

# *Black in White America* by Leonard Freed (1929–2006)

While working in Germany in 1962, Leonard Freed noticed a black American soldier guarding the divide between East and West as the Berlin wall was being erected. It was not the partition between the forces of communism and capitalism that captured Freed's imagination, however. Instead what haunted him was the idea of a man standing in defense of a country in which his own rights were in question. This experience ignited the young photographer's interest in the American civil rights movement raging on the other side of the globe. In June of 1963, Freed headed back to the United States to embark on a multi-year documentary project, culminating in the photo-essay *Black in White America*. It was published in 1967/68 and would become the signature work of his career.

Leonard Freed was born in Brooklyn, New York, to a working-class Jewish family. An aspiring painter, Freed discovered his passion for photography while on a trip to Europe in 1953. Working as a freelance photojournalist in the 1960s, he traveled the world, including many trips to the United States to photograph the civil rights movement. *Black in White America* is a socially engaged visual diary with a moral purpose—it started his journey to become America's leading pioneer in the genre of social conscious photojournalism. While Freed made pictures of important events in the civil rights struggle, including the 1963 March on Washington, he quickly found that his interests lay not in recording the progress of the civil rights movement per se but in exploring the diverse, everyday lives of a community that had been marginalized for so long. Freed's project was aimed not so much at telling the story of a particular day or week but at relating the contours of an overarching conceptual narrative about racial tensions in America. As such, his work provides a balance to the era's more familiar press images of intense strife. Meant to be more than a factual record of a newsworthy subject, Freed's work communicates in evocative ways. Penetrating the fabric of daily existence, his work portrays the common humanity of a people persevering in unjust circumstances. His sensitive and empathetic approach sought not to stimulate outrage but to foster understanding and bridge cultural divides as a means of transcending racial antipathy. To that end, one can see that there is a considerable amount of gray explored in *Black in White America*. From the 1960s onward, variations on this kind of reporting would become increasingly popular in the hands of documentarians interested in engaging the world from a personal point of view.

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The collection presented here is but a small sample of the many photographs comprising *Black in White America*. The descriptive text panels are drawn from notes that were made by Freed over the course of his travels, as well as edited text of Brett Abbott's Foreword to a 2010 edition of the same book.