

## Jean Pierre Laffont: Once upon a time in America

For Jean-Pierre Laffont, the United States has always been a photographer's paradise, he tells Horatia Harrod



Hippies at the Summer Jam in New York State carry a woman who has fainted, 1973 Photo: JP Laffont

By Horatia Harrod

10:58AM BST 11 Sep 2014

When Jean-Pierre Laffont arrived in New York in 1965, the city was in turmoil. The photographs he shot at the time show derelict houses, streets filthy with uncollected rubbish and children clambering over abandoned cars, making a playground in the ruins. The city was broke, public services forgotten, and racial tension simmered, occasionally boiling over in violent riots. “I believed we were in the middle of a revolution,” says Laffont, down the line from his home in New York. “But I was wrong. It was just another page, another stage, another moment down a difficult road.”

Sixties America was far from a paradise but, says Laffont, it was a dream place to be a photographer. “It was really visual,” he says, “and it was extremely simple to photograph the city’s problems at that time.” Today, Laffont says that he is rarely moved to take photographs in his adopted city, but in those early

years he would venture up into Harlem or the Bronx, his Leica slung around his neck, and shoot what he found. “When you arrive at a new place,” he says, “a photographer does not have any illusions. Everything you see is new and everything you see you want to grab it.”



Two homeless men in the shadow of the recently completed World Trade Center, 1975

Modest and unassuming, people warmed to him: an apartment block full of transvestite prostitutes took him to their bosom – until their pimp chased him from the scene – and he was taken up by hippies and farmers, American Nazis and Wiccan priests. Laffont believes that his success in finding stories was thanks to something intrinsic to America. “It’s a country of freedom,” he says. “Nobody asks me, ‘why do you photograph me?’ The American people welcome the foreigners, it is a tradition. And they give you the benefit of the doubt. They ask, ‘what are you going to bring us?’ On the contrary to France, where they ask, ‘what are you going to take from us?’”

Transvestite prostitutes in New York, 1967

Laffont was born in Algeria at the beginning of the Second World War,

and brought up in Casablanca, Morocco. He began taking photographs when his mother gave him a Leica as a boy, and his first attempt at something like photojournalism came in his late 20s, doing his military service in Algeria during the war of independence.





He comes from a family of doctors, and his parents were horrified when he decided to eschew medical school in favour of photography. Only his grandfather, Amédée, a gynaecologist, supported Laffont's decision. "He said, 'J P, if you want to be a photographer, go ahead'. The photographer in his village in France was a very rich man: he had a donkey and took pictures of the tourists with it in the summertime, and he made a fortune doing postcards!"

What drove Laffont wasn't making money, but curiosity. He had a reputation, according to his wife and editor Eliane, for embedding himself deep into his stories. "If you sent him on a story for one day, he would still be on the story in six months," she says. "And I'm not kidding. In the Eighties, American farmers were in great trouble. He went to stay with them and ended up there for two years, on and off. He wanted to tell their entire story: how they live, how

they farm their crops, how they raise their children. This is the way Jean-Pierre works."



The renovation of the Statue of Liberty, which lasted four years and cost \$62 million, 1984

Were he still shooting today, Laffont would be in Ferguson, Missouri, he says, where police have clashed violently with people protesting about the fatal shooting of an unarmed man. He has never considered himself an artist: he goes where the news is. “If you are a journalist,” he says, “you will be a journalist all your life.”

Photographer’s Paradise by Jean-Pierre Laffont (Glitterati, RRP £57.50) is available from Telegraph Books for £52.50 plus £1.95 p & p