

Part 3: Flash as Photographer and the Speed Graphic Time Machine

The more you are learned, the more you dislike losing your time.

- Dante Alighieri

Flash's images are unique in the history of photography. They represent a subculture previously unseen in such depth, shown only before through the stereotyped sensationalism of comic books and broad distortions of mass media. His photographs provide us with an unblinking view of local Detroit and Midwest biker culture in the sixties.

The images function as performance art or "life-in-action" shots, as well as being fine documentary information. Miteff's work has the unshakable authenticity and gripping content as Diane Arbus, his natural contemporary, but without a dour tone, exploitative or depressing demeanor. Flash is laughing with his subjects rather than laughing at them. He exposes all the wild abundance and passions of youth; roughhousing, drinking, laughter, darkness and joy. These are crazy raw moments of freedom bordering on chaos. A sense of

sadness, stupidity and street trash ruggedness are mixed into a moody stew of unadulterated low Americana.

The image of a young Outlaw biker initiation (**plate p.30**) is a rarely seen document. A boot is first passed around the group, quickly filled with liqueur, spit and an assortment of gross liquids to create a kind of dark hazing ritual, drunk down by the loyal initiate. This is one action that helps cement the neophyte to the club, like a baptism in a religious order.

Miteff was working a decade before Larry Clark and two decades before Nan Goldin. Each documented specific subcultures they socially fell into, but it's Miteff's large format and totally involved approach, that sets him apart, a naïve style that combines qualities of a folk artist combined with hard-edged street journalism.

Many of Jim's photos were centered on small pranks and goofy set-ups. He loved to direct and incite his subjects, provoking situations that would lead to interesting and humorous images: bikers kissing each other (**plates 13, 14, 32**) and provoking policemen (**plate 66**), bikers in costume Vampire teeth (**plates 28, 48**), caveman outfits,

balancing beer bottles, pissing, mugging, exposing themselves or mooning the camera.

The image of a "Satan's Choice" member inside a garbage can with the garbage lid on his head (**plate 62**), the christening of Outlaw president Tommy Tucker by a hippie Jesus with a skull and crossbones Iron Cross (**plate 72**) and the biker drinking out of toilet plunger (**plate 100**) are all staged sophomoric gags that the photographer frames in his typical up-front deadpan way. These also show the close rapport, humor and respect fellow bikers maintained around Jim.

The deliberately sensational out front and public use of Nazi paraphernalia - helmets, swastikas and flags (**plates 28, 54, 84, 92, 102, 108**) was set against the jovial disregard of men goofing around, riding drinking, hanging together. Nothing was too outrageous or off-limits for Miteff as subject matter, and he enjoyed a privilege rarely given to another photographer.

Miteff had some setbacks regarding darkroom prints. He never looked at other photography and was a self-taught outsider in the field. He

printed quickly, unconcerned with tonalities or dodging. Using the cheapest 8x10" single weight paper he could afford, he cropped his images closely, trying to pull the action into the frame. Vintage prints are scarce, he rarely printed more than a single copy. He edited his own work tightly, as if for a magazine or newspaper in his mind, and almost never gave photos away.

The final look of the print was never a major concern. It was the *action and the doing of photography* that mattered most to Miteff.

Photography gave Jim a position within the club, a way to stand out and show off among his peers. The few prints he made, were always for himself, a heartfelt chronicle of his days as an Outlaw. Although his printing was irregular, his negatives show extremely fine selective focus and excellent shadow details.

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A comparison to Danny Lyon's *The Bikeriders*, a 1968 book of biker photos is unavoidable, and when seen side-by-side, the differences are apparent. In most circles, *The Bikeriders* has become a seminal almost legendary book. It stood beside Robert Frank's *The Americans*, as a classic, a controversial and important document of its day. Lyon's reputation was sealed as the first to gain access to the Outlaws and to

photograph and publish a book on their culture. Lyon, who was born in 1942, was a baby-boomer and of a younger generation than the Depression-era born Miteff. Lyon used a faster, more portable 35mm camera, the most popular camera of the 1960s.

When seen beside Flash's work, Lyon (who rode with the Chicago chapter of the Outlaws for two years) reads much lighter, self-conscious and distant. Lyon was a stranger entering a world he is trying to frame quickly and escape from. Lyon had a journalistic mind and embedded himself in the Outlaws, self-aware of his position and slightly frightened of it. His "privileged view" and life with the Outlaws reads like an undercover "Life Magazine" assignment. He took mostly shots from his bike, many from a safe distance behind or at rallies – absent are the deeply personal, ritualistic, communal and darkly close up scenes that were a specialty of Flash. Looking at Lyon's work today, *The Bikeriders* reads slightly distant, flat and weak, far less cutting-edge and iconic than it did in 1968.

Miteff was at ease with the Outlaws, his decade long adventure reads like an elder statesman or poet taking the viewer's hand on a private tour of the underworld. He is self-assured, a man given complete freedom to roam undisturbed, an *Invisible Man*, amid the strange and

inaccessible corridors of his day. He instinctually knows where and when to shoot, despite the limitations of his outsized camera. He is telling a deeper, darker, more personal story than Lyons. Miteff controls each shot and situation with methodical ease, merging with the streets and the people he's photographing. There is little doubt that if Miteff had published his work during the 60s or 70s, he'd be considered a giant in photography -a breakthrough artist. Such are the vagaries of time and fashion.

Differences between the works can be explained through the tools they each used. Lyons took photos on the fly, capturing them like a bandit, a hit or miss style, speed-shooting from the hip -a method forged and dependent on the Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand snapshot aesthetic. Miteff preferred stealth and slowness. He studied and melted into his subjects, carefully composing, yet making each photo appear spontaneous, lively and organic.

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