

Photographers Mourn and Mourners Take Photos



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Many photographers, some of them not on assignment, were among the hundreds of mourners Tuesday at Gordon Parks's funeral at Riverside Church in Manhattan.

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Gordon Parks often said the camera was his weapon in the fight against everything he hated about the world — racism, intolerance, poverty. Yesterday, a church in Morningside Heights overflowed with everything he seemed to love most about that world, and the camera this time was not a weapon, but a touching tribute.

Gordon Parks's daughter, Toni Parks, center, at his funeral Tuesday at Riverside Church in Manhattan.

To one side of the pulpit at Riverside Church, just a few steps from the coffin, stood a cluster of photojournalists, many of them black, whom Mr. Parks had inspired with his uncompromising pictures of the black experience. Some of those images were reprinted in the programs that people in the pews held in their hands and stared at as if in prayer, as cameras clicked.

Mr. Parks, the first African-American staff photographer at Life magazine, died on March 7 at his home in Manhattan at the age of 93. He was a contributor to Life from 1948 to 1972, and in that time became known for capturing uniquely American extremes: the bleakness and indignity of segregation and urban poverty, and the aloof glamour of the rich and famous.

At his funeral yesterday afternoon, Mr. Parks was celebrated as a cultural icon who turned a mirror on America's best and its worst, and as an old romantic with a passion for life, a fondness for tennis and a yellow Jaguar. He was remembered as an easy



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man to talk to but a difficult one to lie to, as an extraordinary artist and an extraordinary grandfather.

The viewing and the service that followed drew hundreds — blacks and whites, politicians and actors, those who worked with him on a long, varied list of creative projects and those who knew him not at all.

"He earned his place in our history and in our hearts," former Mayor [David N. Dinkins](#) said in a tearful remembrance, one of several given by relatives and friends, including Mr. Parks's son, David, and the socialite Gloria Vanderbilt.

The Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes Jr., who led the service, read a statement from Maya Angelou, the poet, in which she called Mr. Parks a great artist, a great friend and a great American. "Thank you, Gordon Parks, for your lesson and for your love," she wrote.

A few hours earlier, [Jason Miccolo Johnson](#) gave a eulogy of his own, as many did informally before the start of the viewing. Mr. Johnson, a Washington photographer, organized Mr. Parks's 90th birthday party in November 2002. "He's the godfather of African-American photographers," said Mr. Johnson, 49. "Gordon is to photographers what Duke Ellington was to jazz musicians. He is our black shining prince."

Mr. Johnson called Mr. Parks on his birthday last fall. "He said he felt good for a man 93," he said. "Then he asked how I was doing. He would always ask how I was doing."

Samuel F. Yette worked with Mr. Parks in Alabama in 1956 for a series in Life about segregation in the South. They soon became close friends. "He was instructive and sophisticated, always the artist," said Mr. Yette, 76.

Mr. Yette, like so many of the dozens of still and video photographers at the funeral, paid tribute to Mr. Parks the only way he knew how: he brought his cameras. During the service, Mr. Yette, dressed in a dark suit, stood on a small wooden platform, camera slung around his neck. "I am doing," Mr. Yette said, "what he thinks I ought to be doing."

The photographers, some of whom were there on assignment and some of whom showed up to shoot the funeral as an homage to Mr. Parks, gathered in a knot near the front of the church.

"If you were a musician, you wouldn't just sit in the audience and listen," said Mr. Johnson, whose new book, "Soul Sanctuary: Images of the African American Worship Experience," includes a foreword written by Mr. Parks. "You would pick up your instrument and play. So photographers pick up their cameras and shoot."

Others in the pews had cameras of their own, and would periodically snap a photo. "A Gordon Parks celebration is a multiform, multimedia, multigenre event," Mr. Forbes, a senior minister at the church, told mourners at the start of the service.

Mr. Parks photographed high fashion and low crime. He took pictures of Brazilian slums and Black Panther meetings, Ingrid Bergman and a black Washington cleaning woman named Ella Watson. But the still camera was only one of his tools. He wrote novels, memoirs and poetry. He directed movies, helping spark the film genre known as blaxploitation with "Shaft" in 1971. And he was also a composer. In addition to Bach and [Beethoven](#) works, some of the piano arrangements played during the service were ones written by Mr. Parks.

Near the end of the funeral, Mr. Forbes asked everyone to turn and take a brief look at the faces of those seated next to them. He asked the mourners to take note of the uniqueness of the faces, that human quality that had so captivated Mr. Parks's eye.