

GARY LEONARD

Local photographer Gary Leonard has documented the city since 1960, when he photographed the Dodgers at the Coliseum. He's earned acclaim for his black-and-white photos of politicians, celebrities, punk rockers, sports figures and outcasts. He also casts his lens on urban development, from the Arts District in the '70s to L.A. Live today. Three books showcase his photos: "Make The Music Go Bang! The Early L.A. Punk Scene," "Take My Picture Gary Leonard" and "Symphony In Steel: Walt Disney Concert Hall Goes Up." During the 2003 California Recall, Leonard was even one of 135 candidates for Governor. We met around the corner from his gallery at Colori Kitchen, where Leonard's punk rock photos line the Italian restaurant's brick walls.

NA: What's your first memory with a camera? 1960. I have this memory that I was at Dodger photo day at the Coliseum...I remember driving home, looking at the camera and being struck with possibility. What I did, I stuck the camera out the window without looking. That's something for a nine-year-old. I got back and it was this image of trees and the top of a house.

Did you buy your first camera? My dad did. My dad had had a darkroom...I just always took to it. In college I went to UCLA. I was taking art. I was introduced to Diane Arbus, Ansel Adams, a whole list of photographers. Black-and-white photography. The choice I made was choosing a realm more like a photojournalist, but shooting like a street photographer. That came together. Before I knew it, people would say, can you come over here and take my picture?... It was just natural. When you go out, be passionate about what you shoot. Shoot what you like to shoot.

Are you currently teaching photography classes? I teach classes all the time, but I never made an effort to develop a week-by-week class.

Do you have people join you as you photograph the city? All the time. That's really the best way to learn. Much better than slides or Power Point.

What's changed about downtown? Everything has moved west of Alameda. Before we had people living in the Arts District. I used to refer to it as the Al's Bar District. Al's Bar was at the American Hotel...That was the center of the neighborhood...It was a wonderful neighborhood. You could find parking. Everybody knew who you were. It was authentic. It happened on its own. It was allowed to just be there for 30 years...In the '90s they finally put up signs calling it the Arts District. Now what happens is the artists can't afford to live there.

What would like to see happen downtown that hasn't yet? Cabs. Connectors. It will happen on its own. People want an urban core. They want to live close to where they work.

Why is it worth being located downtown? It's got so much character. There's something interesting on every block...In the '70s I just had this sense it was a wonderful way to live, close to where you work. My daughter [and I] go to City Hall and sit in on City Council sessions. For her, growing up is so rich.

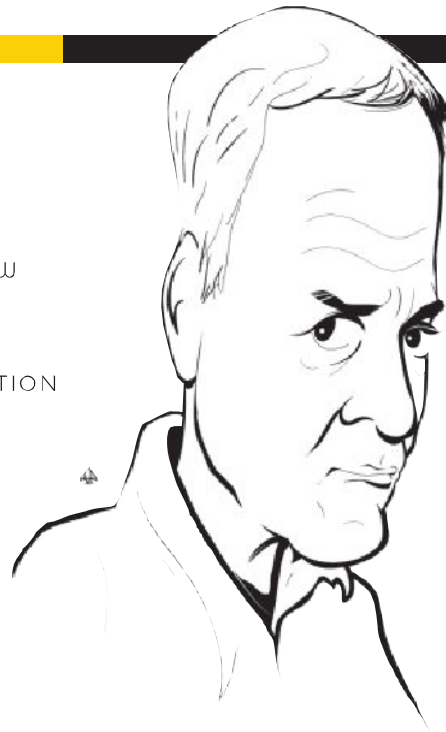
Growing up in the Valley, what were your memories of downtown? I remember going to Little Tokyo. It was huge. It was a real district where people lived and worked...It was authentic...When I was young, you could just feel what came before. Now I'm old enough to know all the spots...There's all these wonderful assets in close proximity that are here for adults and children - culture, and people and activities. My daughter could give you a tour of downtown. It's so funny; she has such a sense of place.

Have you lived anywhere other than Los Angeles? No. I don't think I could. I went to Denver for the Convention. It's got an interesting urban core that's connected. That's what I came away with. The ability to walk or hop on something really gives you that connection...Have you seen Echo Park Cycles [a new bike shop on upper Echo Park Avenue]?

I've heard of it. That's progressive. I've lived [in Echo Park] for close to 30 years. The reason it's developed...because of the [old] Red Cars. Echo Park had courtyards. That's why you have stairs and houses with no garages. They were developed before the automobile...Suddenly people are riding bikes. That's becoming a center. I see businesses returning to service a neighborhood that needs them.

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With the energy crunch that makes a lot more sense. Absolutely. We need neighborhoods. The idea that somebody gets in their car and has to drive to the mall to get something simple makes no sense.

Near Echo Park Cycles, there are other retail spaces available. That's what it will take. There are also restaurants being built along Sunset.

Lot 1? And Elf. And the wine bar. And 15. Who knows if they're good, but to develop a neighborhood, I see one little bike shop and get excited about it. You stay in the neighborhood...It's the future of the city...Once in awhile I'm on the 405 near the 10, and it takes me a half-hour coming from Sunset to Santa Monica Boulevard going south.

That's miserable. I remember the earthquake in 1972. All the streets were slowed. 36 years later and traffic's like what it was during an earthquake. That's every single day, all day. If we have another earthquake, what's going to happen?

One of the things you're known for is your punk rock photos. How did you get involved in that scene? When punk happened, I thought, here's a chance. I'm old enough to get in on something that's truly alternative and exciting, taking pictures for the city. They performed in these venues in Chinatown, odd places in the Valley... Here was this network of people using these assets of the city, downtown. I jumped in full-force.

Have you been involved in any other social phenomena since then? You have to live at night for awhile. You have to rub elbows. You can see musicians and users and artists. Some people end up on Skid Row or dead. At some point, I got tired of it. I still see the people who were living that life. We have families. There's more that propelled me than just the city at night. I haven't cut myself off. I can still see the line. It's just a progression. Every place I see it. My friend Ricki [and his wife Monica], they just opened a diner on Skid Row. It's still happening.

Why'd you get tired of the punk rock scene? Only covering music, you never really get to see the city. Every background is black. Every shot is with a strobe. Every shot, you see the faces, but it can be any city.

What's the goal with your gallery? It should be a place where people can come 'cause you'll get a better idea of what I mean. There's mementos and memorabilia and magazines...That's how ideas get developed. It's the Gary Leonard experience. **NA**

GARY LEONARD GALLERY

740 S. Olive St., Downtown
Mon.-Fri.: 1 p.m.-3 p.m.
Nov. 13 & Dec. 11: 5-9 p.m. during Downtown ArtWalk.
www.garyleonard.com • takemypicture.com