



AN ALTERNATIVE AMERICAN LIFE

Photographer, filmmaker and life-long committed political activist **Jerry Berndt's** career and work has never taken the easy or obvious route as he explained from his Paris studio to *Hungry Eye* US Editor **Sean Samuels**.

"I never went after my CIA files, but I am sure I made a small contribution to their paperwork," comments Jerry Berndt confidently while he searches his desk for the dossier the FBI did make on him. "If I find it, I'll send a copy over," he promises me.

As riotous now as I imagine he was on the streets almost 50 years ago, Berndt is the most audacious photographer I have encountered. He didn't just create enduring images of American public protest from the 1960s; he spearheaded elements of the civil rights movement itself. "I have a hole in the back of my head where a police club left a pretty good dent," he tells me. "That was at a demo in Washington D.C. or maybe it was Tomkins Square Park. I forget. I got hit so many times everything hurts now and it takes a while in the morning to work out the kinks. Back then the country really was split in half culturally, politically and morally. It was like Bob Dylan sings, 'Which side are you on?'"

For Berndt the line of demarcation was clear and he went to jail for the first time as a teenager. He had not been in the movement long, but upon hearing a jazz record and realizing that in the neighborhood he lived these artists would be lynched, he felt compelled to act. "If people ask what my main influence is in photography I often tell them that it's *Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, Volume 4*."

From this humble beginning, Berndt grew into a significant annoyance in the eyes of the US Government. Living and working in Boston, Massachusetts, he made speeches that caused riots, wrote papers, created leaflets and made films that encouraged strikes. He was also regularly pulled over by the police. Berndt's biggest crime however, was to organize activists in the East Coast of America - Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts - to travel to Cuba and cut sugarcane with Fidel Castro. "Travel there is illegal; it said that on your passport. You couldn't go to China, North Korea and North Vietnam at the time either."

Operating out of Boston, the location of two of America's top schools, Harvard and MIT, meant

Berndt was well placed in a city that was an influential location on the civil rights movement map. "On one occasion MIT shut down the university to house a GI who went AWOL," he says. "He was being kept in the Student Union and was surrounded by 100,000 students just daring the police to come and try to take him away. A lot of the great minds were coming out of here and New York City, Chicago and of course there was San Francisco and Berkeley."

Working for the Liberation News Service, the photographic and journalistic arm of the Students for a Democratic Society, Berndt's work was submitted to all of the underground newspapers across the country. These papers served as counterpoints to what was being reported by the mainstream media. "I would feel outrage when I covered demonstrations. With a gathering of 100 to 200 thousand students marching down the street, the newspapers would say 30,000 and the police would report 20,000. We were more successful than that."

The first film Berndt made against the war in Vietnam, against the draft in particular, was a short that was shown during a huge undergraduate debate of some 20,000 students. "It was made from cut-outs from magazines to the soundtrack of Sargent Barry Sadler's *The Ballad of the Green Berets*," Berndt tells me. "The film wasn't just against the war, but racism and sexism, everything we were thinking about at the time. Then *Newsreel* came about which was filmmaker Shirley Clarke's idea - she made the first fiction film in Harlem called *The Cool World*, which is brilliant by the way - she knew that movie crews often didn't finish a roll of film so she collected all of these scraps and sent them around the country to people like me to film what was happening on our college campuses against the war. I did a lot of shooting for that and then later in New York City."

Previous pages: Young man at juke box, Washington Street, Boston, 1969

Opposite: Woman's football team, Detroit, 1972



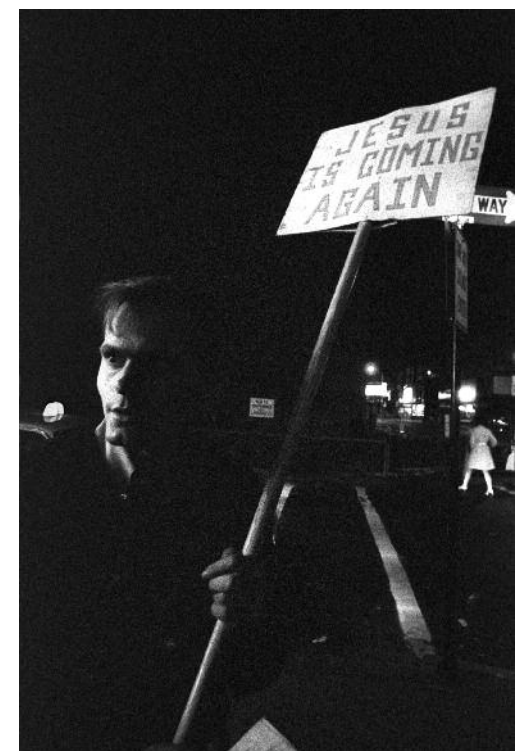


When I look at the images Berndt produced not only from this period in his career, but also later, it is apparent that being in such close proximity to his subject matter both physically and emotionally over long periods of time is why they are so successful. His attachment to the worlds he chose to frequent from the civil rights movement to dive bars and Boston's red-light district, to war-torn countries and empty cities at night are simply a reaction to how he was seeing, but also how he was feeling.

"Photography really is a state of mind. If you look at the world as if it's not already a postcard then you will always find something to photograph. If I go out with a camera and I am angry, I will look for angry things and I will find them, and the photographs when you look at them will say this. That's what I always thought was the job of making pictures – that when you look at the image you should feel what I want you to feel. I used to teach photography and would tell my students, isn't it interesting that when people go out with a camera, there are three things they always photograph – babies, animals and old men and old ladies. Why do you think that is? It's because none of these people are going to whack you in the head. That's why it is such fun for me to make photographs that don't fit. That's the job of the photographer."

"Take the bar room photographs. They came about because I grew up in my father's working class bar. I could be on a top flight assignment. I would arrive at a fancy hotel and unload all the equipment making sure everything worked, but then I would drive across town to find the shittiest bar, I'd sit down, maybe take a picture, maybe not, but it at least it felt like home. Stale beer, dumped whiskey, lots of cigarette and cigar smoke. When I'd had my fill, I'd go back to the fancy hotel. One person got these images right away, Jean-Claude Lemonnier, who used to be the curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. I showed them to him and he said this is not about the bar rooms and the drinking. This is about loneliness and depression and it was."

These images were made during the period



Above top: 2am, Boston, 1970

Above: Young wanna be pimp, Washington Street, Boston, 1968

Opposite: Detroit, 1971

following the collapse of the movement, which was a low point for Berndt. “People that you had worked with and fought the police with all of a sudden acted like they didn’t even know who you were. That really was depressing but there was fear about. There were rumors running round that there were camps out in Arizona and we were all going to be sent to them. Underground newspaper offices were raided on a regular basis and on that front we were losing because people in the movement decided the only way out was to get guns and start shooting back. My voice was, ‘we are outgunned; it’s not going to work.’ That’s when I started photographing in bar rooms and drinking a lot.”

As Berndt speaks I am reminded of stories I have heard before of photographers plummeting into depression. For some the cause is personal tragedy or trauma, for others it is because work simply dries up and they don’t know which way to turn. However, this is the first time I have heard a photographer say it is because their way of life and everything they believed in crumbled to dust. “What I sensed around me was that a lot of the people in the movement who had the biggest mouths and the biggest voices were those who came from upper middle class or even privileged backgrounds. Most of them simply apologized to their parents and went back to graduate school. For working class kids like me there wasn’t really much more to do but put our shoulders to the wheel and find a job.”

Berndt stuck with photography, opting to pick up commercial work in the Boston area, which while financially sensible – the proceeds have since put a daughter through Harvard – did not give him the greatest sense of satisfaction nor did it earn him credibility in the eyes of the gallery owners with whom the possibility of lucrative print sales lay. “It took me a long time to become civilized and that didn’t help in Boston; if you didn’t go to Harvard or MIT to study photography you really couldn’t get anywhere, especially if you made your living doing what ‘they’ called commercial work. I was always doing things outside of such work. I always had my own projects going on, but it didn’t seem to matter. I don’t resent that though;

I did what I had to do and I am very happy now because I can pretty much do what I want to do every day.”

The commercial work Berndt undertook ranged from publicity shots for the Boston Ballet – visiting Moscow and St. Petersburg along the way, corporate portraits and stories for hospital magazines as well as work for the Sunday magazine at the *Boston Globe* newspaper. “There was a lot of dumb work around, which I readily accepted although I hated every minute of it. The only fun part of going to a job was when a 300lb CEO turned up wanting to look slim.”

Perhaps the most unassuming, yet important, job was when Berndt was tasked with making images of the Boston red-light district that would ultimately become *Combat Zone (1967-1970)*, the work for which he first gained recognition. This area of Boston had become notorious because of the number of military bases in the area. At night when the bars closed, the various factions from Navy to Army to Air Force would start brawling on the streets and feeling right at home, Berndt was there to capture the spectrum of emotions without hesitation.

“It was a fun job and there are photographs I really love from *Combat Zone*. I couldn’t use a flash so I had to make a developer that would really push the film, get that ASA up there leaving the grain on the photograph looking the size of buckshot. I watch kids now at exhibitions walk up to them and say ‘wow look at the size of those pixels.’ It cracks me up.”

By now you might assume it’s safe to call Berndt a street photographer, after all the subjects he photographed were at their most natural in this environment, but it is not a moniker he is comfortable with. “Eugene Smith with *Pittsburgh* and his loft project - that’s pure street photography. What broke the back from the old style on the streets to the new style was Robert Frank. Garry Winogrand slammed on a 28mm lens and looked more at the shadows and dynamics of the whole street rather than any one person or event such as Dorethea Lange would do. Lee Friedlander, now I always understood his photographs of extreme

emptiness and loneliness. I understood that immediately.”

Neither will he accept being called a news photographer as he explains in a way only he can. “Let me read you a quote from the underground newspaper, *The Boston Phoenix* from October 29th, 1974. They had 10 different photographers submit a photograph and talk about why they were making photographs and mine is a picture of a huge plastic giraffe with a cement plant behind it. I said, ‘People sometimes ask me what kind of photographs I take. Are you a war photographer or a fashion photographer or a news photographer?’ And I never knew what to answer because I always wanted to be a giraffe photographer.”

Berndt tells me he is not rich from photography nor is he extraordinarily famous, and that is because he always preferred to stay out of sight and do his own thing. All modesty aside, however, over the course of his career Berndt has received numerous grants including a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Arts Fellowship, and his images can be seen in collections in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Bibliothèque National in Paris among others. Most recently, the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego placed his work alongside images by Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Danny Lyons, Bruce Davidson, and Diane Arbus for an exhibition and a book entitled *Streetwise*. All of which are admirable achievements for a career that began by accident.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when Berndt wasn’t assembling dishwashers for General Electric, he would spend his time with friends, building a hotrod out of a 1941 Plymouth and learning how to play the guitar and blues harmonica. An altogether ordinary existence that changed radically the night he met the writer Paul Goodman at a party.

“So this idiot half-drunk says to me, ‘I need a ride to university in Madison.’ I thought, ‘I don’t have to work tomorrow’ and said okay. When I showed Paul how fast the car could go and told him I had built it, he said, ‘why aren’t you at university?’ I came from a rough and tough

background and that was the first time in my life somebody said, ‘you are not stupid.’ When we arrived he said, ‘hang around it’s a state school; they’ve got to let you in. I will write you a letter.’ So I quit my job, sold the car, moved to Madison and flunked out in one semester. I didn’t know how to read, write, talk, nothing. I called Paul to apologize for failing and for disappointing him. He said, ‘I knew you would flunk out, stay there; it’s a state school they have to take you back in a year. I’ll write you a letter.’

Deciding to stick it out, Berndt needed work so he approached the Chairman of the Anthropology Department to see if he had anything he could do. When asked if he could work in a darkroom, Berndt immediately said yes, having never been in a darkroom in his life.

“He gave me his life’s work from Tibet and asked me to make prints. I had no idea what he was talking about. I opened up the darkroom scared out of my mind, but then I found the library and I met Ansel Adams – five volumes. Next I found the student union with a darkroom and about 20 people working in it. I thought some of them must know what they are doing so I studied and in about a year I was a pretty good printer. Then somebody gave me a camera and some film and a light meter and told me I could take pictures too. Because I was already in the movement and because we were planning the demonstrations, I knew where they were going to happen. So I could always be in the right place at the right time and to get the shots. I was extremely fast. People used to accuse me of living on speed, but I wasn’t; I was just excited beyond belief.”

At the age of 22, Berndt’s movement pictures started to be noticed by the national newspapers providing him with an opportunity to embark on a promising career in New York, the end goal for many photographers working at the time, but he didn’t take it, deciding instead to pursue his original calling.

“I didn’t think of photography as being a profession, it was more of a vocation. I did this work because it needed to be done. If it sold all the better, but I didn’t go out hustling. I was happily

working for disreputable newspapers such as the *Old Mole* underground press and later the *Boston Phoenix* and eventually the *Boston Globe*. Even when I started working commercially I never really pushed it. There is an old joke about prostitutes that goes first she did it out of love, but then she did it for her friends because they really needed some love and affection too, but then she did it for anybody who needed it, but could pay for it. Photographers often go in that direction.”

Nonetheless, Berndt’s style and ability to record emotion and truth as well as document meant it would not be long before overseas assignments were calling and he was leaving the country – legally this time – to work in regions such as Haiti, El Salvador, Guatemala, Rwanda and Armenia: regions he would explore with the same sense for justice as demonstrated during his movement days and produce images that would ultimately be published in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Paris Match*.

“I remember El Salvador had the highest birth rate in Central America so US Aid had built this enormous and beautiful hospital for the people, but of course the only people that could afford to get in there were the ones that knew somebody or had the money to buy their way in. This fancy hospital had worked out a three minute laparoscopy during which they would tie the tubes of the women afterwards and never tell them. The doctor was so proud. At the time I was working with the ABC producer, Danny Schechter and he and I developed this routine where he’d get talking to the doctor and I’d walk off down the corridors taking pictures. They would look for me, find me and I’d make some excuse while Danny took his turn to walk off down a hallway looking for someone to talk to.”

One might think that for Berndt, as with many photographers covering international tragedy at a time when the word “embedded” was not yet a part of the industry lexicon, that photojournalism was a more honest account of events where unconventional tactics could win out. Yet while the media was not dictated to and restrained by the military in the way it is today, papers still had to be sold and when necessary were very much a part of

the ruling greater propaganda machine, a business Berndt is pleased to be away from.

“I am happy I don’t have to do that kind of work anymore. I have had enormous fights with editors over photographs over the years – “No this is our helicopter in El Salvador and these are American soldiers shooting at this village below because they think there are guerillas there. It is not that they are shooting at guerillas. They don’t know what’s down there so they are blowing them all up. So you cannot say they are shooting at guerillas. And even then I might find the photograph being used years later as proof we had to use this kind of stuff because someone somewhere says the guerillas had helicopters.” Does he resent the business I wonder?

“I have a very young friend working now, Bryan Dendon, who just graduated from Tisch. He’s doing quite well. Recently he had a small exhibition at Tisch – all of it in colour, but it has to be today or you have less of a chance of people publishing it – and my first thought on walking into the exhibition is this looks like advertising. It was so clean, so perfect, the colors, the sharpness. The soldiers themselves all looked like they had just taken showers before going into the battlefields. I thought this does not look like the D-Day photographs I remember. Another thing that has happened is the ubiquitous image that my friend Eugene Richards started. It was really fresh at the time, but now everyone is using a wide angle lens close up to a subject and making them cry doing it, and it has become cliché. It seems like there is no room anymore for something un-dramatic, but powerful at the same time. Do I have a resentment – yeah, but it’s broader than just the use of photographs. It strikes me as extremely interesting that every major newspaper in the country will have the same headline. How does this happen?”

I ask Berndt if he has ever shied away from taking a picture, and he replies that while in Guatemala once, the village he was photographing came under a mortar shell barrage. “I didn’t care about pictures then; I wanted to find a hole to wait in until it was over. Sometimes I do think it’s

almost impossible to photograph a war accurately. If you notice most war photographers are not on the frontline. Most are on the second line and in the aftermath or if they are embedded, which I have very mixed feelings about. That said I couldn’t tell you why some of those old Robert Capa images stay in my head.”

There is a heavy emotional and physical toll for photographers working in dangerous environments. Post-traumatic stress, drug addiction, debilitating injuries and death have marked the careers of many. For Berndt the end came in San Salvador while shooting a story on the rubbish pits in which whole families lived in cardboard houses picking scraps to sell.

“Here I was crawling around in the garbage like everyone else when I come across a mountain of McDonald’s boxes and a little girl she must have been seven or eight. She had a tattered picture book in her hands and was watching me closely. Finally she walked over to me and in her very best Spanish said, ‘Mister, can you please teach me how to read?’ She had in her mind that in 15 minutes I could give her the secret. There was very little I could do or say. When I got back to the hotel, I found a bottle of scotch and decided I couldn’t do this anymore.”

Today based in Paris, Berndt is enjoying a return to favour with galleries and a new generation of fans eager for the truth contained within his images. “Germany is a hot art scene at the moment. I just came back from Hamburg where the United States Consulate gave me an exhibition about America and, interestingly enough, they let me put up some really nasty pictures. For example there was one with a kid holding a sign that read, ‘They beat niggers, they beat spicks; they beat and whacked and whaled them with their so-called nigger sticks.’

In November Berndt has an exhibition in Berlin showing more than a 100 images never seen before. He is also going through his back catalogue in preparation for a second book to be published by Gerhardt Steidl, who two years ago created a book of his images up to 1973 called *Insight*. This new book will feature work from 1973 to 1990.

“The process takes a lot of time. I look at a lot of the images from that time period and they were not all great. So I do this thing, which I have been doing for years, where I take a whole shoot and glue it to the wall and stare at it for about 10 to 15 minutes a day, and after a month I start taking out the ones I can’t stand anymore. Then at the end of two or three months, whatever is left on the wall and that I still enjoy looking at, those are the good pictures.”

For me the good pictures are not just good, they are great. They are powerful reminders of the human capacity for states of violence, injustice, sadness and ignorance as seen through the eyes of a man who has willingly embraced them all. His self-awareness has served him well and as I picture him in his studio surrounded by his life’s work with prints covering every last inch of wall and film hanging from wires suspended in a corner of the room, I wonder what else lies hidden perhaps forgotten in the files on his bookshelves and desks. Like the jazz record that has played in the background all the while we talk, Jerry Berndt’s life and career has taken many unexpected turns. He has come a long way and with so much still to give, I hope to take up his invitation to an opening night and to see him take the stage. “Have I told you yet that I used to play a little bit of blues harmonica with Muddy Waters?” No, Jerry, you have not, please do.