STATES OF FLUX

Jean Pierre Laffont's epic shots grab a country in conflict, a photographer's paradise

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The reality is that Jean-Pierre Laffont has *seen* things. Yes, he is one of the most celebrated photojournalists in history, not to mention the founding member of one of the world's biggest photo agencies (Gamma USA and Sygma Photo News). But strip back the acclaim and the career and you've got a man who's had a front row seat to some of the most seismic moments in American history.

It started with Laffont's move from Paris to New York City in 1965. The city was dead broke, poverty rife, racial tension spilling into riots. Laffont took to the streets to capture it, finding very quickly that he was easily let into the comfort zones of families, drug dealers, prostitutes,

gangs, the gay community. What Laffont witnessed there was the beginning of an epic journey, one that would inspire him to spend several of his subsequent years trekking the US with his wife, capturing everything from rising subcultures to political history in the process.

After sitting in archives for years, Laffont work is finally on the page. *Photographer's Paradise: Turbulent America 1960-1990* materialises as more than Laffont's story, more than those he captured. It's a tribute to the human condition. And when it gets down to it, it's proof of what can happen when you ditch the wall and actually *see*.

Tempe Nakiska: What is the story behind this book?

Jean-Pierre Laffont: First, I would like to say that this book is the book of a journalist made up of photos taken from a journalistic point of view. One could say it is a series of stories that recount events that I have chased over a period of 30 years in the United States. This book was made by reviewing hundreds of thousands of photos taken over the three decades that illustrate important moments of this country's history. My wife Elaine and I had to go over all my analog archives to give them a second life in the digital world of photography as it is today. In order to showcase my archives commercially and on the Web, we had to go through all my contacts, my slides, edit them and finally scan them to actualize these photos and keep them from being forever forgotten in metal binders. It's while performing all these necessary operations that the idea of a book was born. We realised that when put together, the stories I'd photographed tell the story of the United States of that time.

TN: What kind of journeys were involved in the process of taking the pictures featured in this book?

JL: I definitely do not want to give the impression that this book represents a trip across the United States, or a collage of a country I visited when I came to this country in 1964. I

never thought that one day there would be a book on my work. But it pleases me now to put back in the collective memories of the oldest readers, or amateurs of photography, moments that were particularly troubling, curious, or dramatic that illustrated these three decades. As for the younger generation, I hope they will smile when looking at Apollo XI leave for the moon, or at the fashion that reigned in Harlem at the time of the fight of the century, Ali vs. Frazier. I think everyone will be interested to see the photos of Nixon leaving the White House while the White House staff says an emotional farewell from the balcony, what went on in prisons, at the Head Quarter of Ku Klux Klan, in the army... I crossed the 50 states of this big country and covered the stories that I was interested in photographing, either because they touched me, interested me as a journalist or because I was concerned and needed my photos to expose what was going on.

TN: Of all the characters you have met or photographed along the way, which person or people stand out to you as truly echoing 'America'?

JL: The moments that struck me the most are the ones spent in what we typically call “l’Amérique profonde” which literally means “Deep America”. It’s the rural side, those farms as far as the eye can see, those never-ending highways, or those small roads that seems to only lead to a dead end… The hardship and kindness of certain farmers that have been dispossessed of their farms and end up sharecroppers in their own homesteads… I think of them very fondly as I write these words. I fell in love with these American farmers; they moved me enormously. The farmer knows how to do everything: fix his motors, make his own electricity, sow and harvest, care for his animals, he is the first one awake and his eye never leave the barometer, a hail storm or two weeks of drought could ruin him. I have great admiration for his courage. On top of it, the cost of his work is decided on the other side of the country, without him, in the supermarkets of Chicago. I spent approximately two years with the farmers during the terrible economic crisis period of the 80s and if I had to grab my camera again, it would be to see how and where they are today.

TN: If you could relive one experience what would it be?

JL: If I had to relive once more a memorable experience, I would not hesitate to say that the launch of Apollo XI to the moon was an extraordinary event. Never have I felt America be so happy and proud as the moment those three astronauts went to the moon. I still hear the thousands of voices of all ages shouting at 9:32am, “Go! Go! Go! Go!” during those two minutes when you could see the rocket disappearing… The whole country was in unison. No human victory, ever, has been more beautiful than that morning on July 16th, 1969! I had the chance to live those historical seconds, the “American Dream” in its time of glory, the American believed that everything was possible. And I am reminded of it when President Obama choose for his campaign the three words: “Yes We Can!”

Thankfully my photos remain so as not to forget that moment of national happiness. Strangely, when the rocket lifted up, I decided not to photograph it but rather the crowd. For me the story was not the rocket. It was the American people and I am proud of that decision as the photo of the crowd is one of my favorites.

TN: After all you've seen, what does the 'American Dream' mean to you today?

JL: The "American Dream"! That is a lovely idea. But for an immigrant such as myself, it is first a word that each of us can interpret the way we want. So, there is at first a bit of ironic judgement coming from foreigners, then when living in the US, one is immediately charmed by the forever warmth and optimism of the people, and the feeling of welcome that is present upon each new encounter. This is the American mentality and here is the secret of the "American Dream": the idea that any and every thing can happen here, even a child from a poor family can become president of the United States.

Because I was permitted to photograph it all in total freedom, it became my American Dream. That is why I called my book *Photographer's Paradise*. America is not a paradise—far from it—but my photos are witness to the freedom I had while taking them. Never did a door close in my lens, never did an American grin upon hearing my mean French accent, and never was I asked about my religion, my age, or even my opinions.

America is, and will remain a paradise for those who want to look at it, settle in it and live in it. Everybody shares the 'American Dream' because everybody believes that any and everything can happen, always.

TN: What has changed about the society you photographed then to now?

JL: Do not think that after having photographed American society, during the 60s and 70s, that I have the feeling that people around me on the street are different now. Of course America has changed—the cars, the cell phones, the neighborhoods, the inside of stores, the security of transport, TV, etc. etc.

But the journalist that I am will tell you: the sounds of kids in schools have not changed, car traffic still doesn't move, the subways are the same, the bridges are old, the houses are still made of wood, Halloween and Thanksgiving still make people happy, the beaches in summer are full of people and kids still ask the same questions. Politicians still make the same promises and we still have the same problems. Not much has really changed and the big problems are still here; a woman still does not have the same pay as a man working the same job. There is still violence in schools. There are still neighborhoods in alarming poverty in big cities and the Ku Klux Klan is still

around as well as the death penalty, but gays can get married and America now has a black president. And these are big changes…

TN: How has photojournalism shifted in the past two or three decades with the influx of digital processing?

JL: I was lucky to be a photojournalist during that period. I even say "happy photographer" when I think of the photo-journalist that I was. It's true that since that time, the means of making an image, looking at it, printing it or not, has changed a lot. It saddens me that with time, the price of photos in the press is lower and lower. I often wonder, how can a young journalist make a living? I'm very worried for this beautiful profession that is being the witness of our time, and it's not by selling a photo at one dollar for a few days on a website once in a while that one can expect to seriously pursue this as a career nowadays. One becomes photo-journalist by following codes, rigorous conditions, an ethic. It takes time, and it is expensive. The price of photography cannot diminish.

TN: Is there still room for the photojournalist today?

JL: For me, the photojournalist's role is a mission, and like priesthood: he must show the world what the world would not see without him. There are very few reportages where everything is said in one photo.

We are no longer in the 60s when big agencies like AP or UPI were in search of the One Picture. Today, one can't work like that anymore, there's TV, there's the ability to take 6 pictures per second… Today there's the time and possibility to express oneself more largely. The story has to be shown, the whole story, the context in all its truth.

I think it's a great joy to work in digital. I remember how many times I was unable to take "the photo" because I couldn't reload my camera. Speaking of photo material, we must have had four or five cameras on our shoulders: we

had to take color and black & white, we didn't have time to change the lens, focus had to be done manually and the flash didn't always go off. When I look at photojournalists today who can have 1000 photos on a card, the white balance is automatic and on top of that the GPS will always tell you where you took that photo and when… I dream when I see comrades today send their photos to different magazines from their car. I can still see myself driving to the closest airport while writing the legends for my undeveloped film on an envelope that I would entrust to a passenger or stewardess hoping that the agency's errand boy would be there to retrieve it. How many times have I lost film that way. Yes, indubitably, the craft has changed, the material as well, but the best photo still remains to be taken.

It's true that with new technology in this past decade, photojournalism has very much evolved. The craft is reinventing itself but while technology has shifted the way photographers work, the role of a photojournalist stays the same: animated by his or her passion, showing the world as it is.

Photographer's Paradise: Turbulent America 1960-1990 *by Jean-Pierre Laffont, published by Glitterati Incorporated (http://glitteratiincorporated.com), is out now*

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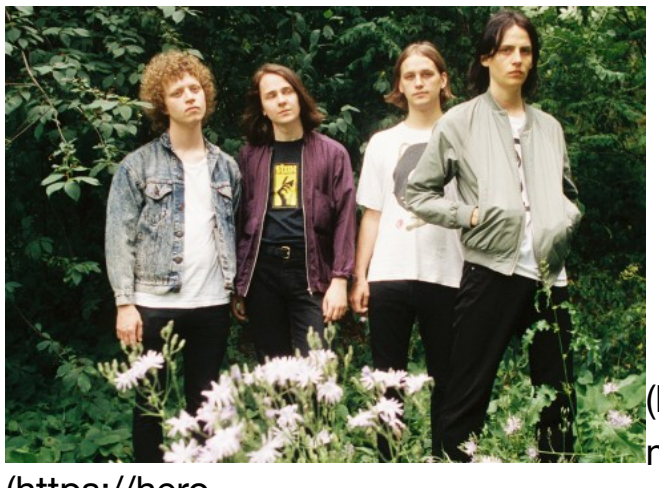

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