

CROSSCURRENTS

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Remembering the 1967 Detroit Black Uprising – Drawings of Lost Photos

There are times when visual art is called upon to clarify or otherwise replace photography. Not only in everyday events with hand retouching of photos, or changing exposure or development times for different parts of a picture, but also regarding *unique* social events when cameras are not present.

This happened to me when living in Detroit during the historic 1967 Detroit black uprising.

Detroit has long had several black ghettos, all with similar features -- poverty, the price-gouging and poor quality goods & services by mostly white-owned businesses operating therein, police brutality from a white- dominated and racist police force, and near universal lack of education of black youth.

After years and years of this, the ghetto exploded, and as one reporter noted, people there had enough, and *appeared* to want to “burn the whole ghetto to the ground.” I recall that nearly a half million people also marched down Woodward Avenue to downtown Detroit to protest their second class status (I believe that same summer).

Friends and relatives in New York phoned me, reading me the headlines in the major Newspapers: *Detroit In Flames; Detroit Burning;* all describing massive damage. These stories were partly true, but the damage was limited to *specific* areas. The uprising massively targeted white businesses, pawn shops, etc., and the event was a major historic rebellion.

The military -- with tanks and artillery – were moved in as reports came that snipers drove the fire



department out of the area. The media also would not go into the heart of the ghetto.

Before the uprising, I went there for years to visit friends. It was not an alien neighborhood to me, so, aged 32, wanting to make sure someone bore witness, I grabbed my camera, with one roll of film. I thought I'd be safe by being viewed as just a white media camera person, likely welcomed by those involved. I was young and stupid enough to believe that all the snipers would be happy to share that assumption and leave me alone. Obviously, I was far more lucky than smart.

When I got to Linwood Avenue, the streets were *completely deserted*. Everyone was indoors or reportedly on roofs or in windows aiming guns. I didn't notice the one or two soldiers that were in darkened doorways until later. Rubble, smoke and fumes from burnt-out buildings, many of which collapsed in ashes into

their own cellars, was everywhere. I was *all alone* in the street, and began to feel that eerie sensation that I was being watched, and I had the late realization I was indeed stupid for doing this, and that I'd *better get back in my car and beat it fast*. But I saw too much I wanted to capture on film. So, frozen in place, I clicked away. The scenes were unique, powerful & I was the only one there to record them first hand that day.

The film I shot I sent to a weekly N.Y. newspaper I subscribed to, certain they'd play it front page, possibly even have a world-wide “scoop.” If I could've done something stupider than risking my life, it was not getting it developed in town first. I wanted to meet that newspaper's deadline so I sent the film that night *undeveloped*. The editor was, it turned out, somewhat undeveloped too, and annoyed at having been sent film the paper would be troubled to develop

themselves, he decided to chuck it out. It's now still rotting away having been 'scooped' into some landfill in New York. I couldn't believe it!

After many years fuming over the loss of the film, several years ago I got around to sketching what I still recalled in order to have *some* external imprint to file away. I had forgotten many small details. I guessed at irrelevant and forgotten items (like a building facade's details or the style and exact shape of a statue) -- but I hoped I still captured at least the *same significance* of what originally was on actual film.

I decided this edition would be a record of what I saw then, film or no film. Should've done this way back then.

The arson that occurred was *selective*. How arsonists managed to burn only buildings on each side of the one they allowed to stand (because it was marked by spray paint as a business run by a "soul sister"), I don't know. Flames still sputtered up from the cellar of totally burned buildings (see drawing, page 1).

That I was spared from a "target practice" bullet had to be because the snipers were also selective, not just blind rampaging vandals seeking excitement, as rebels are often portrayed by some. If even *just one* of them was like that, you wouldn't be reading this article. It shows also that they indeed decided matters on a *political* basis; that they wanted their message brought home, hoping I was going help do that with my camera.

I climbed to the roof of an abandoned car to capture shots of spray-painted slogans on the street surface, like "Freedom Now" and others -- I don't recall all of them. I combined that aspect into a single composite drawing including the since famous Christ statue at Linwood Avenue and West Chicago, which was painted black. Some figures of a Madonna statue's hands and face also were also painted black. The Detroit archdiocese left them that way, and they all remain black today.

Also combined in the drawing are tread tracks typically left by tanks on several nearby streets.

Suddenly, I saw I wasn't alone. A black woman had appeared crossing the middle of the street. As she got across, I then saw ahead of her in the dark doorway of a store, a young terrified soldier, looking furtively to-and-fro for snipers, pulling himself further in, trying not to be seen.

The silent, symbolic clash of two wholly separate worlds was there. They were only within feet of each other, but as distant as on two planets. Oppressor or an agent of occupation -- juxtaposed to that of a child and mother. One a scared target, the mother already felt safe and protected; One holding a weapon of death, the other holding a carriage with new life;



One out in the open light, the other forced to hide in dark shadows -- wordlessly ignoring each other. I waited till they both came into the same view, to snap that with one click of the camera -- to tell that whole story in a scene that only can occur *extremely rarely* in reality.

...And for it to end up in a landfill happens *extremely rarely too*. But I hope these pictures can restore at least a little bit of the truthful impact held by the original lost photos.
- By Bob Fink

