JIM HUBBARD
Remembering Bobby

BY **ALEX SIMON** PHOTOGRAPHY **CRAIG CAMERON OLSEN**

Venice resident Jim Hubbard is an acclaimed documentary photographer who has been nominated three times for the Pulitzer Prize and has won more than 100 photography awards. In 2007, Jim was awarded the Lewis Hines Distinguished Service Award, by the National Child Labor Committee, for his work with homeless children and youth, the first photographer to receive the honor. Jim is also currently Creative Director of Venice Arts: In Neighborhoods, a non-profit California mentoring organization for disadvantaged youth.

A native of Detroit, Jim cut his teeth shooting pictures for The Detroit News in the 1960s, photographing everything from the Beatles' first U.S. tour, to the infamous Detroit riots of 1967, to certainly one of the more profound assignments of his career: spending ten days with Robert Kennedy during his 1968 run for the White House. June 4 marks the 40th anniversary of RFK's assassination at Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel. On June 5th, a retrospective photo exhibit opens on Lincoln Boulevard in Venice at Universal Art Gallery, displaying several of Jim's pictures that he took of RFK during his visits to Michigan and Indiana during the '68 presidential primaries. A few of them are reproduced here with Jim's permission.

Jim sat down with us at his circa 1913 Venice home to reflect on his time with Bobby Kennedy, and the state of the world 40 years ago. Here's what was said:

Venice: Tell us about some of your memories of covering Bobby Kennedy in Indiana during the '68 campaign.

Jim Hubbard: In Indianapolis, especially in the ghetto, it was a contact sport. It was pretty rough. I got knocked down and Kennedy helped me up, actually, he and Rosey Grier. The crowd really adored him, wanted a piece of him, a real fervor. We haven't seen anything like it since. Even with Obama, you see fervent crowds around him, but everything is more controlled, contrived, and organized now than it was then.

It has to be to a certain extent, because of what happened to Bobby.

Yes, it does. But then on the other hand, it also becomes about controlling access, information, and the candidate's image. No one wants their candidate to be seen making a mistake. Whereas Bobby was out there in the streets and was open to making mistakes. It was such an exciting time, which is what persuaded me to get into news photography. It was all about the excitement, the intrigue of the moment, whether it be the Detroit riots, Bobby Kennedy, and during the '60s, Detroit was an incredibly exciting city, in terms of the human element, the human story, much of it negative: homicides, violence, and that's where much of my work came from. I worked at night for The Detroit News, and covered all the crap that happened. And after the riots in '67, it became a different day for a news photographer: I put a shotgun in my trunk, a pistol in my trunk, loaded. I had a helmet, gas mask, and bullet-proof vest, and they had flare-ups in Flint and Pontiac, and all over the state.

The 1967 riot in Detroit was the worst riot in U.S. history until the Rodney King riots in 1992. What was the spark that kicked it off?

On 12th Street the cops, who had a long history of being pretty hardcore, especially against Blacks, raided a blind pig, which is an after-hours bar. An illegal drinking spot. A bunch of Black Vietnam vets were having a party about three or four in the morning, and there were some fisticuffs, and word started to spread. By Sunday night, it looked like the whole city of Detroit was on fire. It was the only riot in American history where the President called in the Army, the 82nd Airborne. It was July, 1967. So they brought in tanks and all that. There were lots of firefights, sniper fire. I traveled with the 82nd at night in open jeeps to try to draw sniper fire. Then the tanks would come, and annihilate the building where the snipers were. It wasn't a riot. It was a small war. So by the time I met Kennedy, I was an urban warfare veteran.

Were you always interested in the Kennedys?

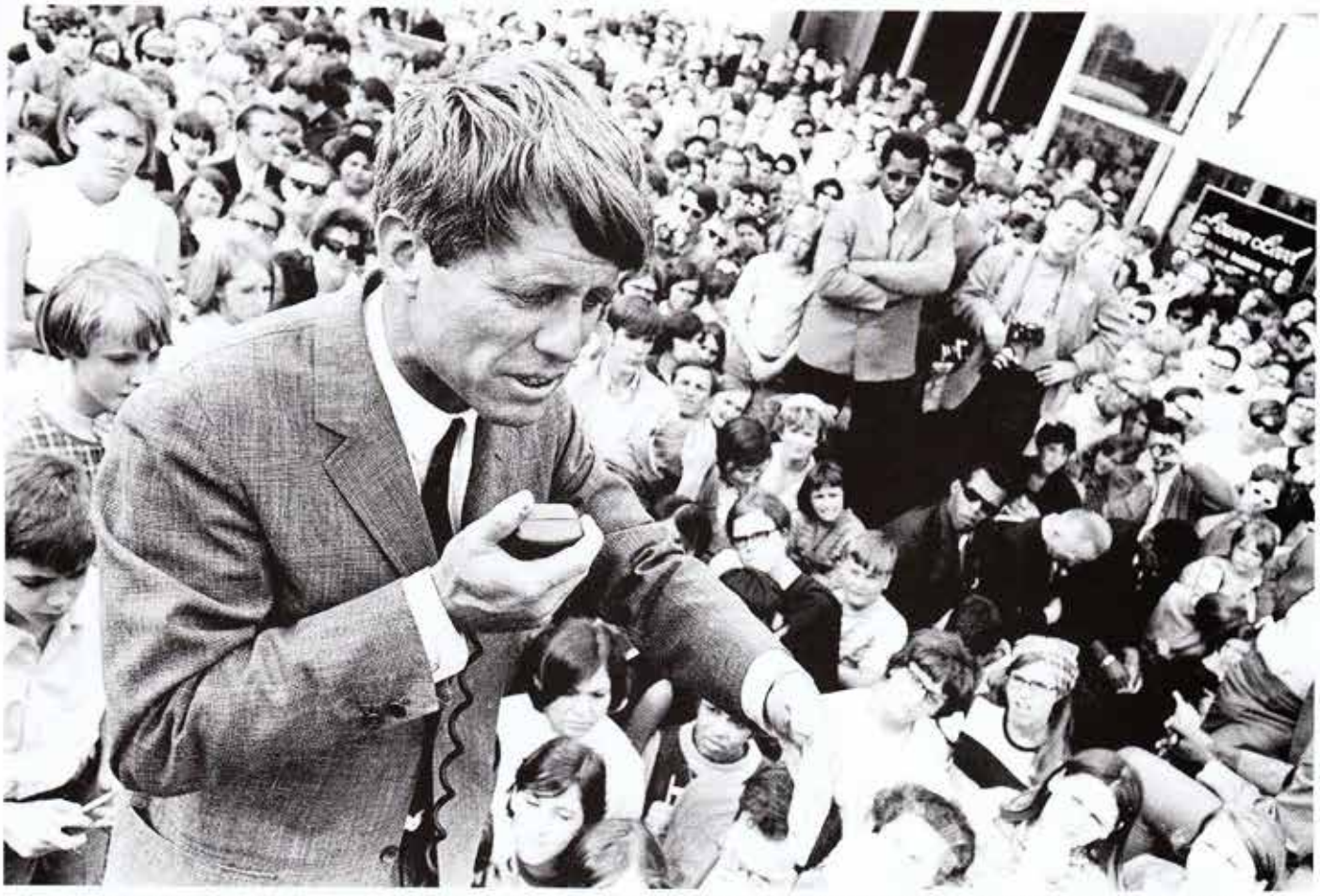
I was excited by Bobby because, as a kid, I was a fan of Jack Kennedy. In my home, in the north side of Detroit, the tone after JFK's death was very somber, and felt like a national catastrophe. Prior to being about 20 years old, I was pretty much a delinquent. I was constantly getting into trouble. I happened to accidentally fall into photography. I got a job at The Detroit News as a copy boy. We made $55 a week, and we were the go-fors. I started seeing the photographers, and was thinking, 'They don't have to sit around here all day. They get to run around, and they look like a pretty wild bunch of characters.' One of them came to me one day and said, "Would you like to work in the photo department?" So I transferred to the photo department where all 30 of these guys mentored me, all of whom were like the characters you used to see in old movies like *The Front Page*. I learned photography, took pictures, got published, and I was off and running.

What were your initial impressions of Bobby when you first met him and how, if any, did those impressions change during the week you spent with the campaign?

Well, by the time Bobby showed up, quite late in March of '68, I'd been following him a bit in the papers, and went out to cover a rally that he held. I was 25 years old, and didn't know what I was doing, but got to follow Bobby for a week. He was very charismatic, and kind of a magical figure in many ways, just his presence, and he was very accessible, as you can see in the pictures. I could have walked right up to his nose and photographed him if I'd wanted to. Some of the campaign organizers at that rally saw me, and they needed pictures, so after I covered him in Detroit, I went to Indiana. I spent ten days with him total, which was plenty. We talked, in brief, but I'd say my impressions of Bobby stayed pretty consistent throughout the time I was there. He'd mostly come back and talk about what happened at the location where we'd just been. When I was knocked down in the Indianapolis ghetto, I was standing right next to Bobby, and was carrying 40-50 pounds of camera gear. Bobby gave me his hand and said, "Do you need some help?" and then Rosey picked me up. [*laughs*] I can't offer you any in-depth insights into him as a person, but the relationship between the photographer and the candidate is very straightforward: you're there to take their picture. The most significant conversations you have are with the writers and television people covering the campaign. It was a bit like traveling with a rock star. I had covered The Beatles when they came to Detroit in '64, and it was similar: the star comes in with their entourage, which protects them, so you really couldn't have a conversation of any substance.

What were the crowds like?

Completely jacked, excited people, so much so, you thought they were going to wet their pants. It was a real thrill, like in the ghetto, which was 99% Black. As soon as they realized he was nearby, they'd rush from their homes, their businesses, their



Bobby stands atop a car and looks down at a crowd gathered to see and hear him at a campaign stop in Indiana, 1968. ©Jim Hubbard

As soon as they realized he was nearby, they'd rush from their homes, their businesses, their schools. It was really amazing, almost scary, to see how excited people were by him, particularly African-Americans. He was spellbinding with his words — very poetic, and that's what was fun about being around him, and being energized by it. The feeling was "I'm just so happy to be alive, at this moment, with Robert Kennedy."

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So you knew in some sense that you were living history?

I'm not sure I had a sense of that or not, but I knew that I was in a moment that was extremely exciting, [especially] after Jack's being killed while President and now his brother probably going to be the President, and should be the President... I certainly felt that way about Bobby, as did most other people.

I love that you shot all your photos in black & white. What kind of film did you use?

400 Tri-X. Back in those days, everything was about speed. You'd break photographic rules all the time if you worked for a wire service. It wasn't about quality or being pretty. It was about getting the image printed, and you shipped it out wet. It's amazing that those negatives, that only fixed for about 30 or 40 seconds, I can still get a great print off of 40 years later. "A deadline every minute," was the motto at UPI.

hat are some of your other memories of '68 — for example, when Martin Luther King was killed?

I was working for the Detroit News, and there was a curfew, because they'd just had the riot the year before, so it was an extremely tense city. Everyone was certain the city would go up in flames. Me and a reporter were assigned to go to the section of town where the riot had occurred the year before, and look for stories and pictures in that area. No one was in the streets, except for lots of police. We were in an alley, looking for people, looking for pictures, for people to interview. About six police cars came up from both ends of the alley, and stopped. About twelve cops had us get out of the car, put shotguns and pistols to our heads. These were all white cops, by the way, and we were both white. They made us get down on our knees, up against a fence, while they tore my car apart, tore the seats out, cut it up with knives and kept the shotguns and rifles

pointed at our heads. One of the cops said, "I think we'll just kill you here." And my buddy and I just looked at each other, looked around, and my thought was that they could actually do this and get away with it. And Detroit police were notoriously vicious in those days. So the night King was shot, I was thinking I was about to be shot in an alley, by the police.

And they just let you go?

Yeah, eventually they let us go. In high school, I had run around with the police commissioner's son. The reporter and I went to Detroit Police headquarters, went to the brass, reported what had happened — which was a time when the police hated journalists because of the way we'd covered the Vietnam war and the riots — and said we wanted to file a complaint and to warn other members of the press to watch out for the cops on the street. The next thing we knew, we heard over the police radio the Commissioner telling all the cops on the street to lay off the press! [*laughs*]

Where were you when Bobby was killed?

I don't remember exactly where I was, probably covering some crap situation in Detroit. What I remember most was driving to Washington, D.C. when the funeral train was coming from New York to D.C. I listened to the radio during the entire journey, oftentimes in tears, just feeling a truly profound sadness about what had happened.

Is there one image or moment of those ten days with Bobby that sticks with you the most?

I'd say the image of those Black children standing on the back of the police car in the ghetto, clutching the Bobby Kennedy campaign poster. It was a very hectic place, very crowded. I think it's very amusing that the white cop is standing behind them, doing nothing. Nowadays, you'd get shot for touching a police car. That image, for me, just captures the intensity that the people in American ghettos felt towards Bobby: intensity of interest, the intensity of...people crazed and excited for Bobby. And it's something we haven't seen since, and I doubt we'll see again. ▼

"Remembering Bobby, 40 Years After His Death," an exhibit of photos by Jim Hubbard, through June, at Universal Art Gallery, 2001 Lincoln Boulevard, Venice, 310-302-8909. Monday-Friday, 9-7, Saturday, 10-6, Sunday, 11-5. For more info, please visit http://www.venice-arts.org/programs /events.html and http://www.jimhubbardphoto.com.

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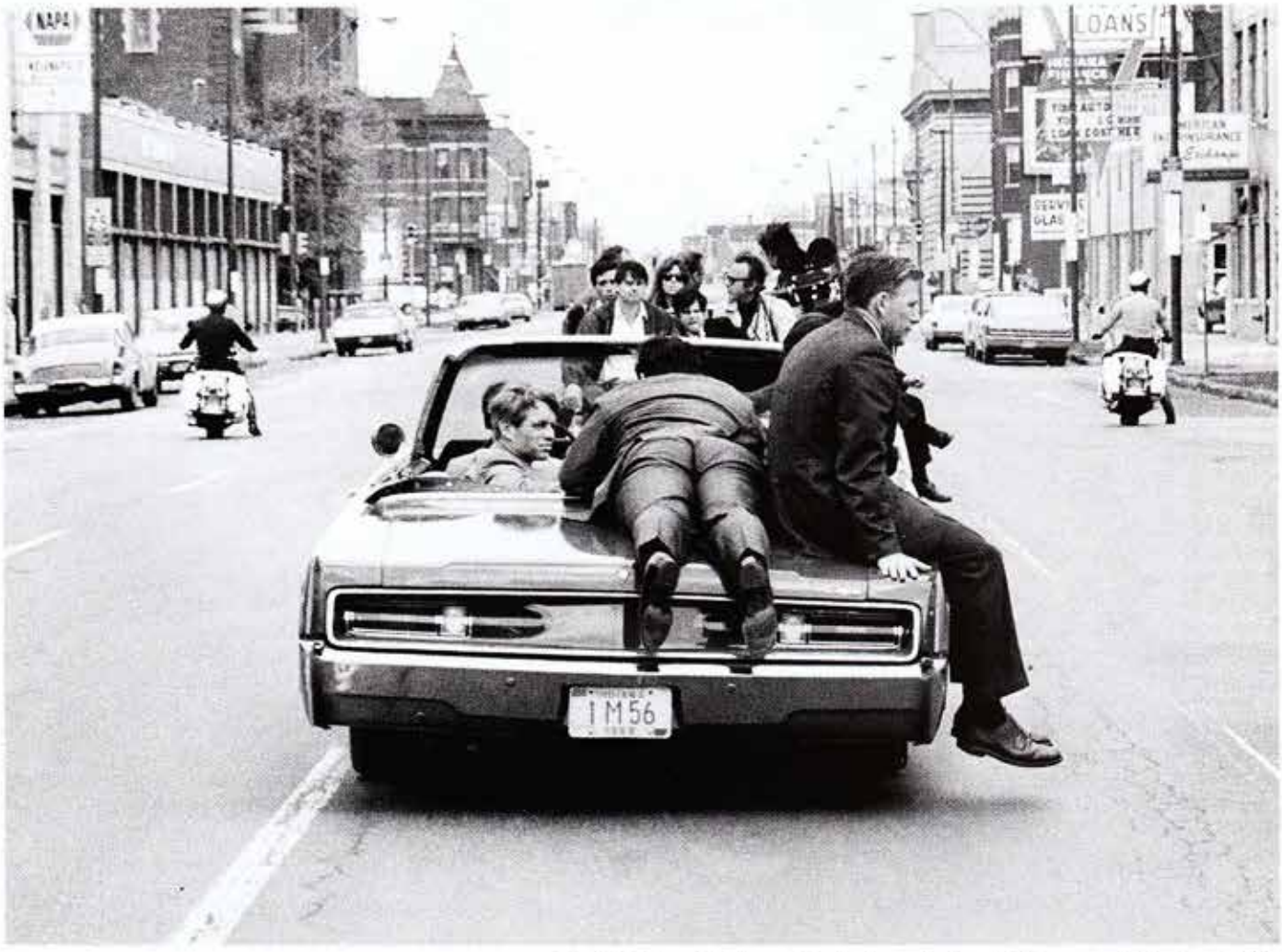

New York journalist Jimmy Breslin lies on the back of the car and interviews Bobby as we race through the streets to another campaign stop, 1968. ©Jim Hubbard