



The Music Makers

by Jimmy Williams



Published in *LensWork Extended* #93

Commentary

I really do have one of the best jobs in all of photography. I get to learn from *the best*, ask them specific questions, and absorb their practical wisdom. Essentially, these *Looking at Images* commentaries are my way of paying that forward. You can thank Jimmy Williams for the following, because it's all his wisdom and part of what makes him such an incredibly successful photographer.

During our interview, I asked him about making portraits, specifically environmental portraits. He then relayed a strategy which I thought was simply brilliant—and not surprisingly have found to be bulletproof. His advice is simply this: find a place and compose a picture that would be successful even if it had no person in it. Then simply introduce the person into that scene and *voilà!* What a simple idea, and what a powerful one!

Consider this environmental portrait of blues guitarist Albert White. In particular, imagine this scene before White walked in, sat down, and started playing. The primary components would be the wall and spotlights, the stool and tip jar on the far left edge, the bright daylight from the large window that establishes a contrast with the dark and moody interior, the light spilling onto the floor in the lower right hand corner intimating a door is nearby, and the musician's stool on an empty stage. Even without White as the subject, that photograph would be terrific. In fact, Williams explained searching for this particular composition and knowing he had

a great portrait once he sat the guitarist on the stool. Both of these photographs—the imaginary one *without* the musician and the one we see here *with* the musician—are terrific compositions, which, according to Williams' theory, is precisely why this image works so well. I agree.

Can't you just hear White playing on the unplugged electric guitar? The relatively quiet twang of the strings, the echo in the empty bar, the slight haze of last night's hectic bar scene? And don't we also get just a sense of the solitary moments that can occupy a musician's life—after the music is over, after the people are gone, and the musician is left alone with his instrument. This is what is called in photography “creating a mood” and Williams tends to accomplish this in almost *all* of his portraits. I have no doubt that he is so successful in creating such emotionally replete images because of his compositional strategy. A closely focused portrait isolating the guitarist's face and instrument would not convey the mood nearly so well.

It's so easy for us to be swept up in the idea of photographing *the person* that we can easily forget that the objective of a portrait is not to show us *what somebody looks like*, but rather to show us a little bit of *who they are*.