So everybody was open at that time.

01:13:14:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And now it gave me a voice and a purpose. I became the camera man. So now I always had a camera with me and everyone, for the most part, a lot of my peers wanted their photographs taken, and it made them feel special because again, nobody was doing it at that time. So it gave me a voice and an assignment.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I just wanted to just have a purpose in life. I wanted to do something more than what I was doing. I started out like a lot of my friends doing graffiti, which was popular back then. And it didn't really work well for me. It was something about the beauty of photography that really grabbed me. That's what it was. Some of my partners were involved in sports, but I didn't really

have time for that. I was involved in photography. And my parents divorced, so I kind of like went on another path. So I'm trying to really find myself at that point. But initially before we picked up the camera, I picked up the camera, we were into music. I had a bass and a lot of my friends, we had a band and that, and that went on for a little while. And I think that something happened in the '70s where a lot of our parents divorced and we all in a sense went astray. And eventually I sold my bass and I just tried to find another way to live. The bass just didn't really work for me.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think it's through photography that I want to really express myself. That gave me a voice. It gave me a voice and it gave me a vision, because prior to that I was lost. So once I picked up the camera, it became my compass. And in a sense, it guided me in a whole nother direction. It provided me with an opportunity to meet a lot of people and engage in the conversation. Prior to that, I didn't really have that direction. So the camera gave me that purpose really early on like no other. And I just use that as an opportunity to kind of like engage people and learn more about humanity at that time, early on.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Well, my parents divorced when I was 15. I was in Catholic school at first and then when we moved to Flatbush, I went to public school and I was pretty much on an elevator level because the education that we got in Catholic

school, it was pretty good. So I was doing all right at that time. And then in '75, when I was 15 years old, my parents had a really ugly divorce and the whole household just fell. And we lived in a house. I ended up moving in with my mother. Times got really difficult, so I sold my bass. I wasn't doing well in school. I fell victim to the streets. You know, alcohol became my medication early in the morning and I kind of like just started to go in the stray. There was no safety nets in place to guide me. But fortunately for me, the library was there to kind of like gave me my balance. And I was able to kind of like use that as a space to go and get back on the path to a degree.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

But you know, there was no one there to really guide me otherwise. I just fell off. I stopped going to school. I didn't want to go to school anymore because there was no money. I just kind of like drifted away. Not only did I drift, but a lot of my friends drifted because their parents were also getting divorced. So it was a very difficult time at that moment, even with the photography. I had to stop doing that because there was no money to pay for the film.

### **Working as a correctional officer**

01:16:19:20

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I spent 20 years in the Department of Corrections. When I came home from the military, my father told me that it's very important that you have a

foundation and a career. So he informed me to take a number of city jobs and I did, and corrections was one of the first ones that called me. And I felt that it was my assignment in life, because I picked up the camera a little early on, three years earlier. And like I said, I looked at the cameras being my compass. And I believed that me working in the Department of Corrections was a space I needed to be in. I had a few friends that were forcefully accused of crimes that they didn't commit.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So they had briefed me earlier about what it was like to be incarcerated and be innocent. And also, I learned about the Attica Rebellion, you know, so that was clear in my mind, the imagery. I learned about the jail riots in Vietnam, and I was very interested about that. So when opportunity came to work on Rikers Island, I accepted it as my new assignment and I have to be there to see what it's like firsthand. And I went in and I was very troubled by the things in which I was seeing at that time. This is right. And I became a correctional officer around the same time that the crack epidemic hit.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So now I'm in this space and I'm seeing the impact of drugs, and the lack of rehabilitation. I'm seeing good people who fell victim to the system. I'm seeing bad people who fell victim to the system. But now I realize that I have a responsibility to use this opportunity to try to help as many young men as I

can. And then take my experience to the street in hopes of trying to deter young men from going on that path. Because when the crack epidemic hit, the money was so good. A lot of good people were falling victim to selling it. I had friends that worked on Wall Street, had good jobs, but the money that guys were making selling crack did not compare to the money they were making on Wall Street. So a lot of young men were drawn towards that illusion. And at the same time, the movie *Scarface*(1983)came out.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So whatever reason, a lot of people gravitate to that world. So now as a photographer and a correctional officer, you know, I'm taking my camera everywhere. I'm taking it to the job every day. I'm documenting the world inside. I'm witnessing brutality and hatred every day and I'm leaving the job and I'm going in the streets. I'm trying to talk to young people about what I'm experiencing and how you have to be mindful that it's not a good time. And mind you, at this moment, there's the war on drugs. So there's this heavy handed approach to dealing with people who were using crack. And it was a really troubling time for me, but I just needed to be there.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And it really informed my practices because I was dealing with so much violence every day, sometimes 16 hours a day, being in this environment with so much hatred. Leaving, I would have to find humanity. So I would go into



the streets and try to capture images of love and peace and beauty, you know, to give me my balance at the same time. So in the sense of photography, it became quite therapeutic for me to contend with some of the situations I was dealing with on the regular.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's twofold. It was therapeutic, but more importantly, I felt it was my assignment to talk to young people about what was going on because a lot of young men were dying at the hands of other young men. And I was very troubled behind what I was seeing. So I would place myself in different positions like downtown Brooklyn, which I looked at as a nucleus or 42nd Street on the weekends or at DeLancey Street, during any given day, where young people would be at and I would approach them and I would speak to them about what's going on out here and about the importance of education.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Because, again, I didn't have a safety net. So I wanted to be that big brother to a lot of young people. And the camera, which was my compass, guided me to them and I always kept a portfolio with me. So as I made images over time, I would create eight by ten images and have my portfolio with me all the time. And I would bring images to talk to them. I used that as my approach. And a lot of guys I was talking to, they were enemies with some other guys. I mean, I would photograph these groups of guys. I might photograph one group on

one side of the street and then a few minutes later, go shoot another group. Unbeknownst to me, they were enemies to each other, but I was a mediator. I was neutral and I was able to engage them and photograph them and just talk to them. I told them what I did for a living.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And a lot of them were really receptive to hearing what I was saying because I'm speaking in real time. Just a few hours ago I was on Rikers Island and I witnessed people getting stabbed and individuals that thought that they can handle it and they couldn't. And they would listen. So I was trying to encourage them to be better. You know, I was a veteran. You know, I inspired some to consider the military, the reserves, to have foundation. I spoke about the importance of the future, because again, I didn't have that coming up and I wanted to be that big brother that I never had in hopes to try to save a lot of these young men because I was losing so many. So many were dying senselessly of just-- due to just nonsense. It could be a look, it could be an accidental bump or it could be a drug conflict.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

You know, being involved in that drug trade. That was very ugly. And I didn't like what I was seeing because I was dealing with thousands of young men each day, going to Rikers Island. And some of them I even knew from the

street. So I was working overtime and just trying to save young men from the pitfalls of incarceration.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

My technique was, you know, I had a business card. You know, I approached them respectfully and I recognized them. I learned early on, I read a book by Dale Carnegie, *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. So I understood the importance of language and communication. If I saw a group, I would look at the leader, who was the alpha within a group and let me approach him and let me recognize him. And I would do that. I would approach him, introduce myself. I had to dress a certain way. It was a whole process. You just need to go and do it. It was a science of going out there. I'm a chess player, so it was about having strategy and being willing to sacrifice. I made it a point to dress a certain way that would warm them up. They would look at me and say, okay, this guy is different. Many of them would look at me as a big brother as time went on, but I approached the alpha within the group, recognize him and said, "With all due respect, I'm a photographer."

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

"When I look at you, I see greatness. If you don't mind, I'd like to take a photograph for you and your crew." You know, and "It's going to mean something as time goes on. I really believe it's going to have a lot of meaning." To my surprise, in many of the cases, they were open. And what I would do

also... once the film role was completed, I would go down to Chinatown. I had a little spot, one hour photo. I would put the film in the shop and walk around lower Manhattan and I would come back in an hour, get the film, the prints and I would go back to the location I would give out prints.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And that was my strategy. Now I'm giving the leader a print and now he's showing his crew. And now everybody wants a print. So I went from taking a picture of the leader and his crew. Now we'll go on to do individual portraits of everybody and give everyone a copy of the photographs. And that became something I would do. What was interesting about it, the enemies might be across the street watching it. And we still also had pose battles because it just wasn't a basic photograph.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I said, I want to get an image, but I want to have strength to it. So I would start posing them and then they would create poses and the poses gave it life. And it became almost like a competition. So the opposition might see what I'm doing. And then I would go photograph the opposition. And I would say, "Look, I shot them across the street. And they had a nice pose." And now these guys want to pose to outbeat them. It was a very interesting strategy that worked. And as time would go on, I will look at some of the photographs juxtaposed to each other in my books.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And they all pose very uniquely, but what people don't know is that they were enemies to one another for so long. But it was about again, recognition and sincerely, because what was more important to me wasn't the photograph. I was more concerned with the individual and seeing them live. I didn't want to see no more of these young men incarcerated. So I was concerned with that. The photograph became evidence of the exchange. That's what it was about. It was more about trying to save them and all of them and even the enemies.

### **Using photography as a medium**

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think I learned it pretty instantly because my father taught me, when I came home from the military in 1980. He saw my interest in photography, an enemy who became a friend gave me an enlarger. And my father started to groom me in the craft of photography, and he would critique my work. And some of my early images immediately, he saw them and he saw I had an eye, you know, because he taught me to carry my camera everywhere I go. Not only carry, have it out, have the cap off, have it set to 1/125 of a second at 5.6 when using a 100 film. And he would direct me.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

He instructed me to read particular books, the *Time Life* series. So he helped to develop my eye. And when I would come on with a roll of film, he would just look at the images and he would critique them and give me guidance. When I started to really realize I had something, one of the places I would go to was a few places, matter of fact, a lot of the local high schools in my area. And I would photograph the little brothers of my friends and to me, what made me feel good and what allowed me to see that I have something special here was the joy in their faces when I would photograph them and give them copies of the photographs. It made them feel so good. And that's when I realized that I have something here. I have a tool that I could use, not only to document the community, but to save lives at the same time. And at that point I realized I need to do this here and I need to do it every single day, and then my father taught me the importance of self assignments. So I would put myself on certain assignments to create bodies of work. And one of my earlier projects was prostitution.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was very interested in it. I could not understand why women would sell themselves. So I would go out there and I would document the prostitutes and speak to them. And that's when I realized I had something, I was building up a body of work. And as I was starting to build it up, I would show it to people and it would intrigue them. I realized it went beyond just portraits. Now I have a solid narrative that's telling stories and young people want to

see my work now. So as I carry my portfolios, they might come to me and say, "You got any pictures? Let me see your pictures." And I will always share them, expose them to different things they weren't seeing.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

But I think that the time, what really allowed me to see that I have something deep here was when I was invited by a friend to witness the birth of his son at home. And when I went to the house, I actually photographed the birth of his child. And that photograph became the number one photograph in my portfolio. And I would take that out and I would share it with people, and that's when I realized I have something beyond the portraits. I captured a child being born. I was there in real time witnessing that. And that's when I said I have something here and I need to use this to really connect with people beyond just getting those portraits. I have to use this portfolio, this camera as a magnet to attract people to me, so I can engage them and speak to them on a range of subjects. Because it was bigger than photography. It was about really their survival. Because I was trying to introduce a lot of guys to music.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Because I came home from the military I was into jazz. So I want them to learn about jazz. I changed my diet. I was eating differently and a lot of young people had health issues. So I was speaking about the importance of health

and nutrition and exercise and reading. So it was all about that. And it was trying to create a situation where they were drawn towards me, and a lot of kids would come to me and as they came, I had something to offer them. I would often take students to the park, Prospect Park and get orange juice and banana and just sit and talk to them about life. I wanted to know about their goals and objectives in life. And I tried to stress to them the importance of having goals and objectives. Because I want the best for them.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

We had a saying back in those days. "I want for my brothers, I want for myself." And I really believed that, when I looked at young people, I felt that I had to invest in them. Because if I don't, they might turn on me. So it was very important to me because again, when I grew up, you know, when I came home from the military, there was a lot of conflict going on. And I knew so many of the participants and they were enemies of each other, and I didn't know that. Being neutral I was able to photograph so many people, but as time would progress, I would find out that some of the people I photographed had major conflict with other individuals, and I was very troubled behind it. So that allowed me to work even harder to go out in the street and engage them. So I would just walk to different neighborhoods, just looking for people to build with, community connect with.

01:28:49:14

JAMEL SHABAZZ:



And I liken it to almost like being a fisherman. I would just go out there, just looking, just to see who could I find. I would always place myself in locations where I could connect with people, and I would have stories for them. It just wasn't about the photography. Because on many occasions I would have my camera bag with my chess board in it. Or I had books in it about health and nutrition, and I'll teach them how to play chess so they can understand strategy and conflict resolution. So I always want to give back, give these kids something in return. So it became an exchange and a lot of them would benefit from that later on in life.

01:29:21:12

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It let them know that they weren't invisible. It let them know that somebody recognizes them. It allowed them to know that somebody cared about them because in many cases I did, and I let them know that, I would often say to them, "I see greatness in you. I see something special about you." And if this wasn't about the physical, you got a good soul, you got a good spirit. And I want to give them that encouragement. Because some guys, some of the gangsters, people might've feared them, but I looked at them different. I saw something... I saw a light and it needed to be nurtured to the point where somebody even told me that, you know, no one has ever told me that before. And I wanted to give them confidence, too. Both male and females because you know, as kids, we can be very critical and very judgmental of each other.

01:30:03:20

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And we could just tear each other down. I use the camera to build people up and let people feel special. Somebody even sit back and say, "Wow, why do you want to take my picture for?" Because I see greatness in you, I mean, look at you. It's like they may not have even seen it, but I recognized that and it made people feel good. So my thing was to try to build character and help to strengthen one's self esteem in a time when one may not have really felt good about himself. And what made me feel good over time was when someone can come to me and say, "That picture that you gave me, my mother still has an in frame on our TV." So it made them, you know, I would give them the photographs and they would just leave feeling so good, and they would take it home and get it framed. Basic four by six print. So again, it gave them visibility in a time when nobody was really recognizing them.

### **The crack epidemic**

01:30:59:11

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Wow. When I was in the army in Germany, back in the 1970s, I like to say we had a problem with heroin and I had witnessed a lot of people fall victim to heroin and not only heroin, but there was a lot of drug use in Germany, during the time I was stationed there. So I was able to see the crippling effect that drugs had on young people. So when I came home during the summer of 1980, I had a bad feeling. As a matter of fact, when I was in Germany, I was

hearing stories of some of my friends who fell victim to angel dust, you know, and they were sent to mental institutions because they were never the same behind that. And when I came home, there was something called freebasing going on and it was a climate.

01:31:39:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It was something I was feeling that didn't really feel comfortable with me. So, and at the same time, heroin was still very visible in the city. And I'm seeing the destruction of what drugs is doing. And I'm bothered behind that because I came home a very conscious individual. I left at 17 and I came home at 20, and I just felt that something bad is happening. I could not understand. It was like this dark cloud was- was coming.

01:32:06:17

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's like, you know, the best way to describe it, Marvin Gaye's song "What's Going On?" and "What's Happening Brother?" When I think about those songs, that was the vibration in my head. I want to know what's going on and I'm looking around and I'm becoming very depressed with what I'm seeing. I'm very angry because, you know, within the short matter of time in which I was gone, so much has changed. So, I felt that I have to- I have to be proactive and see what I can do to bring about change. And that's when the photography came, it was the photography and music. Those two were very key components to developing my vision. Marvin Gaye's music inspired me a

lot to want to go out there and just talk to people. And that's what I was doing. I wanted to know what was going on. So I needed to engage people, and the camera allowed me to do it. Without it, it would have been difficult, but it was something about the camera that allowed me.

01:32:59:04

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Because it's one thing to speak to my friends, but I wanted to speak to everybody, and having the camera was like a key that allowed me entry into the minds of people to find out what's going on. And this is back in 1980. So the freebasing is taking place. And then crack was introduced around 1983 at the same time around the AIDS epidemic. So we have two major epidemics that hit upon my return, crack and AIDS. And I was very devastated behind what was going on. So I just felt a sense of urgency to lend my voice, to talk to people, to try to help them understand there's a better way. And it's very important to take care of yourself because you don't want to fall victim to drugs because it can really devastate your life in addition to incarceration. So I was just trying to talk to a lot of young people on my block. Because when I walked out my door there was always young people around, and I had a love for them and I wanted to document them and get a sense of what was happening.

01:33:57:07

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

You know, what has been taking place since I was away. And they was informing me. A lot of times they weren't good stories. So, I was just working with great diligence to just try to get a gauge of what was happening on all levels. Even with the heroin and the homelessness and the prostitution, those became some of my early assignments. During the day, I would photograph the high schools, but at night I would get on the trains and travel. And I would document the despair on the train. I worked in the men's shelter for a while. I saw another side of homelessness and poverty, and I just became very empathetic to the things in which I was seeing. And I just wanted to find out how can I make a difference, even if I could to save one to two people, how can I use my position to kind of like, you know, avert young men from falling on that very dangerous path.

01:34:43:05

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It destroyed people. I mean, I photographed individuals that were once at their best. They were at their prime, and when they fell victim to crack as a user, it broke them down. You were no longer the same because crack... You know, you wasn't eating, your facial structure changed, you weren't taking care of yourself. That became very painful for me, even when I was working in the jail, to look at people that I once photographed that were looking so well, and when they fell victim to crack, you know, taking care of your person wasn't a priority. It was all about feeding that habit. So that was one of the

transformations that I would see amongst so many people, and even when the AIDS virus came, what that would do to people.

01:35:22:11

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I caught a lot of individuals at their best, and that became a part of a conversation as time would go on. When people look at my work, they say, "Wow, you caught her at her very best." Or "You caught me at my very best because when I fell victim to crack, everything changed." That was one of the biggest changes that I saw, you know, in terms of what the addiction did to people, and even your eyes, how you saw it so much, you might've experienced so much, you were never the same. Your soul was taken, you were empty inside. So that once beautiful glow that you once had, crack took that away, and now there was just an emptiness that I would see.

## Style

01:36:03:18

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Again, my father was informing my practice, so he instructed me to use black and white and available light. I opted to do both. And there's times-- I had a Canon Ae-1 camera. There's times I would have both black and white and color film, and I would shift according to what I was feeling. With the black and white, it was Tri-X 400 and it was all about feelings at that time. So, there's times, moments, I would feel black and white, and I would take the

color out the camera. And I would put in a load of black and white, and I would just go shoot. And... you know, so it was very conscious and I was clear and I was taught about themes. Early on, one of the *Time Life* books that my father told me to read was focused on themes. And he said, "You got to have themes." And for me, the themes gave me a clear purpose in terms of what it is I want to document. So I selected homelessness as one theme, the Vietnam veterans, prostitution, and then young people. So I had a number of themes in my mind when I would step out my door.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I was very clear on what it is I want to capture, so I was always looking, I was constantly observing, and then I fell in love with the trains. I found that the train system allowed me a space where the available light was good, but the subject matter was endless. And a lot of the subjects that I would see above ground was on the trains. What was unique about the trains is the fact that now they're stationary. So unlike seeing someone in the street that's moving. If I get on the train car, now you're there. And once that moment of pause at the train stops, I'm able to photograph you. So I would start riding the various trains all hours of the day, you know, and just walking from car to car, looking to photograph people.

01:37:34:03

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

That's why probably, maybe 30% of my early images are taken on the trains. And I found a lot of interesting people while riding the trains. So I had clear themes early on, and then I would strengthen my themes by spending a lot of time in local bookstores. I'd constantly go to Rizzoli Books in Manhattan and study other photographers to try to understand how did they see things, and not even trying to mirror that, but just trying to look at things from a very different perspective.

### **Introduction to Gordon Parks**

01:38:08:12

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Early on, I didn't know it was Gordon Parks. As I revisited some of the *Life* magazines so many years later, I would remember images that I saw as a child. But back then, I wasn't looking at the name of the photographer. I was more interested in the images itself. So I'll say in the early 1960s, you know, so many of the magazines in which Gordon's work was in, particularly *Life* Magazine. That's when I was introduced to his photography. I learned about Gordon Parks when I was in the army in 1978. And it was through his son's autobiography, *GI Diary* in which that's when the name appeared to me, Gordon Parks. And I still didn't know him to be really a photographer. It was more or less a book between-- letters between a son to his father, but that's when I was introduced to who he was. It wasn't until maybe 1985 and



looking at a wide range of photography books, some images taken of the African American community would kind of like resonate with me.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I would start seeing the name appear in the captions. And it wasn't until the 1990s, I actually started to learn more about who Gordon Parks was. But even in the credits of the movie *Shaft*, I remember going back to both watching *Shaft* and *The Learning Tree*, we didn't really pay attention to the credits, but as time would go on I'd realize that this man produced *Shaft*, and I used to read *Essence* magazine a lot, and there was that name again. So I would see it in glancing and not really pay it any mind, but that's when I pretty much became acquainted with who we was, you know, through those indirect methods.

01:39:42:00

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think some of the images that I saw early on that really captivated me was his documentation of the Nation of Islam. And I was very impressed with some of the photographs I saw. I remember vividly an image of Malcolm X teaching a class to men on manhood and being a husband. And it's something about that that grabbed me because I said, "Wow, that's something, that you have a man teaching other men about being a masculine man." That image stood out. And then I remember photograph of women in the Nation of Islam as well. And they were all in this formation and I just looked at composition

and lighting and black and white imagery. And that's an image that stood out. And there was a photograph of Malcolm X holding up a newspaper, uh, speaking about police brutality. So I think that it was that particular body of work that really resonated with me because at that time, the Nation of Islam was coming up. And I used that as an opportunity to actually go and document that group based off seeing how Gordon did it.

**Reflection of life's work**

01:40:45:08

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think at this stage in my life, you know, I look at myself as an alchemist. I'm able to freeze time and motion. I don't even call myself a photographer anymore. There's been a debate about my work being posed, and all that. So I said, "You know what, I'm an alchemist. I freeze time in motion and I'm a documentarian." My objective is to contribute to the preservation of history and culture. That's what I do. I've done fashion, documentary, fine art photography before. Now, it's about freezing time. And that's how I look at it. So I don't really care for titles anymore. In the past I did use them to help people better understand my work, but now I think that what best describes me would be a documentarian.

01:41:24:07

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And there's a part of art in a lot of my work too, because I like to create, I like to put things together. I like to tell stories, and that's the body of work I've never shown before. Because I feel that it's important to speak to the time, especially now, since I'm not shooting as much as I used to. I look around my house and I find items to bring into life. It could be old newspapers, it could be old GI Joes. And how can I use these objects to create artistic work that speaks to the time. So, there's a part of my work that I do. There's an aspect that I do see myself to a degree as an artist as well.

### **Difference between black and white and color film**

01:42:01:23

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's— it's really hard to say. I think it's for more of my documentary type of work, you know, the black and white kind of like works. Because it's just a feeling and that's the only way I could really describe it, as a particular feeling I want to capture, you know, and not necessarily gloom, but it's just some— Maybe because I was raised on black and white images that it really stays with me. And my father was really adamant about shooting black and white. The color to me when I use it is more to produce energy in a particular feeling of joy and happiness. When I have a tendency to put the black and white in, I have another vision. It's like, I want to go out there and shoot images that are more in documentary nature. And to really tell stories. I think with the color, it's more of a fun thing with me.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So if I put color film in my camera, I might opt to shoot more portraits, but it's something about... And it's a mental thing, when I put the black and white in the camera, I'm seeing things differently in my head, everything now just goes totally black and white, whatever I'm looking at, I'm looking at it in black and white. Even to this day, when I shoot digital, like this camera here, it's set on a black and white setting. Because now that's how I'm looking at things now. The joy that I once saw in shooting color, I'm not really seeing anymore. So it's really interesting that a lot of my work now is just black and white because it's reflective of what I'm feeling inside in terms of kind of like dark moments and gray areas of time of uncertainty. So, it's more-- my work-- when I put the black and white and that work has a tendency to be more on the level of social commentary.

***The Segregation Series***

01:43:36:13

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It was actually refreshing to me because most of the images I saw in the segregated South and the work of Leonard Freed, it was always black and white. And practically all the images I've ever seen of segregation in the South was black and white. So when I saw Gordon's work and I was just looking at it last night, it was something... it gave it life. It wasn't as dreary as the black

and white images that I was so accustomed to seeing, and despite the harsh conditions that the subjects were living in, it was just something about it, that just it... I don't know, it's hard to explain, but I think the only way to describe it again is that it just gave it a sense of life and feeling and hope to me.

01:44:16:14

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Where the black and white was just always-- I always associated black and white was just, you know, almost like war and poverty and negativity because that's all I grew up seeing. Even when I looked at old war images from both World War I and World War II, and even Korea, it was always black and white. So, subconsciously in my mind, I associated black and white, with just pain and suffering. But despite the conditions in the South that Gordon captured in color, it just gave it a different type of feeling to me, despite the signs and the hardship that people were going through.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I don't know. It just gave it a whole nother life and feeling that I kind of like needed to see. Because other than that, the images would have been repetitive. So if he shot those same images in black and white, they would have been good mind you because it's Gordon Parks, but it was something about the color that gave me a sense of... To me, it represented a sense of hope and possibility.

**Choosing to photograph the mundane**

01:45:10:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

My approach. It varies. What I'm just trying to do now is– is– is offer a counter narrative to a lot of the negative images that we are so accustomed to seeing. You know, so I try to create images that represent hope and possibility. Love is one of the key components that's in a lot of my work. I want to capture love. It could be a relationship between a young boy and a dog. It could be best friends on a bicycle. It could be a couple on their first date. It could be two elderly people, a man and a woman who've been married for 50 years. But I need to show that love because I started to recognize later on in life that my work is being seen by people around the world. And again, I have to have a counter narrative. I was greatly influenced by the thought process of W.E.B. DuBois when he came up with the Paris Exhibition in 1900. And he created this exhibition to give a counter narrative to negative stereotypes back in 1900, you know, in that show in Paris.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And his objective was to offer a counter narrative. So, I knew that I have a responsibility as a photographer to create images that will offer that counter narrative. Now I did shoot the ugly side too, because there's a reality and to me it's balanced. But I understand... I do view my work, to a great degree, as visual medicine; that it helps to heal. And we see a lot of misery and we need

to change that narrative. So I feel that I have to create that. That's why there's a lot of my work is in fact posed because I wanted to bring that love. I might find a couple on their first date and they don't know what to do. So I said, "Well, put your arm around her. Hold hands."

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I even worked on the series on handshakes because I wanted to show what brotherly love looks like because, you know, we have this macho mindset sometimes where we always want to look hard and firm. So I said, well, let me just break that up by having guys... let me do a whole on guys shaking hands and guys embracing one another. Because again, I know that people are going to see this. And not only people are going to see it around the world, but I want even the local people to see images of joy. And now, as I share my images on social media, mainly Instagram, I'm getting feedback from people and they're telling me what my images do to them. So it allowed me to understand that I was on the right path, that my work is in fact visual medicine. And it helps with the healing process and it makes people feel good. When I receive a message from someone, they would tell me that "Your work made my day." It allows me to understand that this is what this is about right now. I want to make people's days and I want people to feel good. So it's very important to me to show images that show hope and love and friendship.

01:47:43:20

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

To me, it was just business as usual. It was just life. I didn't really see the change. The music was changing and the music spoke to the time. Because you had a song by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Four, "The Message," and it spoke about drug addiction and the hardships of street life. So it's through that music, the musical narrative, in a sense, it changed and it dictated the time. But I didn't realize I was really creating anything special. It was just business as usual for me, it wasn't until the crack epidemic hit that I started to see this transformation. But prior, with the birth of hip hop, it was just normal.

01:48:20:05

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

The only thing that changed is I started seeing more people with big boom boxes playing the music on those boxes. So that became a part of— of one of the props that would be so prominent in a lot of my photographs. But other than that, I didn't really recognize— I didn't really recognize any drastic change until that crack hit. And then when the AIDS virus hit, because I started to see changes within people physically, and I started to see sorrow. Now the expressions of joy that were once so prominent in the early eighties start to change because with crack and with AIDS, there was a lot of death. So if you lost a loved one, it might manifest itself if I see you in the street now. You know, and unbeknownst to me, I might approach you, but you just lost someone to the virus, or you might've lost a friend to violence. So those



expressions of joy that once existed so prominently early in the 80s started to change because a lot of people were witnessing a lot of suffering. I started to see that change in that sense.

01:49:14:19

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

One of the things I would do a lot is I would travel. I would get on the train a lot to just go to different cities to just see how life was when I came home because when I was in the service, I read about different places, and now I'm in a position... Before I went, I was young, so I wasn't traveling, but once I came home, I wanted to travel and learn more. I read a book, *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown, and that informed me to want to go to the East village, the West village, like what are these places right now? So I wanted, you know, when I came home, but prior to going to the military, I'd never been to Harlem before. Maybe once, but now I want to branch out of my Brooklyn community and explore new communities.

01:49:51:06

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I would go to the West Village to try to understand what was happening there. I would go to the lower East side a lot. I would go to Harlem, Spanish Harlem just to see different areas and try to learn more about people. I was very curious about humanity, you know, and I just felt, again, my camera was my compass that brought me to these different places, and it was good because I met so many people in my travels. So like Gordon, I was exploring,

and I was exploring poetry and the arts, the theater. I became very inclined to the Black Arts Movement because I read about it during my time in the military. So when I came home, I wanted to know more about that. So I started documenting that scene, you know, the poets or the musicians. That was very important to me, but traveling was very key. I was very intrigued. I read a book about a young man from Superman, the Man and how he traveled.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It escapes me right now. I'm having a senior moment, but just to get on the train and travel, I started to travel. I would get bored with New York and go out to New Jersey and started photographing that area. Then I would go out to Baltimore. No, I would go out to Philly and Baltimore and D.C. just to explore because I wanted to see the world. So my cameras guided me to these different places, and all I needed was a camera and some film and some money in my pocket, and I was good. I was just traveling sometimes get off train, stop and just walk around the city that I knew nothing about. Just out of curiosity, just to learn.

01:51:17:00

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I believe, wholeheartedly, in angels and you never know the people that you meet in life, and I started looking at some of my subjects as angels. You might walk past a homeless person, and you might look at them in a certain manner,

but you don't know who these people are. I became very curious about the human experience, and I believe that every person I met on this path, I was meant to meet for a reason. I kept a journal with me. I wanted to document my experience, and I met a lot of wonderful people in my traveling, and I always felt it was always meant to be. So, that really inspired me to continue to travel because I got to a point, I felt I'd done enough in Brooklyn, and I needed to just see more of the world. There's a lot more going on out here, and let me go out there and just see it. Let me just play it by ear. There was never really any really set destination. Sometimes I'll just go. As long as I had money, I'll just venture into any area and whatever happens, happens. In so many cases, what happened was I would see something that I felt that was necessary for me to see.

01:52:12:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And I saw the misery, the poverty, the pain, you know, because when I came home, I saw the addiction, and I had never seen it before. I heard about it. I might've saw a clipping of it on the news, but now I'm seeing some of the things that- that- that writers wrote about. Even with Gordon, when he spoke about Red Jackson, you know, I'm seeing the gang culture. I'm seeing elderly. I'm seeing people fell victim to that world, and I'm becoming more just curious. The more I traveled, the more curious I became. It almost became an addiction to me. I just wanted to see more and learn more. I wanted questions to be answered because I had so many, and knowing my

father wasn't really telling me, informing me of different things. So I just figured, let me go out and ask questions, and a lot of times I was asking, and I had a particular assignment because I wanted to know about the Vietnam veterans.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So a lot of times my travels was rooted in me trying to find them. So I would often times approach men at that time who were in the late thirties, and I want to know about where was you at in 1968, and what was life like in the sixties? So I was trying to just get information in my travels, and I just wanted to talk to people. I think early on... I wanted to be a journalist, not only a photographer, but I wanted to just find information. Back in the early days, there was a noted young man who was on ABC called Gil Noble. He had a program called *Like It Is*, and he kind of inspired me. He would do interviews with a number of people on his show every Sunday. So he kind of informed my practices. It's one thing to make an image, but I wanted to know more about the people in which I'm photographing, and I had a lot of answers, and I found that, as a young man who just came home from the military, everyone I pretty much approached was really open to talk to me. So I might sit down and buy a cup of coffee for a person and just talk about life. You know, and it was very healing for me. It gave me a lot of insight. So it's something I just always did.

**Red Jackson**

01:54:11:06

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think that... As I revisited that story with Gordon, I think that Gordon saw himself in Red Jackson. Of course, if Gordon didn't pick up the camera, he could have easily been Red Jackson because of the life that he was living at that time. So I think Gordon empathized with him, and he just saw a young man that had a lot of potential. He was a leader. He was a boxer, and Gordon boxed, and I really firmly believed that Gordon saw himself in Red and he saw he didn't have a father. He saw the hardships he was going through. Gordon went through poverty, and he just saw his greatness and he just felt the need to mentor this young man using the layman's of photography at the same time trying to show him in a light that would illuminate some of the problems that existed in Harlem, in regards to poverty and gang warfare and injustice. At the same time, Gordon had his own sons that were privileged, that had the opportunity to go to good schools and live in a good home. So he just saw himself in Red, and he had that love, and I thought that was a really special connection that really resonated with me because throughout my life, I've always come upon Red Jacksons, and I wanted to try to help them anyway I could, both prior to going into corrections.

01:55:29:07

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It was just always my intention. I always saw the goodness in people because I was Red Jackson, you know, and all I needed was someone to believe in me. So, that story really resonated with me. I've looked at a lot of Gordon's work in the past, but there was something about the Red Jackson story that really touched me because what's interesting about that is two members of the gang inspired me. You know, one gang member who was once terrorizing the neighborhood was incarcerated, and he came home, and he started to go after the young men. He just went after young men and tried to put them on the path because he had fallen victim to the streets, and during his incarceration, he went through a transformation, and then he went back to the same streets that he terrorized, and he started to guide people in the path. When I was going through a very difficult time of my life, he helped guide me on the path. So, that was very important.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And then one of the young men that influenced my photography was a warlord in a gang, too, just like Red Jackson. And despite him being in a gang and a warlord, he was a good person. So for me, I understood that. I understood that many of us came from very difficult backgrounds, and we just needed someone to guide us. We needed someone to listen to us and recognize us. I think about when Gordon had first met Red, you know, in that precinct, and Red was a little apprehensive, but they built this great bond

with each other, and Gordon recognized his leadership ability, and they developed a really unique relationship.

01:56:52:01

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I did that all my life. All my life I've known Reds. Even to this day, there's a lot of young men who've I've inspired for over 30, 40 years that I just saw something in, and I would take them out of the street, take them away from the concrete and bring them to Prospect Park and have some orange juice with them and talk to them about life and goals. Bring them to my home and teach them how to play chess. So I could really understand that relationship, you know, on so many different levels. Even in researching Red Jackson's story, I had to go back to another person that Gordon had great influence on. That was a Detroit Red just a few years earlier, and that was Malcolm X, who was Detroit Red at that time. How ironic that Malcolm, just a few years earlier, was in Harlem engaged in a lot of negative activity as well. They would develop a friendship because I do believe that Malcolm-- that Gordon saw a part of himself and Malcolm, and in a lot of his subjects.

01:57:45:22

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So when it comes down to Gordon, it was the empathy that he had for his subjects that I thought was really powerful, especially those individuals. You know, you had Red Jackson with his hardships, Malcolm X, who, you know, his difficult life coming up, and even with Gordon, coming from a very large

family, Malcolm coming from a large family. He just saw himself in them, and he just wanted to be like a mentor and a guide. I understand it because, being a photographer, the type of photography that we do, it puts us in a position to do that, and I teach my subjects... my young students in which I'm teaching, to become concerned with the subject.

01:58:23:12

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Just don't go after getting the photograph. Try to learn about them because we could be angels and guides. One of the great honors for me, if a person refers to me as an angel, and they've done that. A lot of young men that were incarcerated, the fact that I might take an interest in them and guide them and take time to hear them out, they will refer to me as an angel. So I want people to be that, you know. Again, the camera's a compass that leads us on these paths, and you can make a difference in a person's life, even if you inspire them to become a photographer. You can help change their life, and that's what I wanted to do, and that's what Gordon wanted to do. I mean, with Flavio, he had a concern. When we think about the Fontanelle family, Gordon saw himself within that family. He came from that type of poverty, not to that extreme, but he saw a condition that he was once in to a great degree, and he's very empathetic. So those are the stories that really stay after me. When I look at his work, I think about the Fontanelle family, I think about Flavio, and I think about Red Jackson.

01:59:19:06



JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Those are the stories I think that really resonated with Gordon. That's what he really wanted to do. It's one thing to shoot the fashion and travel the world, but it was something about going back and trying to use your position to transform the lives of people.

**Finding purpose**

01:59:39:15

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think now, as I matured in life, I realized that this is my purpose. Everything in life to me happened for a particular reason. But as I really took time to meditate and think about who I am and what my purpose in life is, I realized first of all, that having the ability to see is a divine gift. Having spent time with people who are visually impaired, really humbled me, and I realized that I have something special, and many of us take it for granted that we can see. So I feel that the least I can do, having this divine gift, is bring some good in this world. I've seen a lot of bad in my life and certain decisions I made in life may not have always been great.

02:00:21:19

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I find it that the work I do, in a sense, is my way of atoning for some of the misdeeds in which I've done. At the same time, I believe I could bring joy in this world by creating images, not only of the people in which I'm

photographing, but now to take that same photograph now some 20, 30 years later and share it and bring joy in the lives of so many other people. So it's my purpose, you know. And again, I believe in angels. You never know who you meet. A wise homeless woman once said something to me that really resonated, and I think it helped to change the way I looked at life. And she said to me when I walked by her without giving her money, she said, "What goes up, must come down." And that really humbled me. And I said, "Wow, you just never know who people are in life." So it made me just look at things differently, and I go back to that great statement that Confucius once stated "Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it." So I started to see beauty within everybody, and I just want to make a difference in this life, and I realized that I was placed on this planet for that purpose.

02:01:22:02

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I have to bring good, especially having come up during the 1960s, and I often speak about the fact that all my life all I've known is war. Being one that has a profound love for photography, I was always drawn to images of war. Early on, I was traumatized behind that. Looking at pictures, that's all I looked at. From not only the wars in this country, just wars in general. All wars, I've studied. Every major war that happened in this world, I analyzed. So from my perspective, the world is a very hateful place, and we have to bring some humanity in the world. It's something about the gift of the... I feel it's the artist. Harry Belafonte often speaks about the role that the artist plays, and

I'm a firm believer that the artists of all genres, the poets, the painters, the photographers, the musicians, we have a responsibility to bring some joy in this world. I believe in that, and I feel it is my purpose.

02:02:20:12

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It is my duty to use my position, my platform, this wonderful global language of photography to bring some joy in the world. Because what happens, too, having the opportunity to exhibit my work around the world. Now I'm sharing my work in South Korea, in Japan, in Germany, in France and London, and people are coming out to my shows and looking at my work. It's a very powerful thing that I've been blessed to freeze time and motion, but now I'm in a position to share images. Now, hundreds upon hundreds of people are coming to my show, and they draw inspiration, and that means a lot to me. So I'm in a position to influence people. So how can I go about doing it through these images? A lot of my exhibitions have very important titles to it. *Love is a Message, Honor and Dignity*, and it's done with great intent because I feel that it's necessary for me to offer a counter narrative to show the humanity, not only within the African American community, but in the world community because every country I go to, I try to document that same humanity, and I try to share it, to use that wonderful language of photography to express or showcase beauty and love.

### **Gordon Parks' early life**

02:03:36:00

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Well, his upbringing, first of all, it had to be humbling. To be raised on a farm and to not really have a whole lot, you know, to have a large family. But I think that what really resonated with me about Gordon and his life, is the fact that when his mother died and he went to Saint Paul, Minnesota to live with his sister, and at the age of 16 to be thrown out the house in the dead of winter time. That really blew me away when I read that part of his story and the struggle that he went through. What's so fresh in my mind is being so hungry. There's a dog on the street, and you and the dog are looking at this pigeon to eat because you're both very hungry.

02:04:21:22

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So that was very humbling to know that at such a young age he had to endure such hardships. First of all, to be thrown out of your sister's house. Here, you have your older sister and you have conflict with her husband and he lacks empathy. He throws you out in the dead of the winter, this young boy, and now you out there on your own, trying to figure this thing out, and some of the things you had to do just to survive. I thought that was just incredible, and all he needed was someone to believe in him. Luckily for him, he was able to get that camera, and he had people along his life that trusted him that saw something special and saw that light, saw that angel, and would take him under the wing and guide him. I thought that was incredible and just how he

elevated. The fact that he would ride the trains and pick up the magazines and look at imagery and be informed behind that. Having an opportunity to go to different cities under some really harsh conditions just to survive and being amongst the filth and the drunkenness and addiction.

02:05:21:04

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

He had to experience those hardships in order to be the great man that he would become. So when I look at his earlier days, it's like, "Wow, I thought I had it bad." That was very challenging to be so young and have to survive like that. But I mean, look at the genius of this man. Despite not finishing school and not being trained in certain things, the piano, he was able to navigate himself and go into these different spaces and have people believe in him that would guide him. So it was always angels looking out for him that would help him along the way, and I thought that was very interesting about him. He never gave up, and despite the racism that he went through and the obstacles that he confronted, he never harbored any resentment. He just realized that that was a part of life and he kept pushing forward, and I thought that was very admirable about him, that he could harbor this type of forgiveness and move on. He was constantly being challenged, but despite those challenges, he just kept moving on. It did not deter him. Others might've broken down behind that. It takes a very special person to endure so much and maintain your focus, and I thought that was really incredible.

**The impact of photography**

02:06:33:06

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

To me, I look at it as a frozen moment in time, and when I make images, I have this idea that it may not make sense now. It's going to make sense later on. I look at it as a part of history. It's a very important frozen moment in time, which I don't understand. I feel that, personally, I was inspired to be here at this particular time to freeze this moment in time for a particular reason. I look at it as a piece of a larger puzzle of the world, and I just want to contribute to it. So it's something that means something, and I don't know what it is right now, but I know one thing that it's frozen forever, and I'm here to just freeze this moment. For me personally, when I document a certain situation 30, 40 years ago, I call them the frozen moments.

02:07:15:03

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Now, thirty, forty years later, I thawed them out, and I shared on a platform, my Instagram, and now so many stories come out behind that one image. It amazes me that people could say something I might've taken for granted, and it might've been the right photograph, but something compelled me to capture that moment at that time. And now when I share it, someone can say, "Well, that's me in the photograph" or, "That store in the background is the store that me and my mother went through." So I look at it as pieces of a larger puzzle of society, and I just felt that I'm just a contributor. So that's

pretty much how I viewed my photographs. They're all very important documents that the creator put me on that path to freeze for whatever reason.

### **Getting published**

02:08:00:11

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

That didn't happen until the late 1990s when a lot of the hip hop magazines were coming out, and I started to see images that kind of like mirrored mine. I saw people from my community and now we're getting shined because prior to hip hop, you wasn't really seeing that. A lot of what you were seeing, like a lot of the R&B artists, but now with hip hop being, it was something new. There's a lot of young people, and then I was studying in magazines. I said, "There's a void here. There's a lot of hip hop artists in here, but what about..." I'm looking at my work now. So I have everyday people that are very similar, and that's when the idea came to start publishing because prior to that, I did photography mainly to inspire young people, but at the same time, I wanted a visual diary of my life.

02:08:40:10

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I never wanted to be without memory. When I was in the military, I vowed that when I was overseas, that when I returned back to safety, I will never be without memory again because I would often times, when I was in the field, I

would daydream about being home. Or I would try to reflect on things that I remember about New York; the trains, the buses, the people. So I said to myself, when I go home, I will never be without memory. You know? So, my work was about really having a visual diary my entire life, constantly every single day. Not only was I documenting with photographs, but I was also writing. But it wasn't until the late 1990s that I started to have conversations with my coworkers about a time before crack or back in the days because so much has changed. In speaking about that, then the idea came to me that I have work that I think is worthy to be published, and then I started to approach different magazines and publishing companies with my work, and presented ideas to them, and they were very receptive. So it wasn't until, really, 1999 that I was published for the very first time.

02:09:43:16

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

There was a magazine called *The Source* that gave me a feature. It was a hundredth anniversary issue, and I think they gave me 15 pages, and I was told that the magazine sold almost overnight. It became this sensation because everyday people were in this magazine and I didn't realize it. To me, they was just every... They weren't really everyday people anymore. A lot of the people I photograph will go on to elevate and become very renowned people. So I caught a lot of people, and they were just basic, but as time progressed, they became very popular. I realized at that time that my work was very valued, and it resonated within the industry, the publishing



industry. So off that one magazine, I was able to go to publishers and other magazines. They wanted to see more of the work, and my voice started to be published, and it became a very interesting story, mainly off the style and fashion.

02:10:33:08

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It wasn't any backstories at time, but it was the fashion because it started to kind of shift. Crack had changed a lot of that. So there was a lot of interest. And back in those days, there was a lot of international magazine stores throughout New York, and I would go to a lot of them and just sit, and like a library, I would go study all these magazines from around the world. I would write them, and I would try to get my work in them, and everyone was pretty much receptive. So, that's how it kind of started. I didn't realize I had something that was so valuable. All it was to me was a visual diary and just photographs of people I met on the path of life. I would have never imagined it would have so much meaning.

***The Atmosphere of Crime***

02:11:15:10

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's just a harsh reality of a world that exists, and it's unfortunate that it's always been there. For me personally, when I look at it his images of San Quentin, it takes me back to my experience on working on Rikers Island and

the misery that I saw and how painful it was to see men in cages. You know, men incarcerated who weren't going home. You know, to be in a situation where I'm looking at young men, many who were under my wing, my leadership, 17 years old, doing 30 years in prison. And I know a number of young men who were in my area, who did 20, 30 years. It's very painful because it was very personal for me.

02:11:52:20

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's not like I went into a place that I didn't know people. I was in the space where I knew a lot of people, and I was watching them get sentenced. I watched a lot of young men that couldn't take it. They were hanging up. I witnessed the brutality of individuals that you in this system and now, you have to survive. I saw the wars that were going on in prison. So it was very difficult. I worked in central booking where a lot of people in Manhattan would get arrested, and when I look at some of Gordon's work, I think about that because I had to interact with police officers every day. So it's not like I was limited to correction officers. I saw it. I saw police officers bring in numerous prisoners every day, and it was very difficult. It was very sad for me. I witnessed brutality on the street and I documented it. I photographed police officers because I realized that they have a job they got to do. There's a lot of good officers out there. So part of my process was trying to understand who they were. So when I look at Gordon's new work on the police department. I could identify with it.

02:12:52:08

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I appreciate it because it's a very important narrative that needs to be told. And for me personally, as a photographer, as one who's trying to continue in that tradition, it's a very large body of my work that I've never really shown before because there's mixed emotions behind that, but at the same time, I feel that it's very important to show that. I've documented it for at least, I might have 40 years worth of images dealing with that type of world, both on the street and inside the jail. So it's a very important narrative that needs to be told.

02:13:19:03

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Gordon was really pained behind that. Some of the volunteer work that he did in Minnesota, you know, that people don't often speak about going into the jails and trying to talk to young men about changing their lives and being a mentor. That's very important to him. He saw what was going on, and at the same time he realized that, "Let me talk to these... let me use my position to engage you, to kind of give you a sense of hope and possibility," because again, Gordon could have easily been in prison, too.

***Life Magazine***

02:13:50:12

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was just recently reading about the Red Jackson story and the fact that *Life* Magazine wanted to put that photograph of Red on the cover, the smoking gun. It was this conflict that Gordon had with that. I understand it because he did not... We've already seen it. The story alone was already very difficult. And I find that to be really hard. We talk about 1948 in America. You know, you're doing a story about this gang banger and that was really hard, but Gordon's idea of wanting to do it was to bring attention to a growing problem in the cities around America and I thought that was great. And it just wasn't limited to the African American community because gang culture was in a lot of the large cities, and I admire Gordon for his first assignment to even have that idea, to want to do that, to bring light to it.

02:14:38:05

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And I understand the conflict, you know, in trying to tell that narrative. Even the Fontenelle story, you know, it was a very difficult story, but Gordon wanted to tell it and as time would go on and got even harder, especially when the story came out and the donations came in to help support the family and the house eventually got burned down. I know Gordon was really... I can't imagine what he was going through because you're trying to do good, and your intentions is good. And even probably, I'm not familiar with some of the discreditors that came forward that didn't like what he was doing within the community. Because I know they had to been there because some people didn't understand that, like why are you showing these images

here? Do we really need to see this right here? But they didn't understand what Gordon was trying to do.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And I can understand that as a photographer, sometimes you are placed in that position where it's conflicted, where people don't understand what your real intentions are and you get this flack, you know, but he held his ground, especially when it came down to Red Jackson. It shed light. It gave Red a visibility and it helped the world become more empathetic, to a degree, because now this *Life* magazine is being shown all over the world and they have an understanding that you have this good kid that's caught up in this unfortunate situation. So he achieved his objective even when Flavio and I appreciate that story because he did not just limit these stories to the African American community.

02:16:01:10

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

To go to Brazil and see this young man and be empathetic with his struggle, and using your platform as a photojournalist to help get him the needed medical attention to help him. I thought it was really incredible. So I appreciate that. I don't know too much about some of the struggles he had other than what I read about Red Jackson. And I believe I read something about the story about the Nation of Islam that produced a little bit of conflict as well, but I can't really elaborate on that in length because I'm not too

familiar with that. But I know there was always this... It was just conflicted, because even for me, it's like that when I put out work, how's it going to be taken? Because there's certain work I'm not going to do. Even when my publisher, when I came up with the idea of doing a book called *A Time Before Crack*, there was a debate behind that. They thought it was an intimidating topic, a caption... because I had two titles at that time, *Strictly Old School* and *A Time Before Crack*, but I felt it was necessary to address the crack epidemic.

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JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I felt I had to. To call the book *Strictly Old School* is fine. I think it would have sold well, but by coming up with a very provocative title like *A Time Before Crack*, it resonated and was thought provoking. And I stood my ground. I had to do this right here because I can't let this epidemic, this situation pass. I have to talk about as some form of fashion, which I did. So I understand the conflict that one can have one time. But what I admire about Gordon is that he held on to his integrity and he did not sway from his position. And he went on to bring a lot of good out of those various stories in which he covered.

### **Gordon Parks' methodology**

02:17:43:21

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think he was sincere and he was honest. And his intentions were good, you know, he wasn't- he wasn't about manipulating. He was just sincere in

wanting to really capture the Nation of Islam in a particular light and Malcolm's humanity. And I thought that was really interesting. It takes a lot to gain the trust of a person, you know, because there's always a suspicion that's there, but Gordon had a way. He was a gentleman, he was a scholar, he was well-traveled, he was very dignified. And I think that anyone that saw Gordon and see that within him you'd be very open. So just his manner, his character alone kind of like eased people a little bit. Because that apprehensiveness is always there.

02:18:29:06

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And it's not an easy thing to convince people to allow you into their world and document them, especially organizations like that. So I'll say it was his character, it had a lot to do with it. And the sincerity, you know, his honesty, his genuine concern with trying to just learn more about these organizations, regardless of how he felt about them. He just wanted to give, you know, I want to hear your side, you know. I'm going to approach the situation in a very objective way, wanting to just know someone that comes from your community.

**Muhammad Ali**

02:19:03:22

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

What I find so captivating about Muhammad Ali's imagery that Gordon captures that we know Muhammad Ali as a boxer. And we see that and-- but what I found that really captivated me, were the images of him as a humanitarian. His image as a big brother, as a mentor, there's a few images that stand out in my mind. There's one that Muhammad Ali is sitting amongst a group of men, older men, and he's having a conversation and he was in the center, and you can see it's a very serious conversation. And there's a number of images of him with children. And I thought that was really important because many of us know, Muhammad Ali as this loud mouth boxer. There's always just always at the camera speaking, but I liked the side of him as a father.

02:19:51:08

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I liked the side of him as... an individual who has a profound love for children. And that's what I thought... Those are the images that I think are very important. I have that book that Gordon did on Muhammad Ali and I appreciate that book. It's something about those images that I think are very important that Gordon captured. Even him in the restaurant, him praying, very, very, very important imagery to give that balance. Because like I said, there's just this narrow vision of Muhammad Ali is a boxer, but Gordon brought out the humanitarian side of him, which I thought was really interesting and very important too, that he was able to capture those moments. You know, that very few people would even think about capturing.



**The Black Panthers**

02:20:38:02

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Same with that. I don't know too much about it. I remember the images that stands out in my mind of Eldridge Cleaver and his wife, Kathleen, which is very personal to me because I was asked to recreate that image. But the story behind it, the backstory, which is a very interesting story. And I think one of the greatest lessons I got out of it, when one of the Black Panthers talked about the 45, you know, and using the weapon. And then Gordon spoke about the 35 millimeter and how it could be a more effective weapon. And that really resonated with me because you have many that want to pick up the gun. And in certain situations, the gun has his place, but he spoke about the power that the 35 millimeter could have. And that really stayed with me. That's a lesson that stayed with me for a long time because I grew up in a gun culture with the nine millimeters.

02:21:26:22

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And it was something about that 35 millimeter that had a little bit more power. And rather than destroy, I wanted to be a builder. So I thought that that was a very important conversation that Gordon had with that Black Panther about the power of photography and imagery, and how you could use the camera to be a really more effective weapon versus that 45. So that's what I got out of that brief exchange.

*Shaft*

02:21:56:05

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

It's a few aspects of *Shaft* for me. I remember when my parents went to go see *Shaft*, first of all. It was a big thing for my community, you know, in the neighborhood at that time. When it premiered that night, everybody was going. I remember we had a babysitter and I remember my parents getting dressed up to go see *Shaft* and I remember them coming back in a sense, we were happy because we got a chance to hang out with the babysitter. In seeing *Shaft*, wow, my memory is sad, let me kind of like go back to... The only thing I could really vividly remember, first of all, the music was great. To see our first like Black superhero was really great, Richard Roundtree, he had his afro his sideburns, he was cool and smooth, and that was like our hero because we didn't really have a lot of heroes back then. So when Gordon did *Shaft* we got a hero now. A guy that ain't taking no shorts he could fight, he got his gun, he has the women and he was just someone that we kind of like looked up to. And I remember some of the older guys in my neighborhood and seeing *Shaft*, they were inclined to become police officers right now. So, that movie encouraged a lot of African American men to join the ranks of the police department.

02:23:08:05

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Because they wanted to be like *Shaft*. So, that's really my only memory of it. Of course the soundtrack stays in my mind, you know, that great soundtrack by Isaac Hayes. I remember how that made me look at music in a certain light, but I just remember visually looking at different situations. From that movie I started to learn about police corruption and racism indirectly, and things of that nature and just a broader view of things I was looking at in photographs now. Now I'm looking at motion now, I'm getting a better understanding of things that are going on. And I thought that was interesting. I started to kind of look at things visually. I'm looking at my city now and filmmaking to a degree how things are coming alive, I'm seeing areas. But that's the only memory I really have, I haven't watched *Shaft* in a really long time, but those are the only memories I really have of it. Like I said of just this guy, who was Richard Roundtree, as Shaft.

02:24:11:16

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And how debonair he was, you know, he was a nice dresser and he had heart. He had a lot of courage in the time in which a lot of Black men didn't have courage. You didn't really see a lot of them within the ranks of the police department. So this is a man that was able to join the force and he went against the grain and he held onto his integrity. And I thought that was really an interesting situation. So, that's all I can say, honestly.

### **Gordon Parks' style**

02:24:40:01

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Well, I admire Gordon. You know, he was always very debonair and he always had his blazer on and he just seemed to be a really classy individual. He seemed to be a man who enjoyed the finer things in life, and I thought that was very important. Even for me as a photographer, when I'm out there and in the street I would dress a certain way because there's a certain energy that it gives off. And that's what I learned from that. If I'm actively going to go out in the street with a particular assignment, I believe in dressing a certain way because it produces a particular vibration. And I think I learned that... I gained that style from watching Gordon because he was always like that. I never really saw him too much dressed down. He always seemed to be rather dad- debonair. And just a really classy man, a really dignified man, very eloquent man, very sincere man, a man of good character.

02:25:27:06

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I studied that about him, his ability to communicate with a little bit of everybody, you know, and we kind of like needed that. Like how do you navigate this very complicated world of photography? Gordon was that pathfinder that created that way of how to look at it, how to go about this. Especially for me, you know, as I start to exhibit and even lecture, it was very difficult because I had no one to show me the way. You know, so in studying Gordon, I started to see, okay, this is how this thing works. This is how you

need to be. You might be placed in positions where you might be a little uncomfortable, but how do you navigate through this? How do you engage people in conversation?

02:26:01:22

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

So I owe a lot of where I'm at right now to just how Gordon was able to effectively do that. Because we didn't have a lot of Black photographers to mirror. You know, really none that were living at that time. So Gordon for me in the 90s was that person. When I was coming up he was still alive at that point and I just kind of like analyzed him like, how do you go about doing this here?

### **Meeting Gordon Parks**

02:26:29:13

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I met him at the Leica Gallery during the opening of Eli Reed's book called *Black in White America*, I believe is what it's called. *Black in White America*. And I was downstairs about to leave, and Gordon had come down and he got into a cab and he had a really bad toothache and he couldn't speak. And I asked him, "With all due respect, sir, may I take a photograph of you?" And he allowed me to take that photograph. And then he saluted me, he looked me in my eyes, and he raised his right hand and he shook his fist about three times as he looked at me. And he didn't utter one word because of his toothache at

that... I didn't know he had a toothache until later on somebody told that to me. But through his body language, he let me know that you are, in a sense, carry on that torch. Like hang in there, hang in there. Because I had met him, I had just had a really difficult day at jail where a young man tried to kill himself, you know, like maybe two hours earlier. And now I'm at an opening and I'm struggling with what I just witnessed.

02:27:31:00

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And now I see this man who's in his 90s, who's very accomplished. And he sees me and he tells me, carry on. He must have saw the pain inside me at that point because I'm struggling with the fact that I had to cut down this young man who just didn't want to live anymore. And just a couple of hours earlier, I'm dealing with that. And now I'm at this big art opening for Eli and Gordon saw me and he raised his fist and he just took it three times in the sense that say, it's going to be all right and hang in there. And then the second time I met him was at his opening for his book of *Half Past Autumn* at the museum of New York.

02:28:07:00

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And he graciously signed both the book for me and one of my photographs that I felt mirrored one of his images. And I thought that was really incredible. So, that allowed me to know that I got to continue on to meet him,

to shake his hand and it meant a lot to me. So just two occasions in my life in which I met him.

### **Current projects**

02:28:30:13

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I was invited by a good friend of mine, Monique Glover. And she's working with a number of young children who are aspiring models, you know, from the ages of two to 15 years old. So she came up with this idea to do a calendar using my images as a template. She has 30 children and she's going to photograph a number of them dressed in the fashions of some of our most iconic images. There are twins. There's a number of individuals... I don't event... I can't believe what she's doing, but once she presented the idea to me, I immediately accepted, like, this is incredible because for me what's more important than photographing the fashion in this remix is to have an opportunity to photograph these young children who represent the future, you know, during this very difficult time.

02:29:19:08

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

And it's very difficult to photograph children. Back in the days I was able to effectively do it. And to this day, I can't believe I was able to do it in the manner in which I did because there's a certain fear and apprehensiveness amongst parents of strangers taking photographs of their children. And I

absolutely love children. So the fact that she has created this platform for me to come with the consent of the parents, to photograph these beautiful children, all young children who represent hope for a better world, it means a lot to me. So I'm very excited with this opportunity. She's a great stylist. She's telling me that the clothing it's going to mirror some of the clothing in my book, and I'm really happy with having this opportunity to do this here.

02:30:00:13

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

Because for me it might be my last photo shoot. So to go out with a bang and photograph children, it's going to probably be one of my most important bodies of work. So I'm really excited we're doing this right now. So I don't know what's going to await me. It seems surreal in a time of corona to have this opportunity, but it's just as important. So I plan on just working in my traditional style of just portraits, candid, just portraits, just kids posed up. So I'm going to have fun with that.

### **Influence from Gordon Parks' work**

02:30:36:01

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I think that what Gordon did, in particular, his book *Half Past Autumn*, it showed me... It served as a roadmap to me because within that book you had documentary, fashion, and editorial work, and fine artwork. And I started to look at my work in that sense. It's not limited to one particular area. I



absolutely love fashion photography and Gordon did it so well. So he inspired me to continue in that area of fashion and he did documentary. So in looking at that book and studying it thoroughly, I wanted to do everything that Gordon did. I wanted to go to the different countries that he went to document them. And it just gave me a gaze. This is what I want to do, just like this here. I want to do the fashion. I'm going to incorporate some of my family photographs.

02:31:17:20

JAMEL SHABAZZ:

I want to become a writer now because, you know, the fact that Gordon didn't finish traditional school and he was able to acquire 50 honorary degrees and he did it. So it inspired me that this is the roadmap. If you want to excel in this arena, this is the direction to go: to publish books, to do exhibitions, to do lectures, to give back. And so that was a guide. So when I look at that one particular book, *Half Past Autumn*, it's my roadmap to where I need to be as a photographer. So as I edit for my new book right now, I'm using that book as a reference to create these different bodies of work, to work as a single narrative of my journey in life.

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