

‘The Spirit is in Charge’: Chester Higgins Jr. visualizes the Black Pantheon



Photographer Chester Higgins Jr. poses in front of a few images from his Black Pantheon series. (Photo by Damaso Reyes)

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If one thing embodies all the images that photographer Chester Higgins, Jr. has taken, from his portraits of kings and political leaders to musicians and visual artists, it is dignity. In a world filled with negative visual depictions of people of color, what comes across in his decades of visual art is the love he has for Black people, a love he wishes they had for themselves as well.

“I want[ed] to change the visual image... redefine the visual image of Black people in the media,” Higgins, 77, said about his motivation to become a photographer when he moved from his birthplace of New Brockton, then a hamlet of 800 souls in southeastern Alabama, to New York in 1969 to learn the craft.

It was that negative image of Black and brown folks, which dominated (and some say still does) the media, that pushed Higgins to become a photographer. That same drive led him to the *New York Times*, where he spent 40 years as one of its most celebrated portraitists and photojournalists.

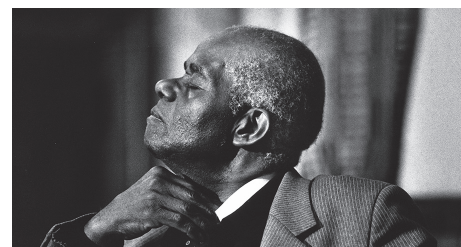
“The newspapers and the radio and TV stations didn’t show us as American citizens petitioning the government,” he said of the media he consumed as a young man during the Civil Rights Movement. “We came off looking, I thought, [as] potential thugs, arsonists, and rapists,” he added—a reminder of the critique many had of the images that spread during the summer of George Floyd in 2020.

The Queen of Soul Aretha Franklin
(Chester Higgins Jr.)



“That taught me a very important lesson,” Higgins continued. “People tend to think of photography as evidence and that it does not lie. It tells the truth. Well, my experience taught me that there’s a continuation to that sentence. And that is, ‘the photograph never lies about the photographer.’”

During his decades behind the camera, Higgins photographed many of the greats of Black culture, including Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Shirley Chisholm, long before they came to prominence. Many of his subjects “were considered enemies of the state” when he first captured their images, he told the *AmNews* in



Historian John Henrik Clarke
(Chester Higgins Jr.)



Poet Maya Angelou (Chester Higgins Jr.)

a wide-ranging interview.

In addition to changing the way the public, especially his community, saw Black people, he said that he “wanted to

influence policy-makers [and] decision-makers” through his imagery, and the *Times* provided him with a huge platform.

“My people, in addition to having a huge capacity of self-hate and denial, really have a hard problem accepting the fact that they African people,” he said of his lifelong motivation to document the African diaspora, which he has done through his books, including “Echo of the Spirit,” “Feeling the Spirit,” and most recently “Sacred Nile.”

His recent show “Black Pantheon,” curated by Dr. Deborah Willis at the Bruce Silverstein Gallery in Chelsea, provides a glimpse of the giants of Black culture Higgins documented over more than 50 years. Many of the images are iconic, but the depth and breadth are impressive. Each image is deeply centered in love—in fact, centered in self-love—of Blackness.

“I’m proud to make a record of them,” he said of this body of work, but he is also acutely aware that the monumental task that he set for himself all those years ago is still not complete.

“This battle...can’t be won by me, by Gordon Parks...it takes thousands of eyes constantly pushing back” on the negative narrative of Black people in the media, he said.

Perhaps the weight of being a warrior for love had taken a bit of a toll on him when he said, toward the end of the conversation, that “it may be 100 years after I’m dead that my work has relevance.” But the depth of his love could not be diminished.

“In the end, the Spirit is in charge,” he concluded with a smile.