

## Historic Memories

### Danny Lyon's photographs at the College of New Jersey tell stories of the Civil Rights Movement

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John Lewis is among the people Danny Lyon photographed when he worked as the official photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

DURING the summer between his junior and senior years at the University of Chicago, Danny Lyon, a skinny, curly-haired, white kid born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens, packed an Army bag with two cameras and asked his sister-in-law for a ride to Old Route 66. From there, he proceeded to hitchhike his way south. A week later, he was in Albany, Georgia, locked in the jail cell next to Martin Luther King Jr.

Over the next several months, in between arrests and police beatings, Mr. Lyon would embed himself with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), eventually becoming their paid staff photographer, a first for an activist organization.

Mr. Lyon traveled from one site to the next to document bombings and beatings, arrests and protests, song and prayer, and from the summer of 1962 through the fall of 1964 (with a return north to finish his senior year and receive his BA), shot about 150 rolls of film.

Fifty photographs from that immense body of work, *Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, are on exhibition at The College of New Jersey Art Gallery, through March 1.

As I walk through the gallery, I'm struck by context and contrasts. A south deeply divided, nearly 100 years after slavery was abolished and a couple of years shy of passage of the Civil Rights Act, in the grip of segregation. Generations of black

protestors, their faces peaceful and composed, and occasionally etched with grief. Generations of white resisters, civilians and police, their faces etched with sneers and disgust, hatred and anger.

Mixed in are beautifully composed moments of repose: Mr. King before he delivered a speech in Birmingham. Bob Dylan strumming his guitar and talking to Bernice Reagon, a Freedom Singer who would go on to form the all-female singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock. A young John Lewis, then chairman of the SNCC, who in 1987 would become the U.S. representative for Georgia's 5th congressional district.

"The period I photographed was its golden age. That summer of 1963, 15,000 people were arrested in non-violent protests in the south. It was the high water mark of the Movement," Mr. Lyon blogged in 2010, the 50th anniversary of SNCC. (View his work at [www.dektol.wordpress.com](http://www.dektol.wordpress.com).)

"The photographs I made have proved to be among the most enduring evidence of SNCC. They are shown in museums throughout the country, and few books or films on the movement appear that do not use at least some of them," Mr. Lyon continued.

Four are included in a set of Knowledge Cards published by the Library of Congress to commemorate the civil rights movement. "A picture of me is on a fifth card. It is my proudest achievement," he wrote.

The experience with SNCC would shape and dictate the course of Mr. Lyon's career. He has dedicated himself to chronicling social movements, working across mediums, including books, blogs, photography and documentaries.

"I am a realist," he writes in an email to me, "meaning I believe in the power of the camera, documents and reality. I participated in what was clearly an historic event, and consequently preserved or recorded it for the future." In his 70s now, Mr. Lyon is still hard at work, in recent years crisscrossing the country to photograph Occupy demonstrations in Los Angeles and Charlotte, Wall Street and Albuquerque. "It's an active, important, social movement. That is what I did, and do," he says.

And, along the way he's taken time to lecture aspiring photographers. In 2011, as chief curator at The Light Factory Contemporary Museum of Photography and Film in Charlotte, Dennis Kiel brought in a traveling exhibition, *Streetwise: Masters of 60s Photography*, which included 10 photos taken by Mr. Lyon. With a budget for travel, Mr. Kiel invited Mr. Lyon to visit.

"I brought him to Charlotte to rock the boat a bit, and he did not disappoint," Mr. Kiel says. Mr. Lyon toured a group of about 15 photography students through the show, "and he really kept them (and their teacher) on their toes, telling many stories about why he liked Robert Frank so much, his dislike for Lee Friedlander (this shocked the students since his work was part of the exhibition), and how a Diane Arbus photo, now probably worth six figures, slipped through his hands. It was an amusing and informative afternoon and one that I won't forget," Mr. Kiel says.

The exhibition at TCNJ was organized by art2art Circulating Exhibitions out of New York, and is presented by Edwynn Houk Gallery of New York. Hava Gurevich, art2art's director, described Mr. Lyon's life work as revolutionary, and his photos of the SNCC movement as "evocative and full of information. Some were made into posters or printed as brochures, to raise funds and awareness, or sent to newspapers that wanted to publish them. He documented from within, but he also wanted to contribute to the movement."

The exhibition is being presented as part of TCNJ's campus-wide exploration of the theme of justice, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act.

Danny Lyon: Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement is on view at the College of New Jersey Art Gallery, 200 Pennington Road, Ewing, in the Art and Interactive Multimedia Building, through March 1. Hours: Tue.-Thu. Noon to 7 p.m., Sun. 1-3 p.m. Admission is free. For information, go to [tcnj.edu/artgallery](http://tcnj.edu/artgallery) or call 609-771-2633.