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By Jessica Zack

Stephen Somerstein: A photographer remembers his Selma-Montgomery march

Stephen Somerstein was a 24-year-old student editor of the City College of New York's campus paper "Main Events" when he headed south on an overnight bus from New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal to document the Selma-to-Montgomery, Ala., march for voting rights in 1965. He and a fellow reporter arrived in a makeshift campground on the outskirts of Montgomery where marchers from around the country were preparing for their final leg to the state capital.

Carrying a bag filled with five cameras and 15 rolls of film (including one in color), Somerstein took nearly 400 photographs, many of them now iconic and exquisitely composed, documenting this pivotal event in the civil rights movement. Highlights from Somerstein's Selma body of work — including his famous photo from behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s head, which was reimaged for the "Selma" film poster — are currently on view at San Francisco's Modernism Gallery until April 25.

"We had done other small stories in the student paper on students who had gone down to work on voting rights as part of Mississippi's Freedom Summer the year before," Somerstein, 74, said during a recent interview, paging through a mock-up of a book of his march photos he hopes to see published later this year.

"Then we were watching everything unfold on national television, the marchers on the bridge being beaten back, the murder of the young African-American (Jimmie Lee Jackson) who was beaten by the police, and the white minister James Reeb who was killed. We were appalled."



"Young boys marching with American Flags",
1965, gelatin silver print, 16 7/8 x 11 1/4 inches

Somerstein, who was still living with his parents in the Bronx, “had never before been farther south than Washington, D.C.,” where he photographed the 1963 March on Washington. “I went home that night to tell my mother, ‘I’m going to Alabama.’”

Although there were multitudes of photographers documenting the march, Somerstein’s images are distinct in part for focusing not exclusively on the famous leaders and celebrities in attendance - although he does have shots of King, John Lewis, James Baldwin, Joan Baez, Rosa Parks and others — but on the anonymous bystanders observing the civil action in progress.

“You had to photograph the luminaries, but then I thought, What is the march for?” says Somerstein. “It’s for the people living there, the blacks who have been deprived their votes. I came down for a few days from a nice, secure place in the North and were protected by 10,000 US soldiers. But the army would leave and I’d be going back home, whatever we accomplished. The people there had to take the brunt, for good or for bad, of what occurred.”

Somerstein recalls wanting to break away from the march at one point to find a shop to purchase additional film, “but a military officer told me, ‘Don’t do it. We can’t guarantee your protection. You’re obviously from the North and very visible.’”

“So I had to be very parsimonious with my picture-taking. Every shot had to be well - composed. I couldn’t waste an image, and almost everything I took was a one-off.”

Somerstein positioned himself directly behind Dr. King on the podium as he delivered his famous “How Long?...Not Long” speech, resulting in an image which was closely adapted in “Selma.” “I focused on the people listening. Some were hunching over, covering their eyes because they wanted to concentrate on his words.”

Despite his “passion for socially concerned photography,” Somerstein, who lives in Mountain View, dedicated himself to a career in science. Until his retirement eight years ago as an astrophysicist at Lockheed Martin, he designed spectrometers and other instrumentation for satellites, first at the Harvard-Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory before moving to California in 1976 and joining Lockheed in 1986.

He had always been fascinated with physics and space, as well as art. His father was a motion-picture editor for Twentieth Century Fox, and Somerstein remembers as a boy meeting Otto Preminger and John Cassavetes.

Somerstein got his first camera, a Brownie Hawkeye, at age 10. “I always have a camera with me,” he says, holding up the brand-new Sony RX100 digital point-and-shoot hanging around his neck

He studied the early-20th-century social reform-minded photos of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, and Farm Security Administration photographers like Arthur Rothstein and Ben Shahn to “find out what really makes a good photo compositionally.”

“Very rarely were people aware of my taking the photograph,” he says of his Alabama photographs, including his favorite, which shows a multi-generational family observing the march in front of a Coke billboard.

Clayborne Carson, director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, has gotten to know Somerstein since being contacted years ago to help identify some of the lesser-known civil rights leaders in his photographs.

“I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of Stephen’s work, especially since he is not a professional photographer,” said Carson by phone. “A distinguishing feature of what caught his eye that day is the people who were there as participants and bystanders, which is important to remember as we memorialize the iconic events of that era.”

Other than the few shots that ran in the CUNY paper and a shot of Baez he immediately sold to the “New York Times Magazine,” none of Somerstein’s work had been seen by the public until a 2010 exhibition at the San Francisco Art Exchange.

“Given the recent turmoil and social unrest in Ferguson and elsewhere, I feel very strongly that right now is the time to show Stephen’s work,” says Modernism Gallery owner Martin Muller. “His work is part of a timely conversation about issues that are still alive today.”

Somerstein is devoting himself with renewed vigor to his photography since retiring from the aerospace industry. Yet he has continued to photograph important events over the last five decades — including the 1992 San Francisco riots following the Rodney King verdict and the Marina after the Loma Prieta earthquake - amassing an enormous personal archive of photographs.

“I’ve always gone out and shot as if I were a journalist covering the story, but without a newspaper or magazine,” Somerstein says. “I’d tell myself, ‘It all goes into the archive.’ And I’ve always known, this work will come out one day.”

Jessica Zack is a Bay Area freelance writer.



“Coca Cola lady looking over black multi-generational family seated on hillside under sign”, 1965, gelatin silver print, 13 1/2 x 16 7/8 inches

Stephen Somerstein: March for Freedom, Selma to Montgomery, 1965. Through April 25. Modernism, 685 Market St., Suite 290, San Francisco. Open Tuesday — Saturday 10am-5:30 pm. (415) 541-0461. www.modernisminc.com