

Charlie Phillips – In Plain Sight

November 12 – March 12, 2023

Charlie Phillips' first exhibition in Sweden, after breakthrough in Great Britain

Charlie 'Smokey' Phillips (b. 1944) is one of Britain's most overlooked and at the same time celebrated photographers, who from the early 1960s documented London's Caribbean immigrant community. Through a series of unique photographs, the exhibition *In Plain Sight* captures events in the west London districts of Notting Hill and North Kensington. It was here that race riots occurred, new music was created, Caribbean-influenced funeral ceremonies took place and the legendary Notting Hill Carnival was born, all while people lived in difficult socio-economic conditions.

By chance, Charlie Phillips was given a camera as a 14-year-old. It was 1958, two years after he had arrived to the London neighbourhood Notting Hill from Jamaica. In the same year, the first riots broke out in the area as a reaction to the increased tensions between immigrants and xenophobic groups.

Here, traditional English working class was living side by side with higher and lower educated immigrants. The housing conditions were substandard and if you found work, it was often underpaid and exhausting. Unfortunately, many ended up turning to crime to make ends meet. At the same time many writers, artists and musicians flocked to the district, giving it an increasingly creative and lively character.

The exhibition *In Plain Sight* shows what could be visible to everyone, if they only chose to see it. Charlie Phillips' images bring up issues that have returned in recent years through the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as in Steve McQueen's TV mini-series *Small Axe* from 2020, which also deals with the Mangrove protests.

With his insider's perspective, Charlie Phillips took pictures that were free from rules, often unfiltered and marked by the everyday realism of a chronicler, an instinctive approach derived from a familiarity with the area and the people. Sometimes people pose for, sometimes they are oblivious of the camera. His directed gaze highlights the dignity and pride of the locals, which is seen especially in the images from the series *How Great Thou Art* documenting British-Caribbean funerals.

The focus is on human existence and the life that plays out on location. London's grey fog is present as a faithful extra on the set. The pictures represent a small geographical area, but the personal portraits reflect what happened in society at large. Optimism and resilience prevail despite

hardships and prejudice and allude to the zeitgeist in relation to freedom movements in the Caribbean.

Even celebrities like Muhammad Ali, Steve McQueen and Jimi Hendrix ended up in front of Charlie Phillips' lens. The images that are preserved today, despite the fact they could not be stored adequately for a long time, also bear witness to the transition from black-and-white to colour photography, from analog to digital. His choice to use modern technology indicates an interest in documenting time and the course of events instead of using the most nostalgic technology for a distanced representation.

In recent years, several books and films about Britain's immigrant history have been published, with both archival material and testimonies from the time. Charlie Phillips' images bridge the gaps of history, highlighting the challenges and successes his community experienced, ultimately leading to the gentrified version of Notting Hill today.

Charlie Phillips

Ronald "Charlie" Phillips was born in 1944 in Kingston, Jamaica. Between 1968 and the first half of the 1970s, he worked abroad as a freelance photographer for magazines such as Harper's Bazaar, Life and Vogue Italia. Phillips returned to the UK and opened Smokey Joe's, a jerk chicken food truck, which in 1988 became a restaurant in the Wandsworth district of South London. He ran the restaurant until 1999.

His photographs from the 1960s were featured in a 1991 exhibition at the legendary Tabernacle cultural centre in Notting Hill, coinciding with the release of his book Notting Hill in the Sixties, which compiled oral accounts of the period. Paul Goodwin's Urban Eye exhibition at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham in 2013 became even more significant to help Charlie Phillips' work reach a greater public. A grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015 enabled the initiation of the Charlie Phillips Heritage Archive, an extensive restoration, cataloging and digitization of his production. The launch of the archive's website marks the culmination of this project.

He has been exhibited at Tate Britain, Museum of London, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Museum of the City of New York, London's Southbank Centre and Leica Gallery, as well as The Photography Show, Birmingham. His work is also represented in collections at The Wedge, London's Victoria & Albert Museum and Tate. A portrait of Phillips by photographer Aliyah Otchere was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, London in 2021. Phillips was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2022 for his services in photography and the arts.

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Opening hours: Wednesday - Sunday 12-4 pm, Thursday 12-7 pm

