

The Photographs of Billie Berri, 1921-1997

Many of the dance students and friends of Billie Berri will remember her lessons at her McAndrew Road studio, her outstanding variety shows in the late fifties and early sixties with her students, her directing of several Art Center plays in the late forties, or her excursion into the world of Thoroughbred horseracing and breeding with Amatil, Belle Ami, Pozy, Gimmie-A-Kiss, Beau Billy, Dolly, and Bridgett.

Only a few were aware of her wholehearted dedication to songbirds and their photography the last twenty-five years of her life. Like the french impressionist painter Edgar Degas, who hung out at the Paris Ballet and at Longchamp racetrack, she also had an artistic eye for both the human and equine presentation, and this talent easily transferred to the natural bird world around her.

By the late summer of 1996, when she had grown too weak to lift the camera, she had exposed, mostly at F4 and 60th of a second, some 25,000 frames with her used Fujica 605 35mm, 100-300mm lens, and flash. It took years for Billie to win the trust of the wild birds, and for the first few years she would not even use a flash, for fear of upsetting them.

She did everything she could to make her property a St. Francis inspired sanctuary and to attract birds to her kitchen window feeding station. She put out wild bird seed, sunflower seed, mealworms, sugar water, and several shallow bird baths that she kept clean and filled daily. She planted several fruit trees just for the birds.

Each of Billie's photographs represents hundreds of hours of patiently waiting for just the right moment to click the shutter-- just when the bird pauses, holds its breath, and says "cheese!". And in that split second exposure their heart and soul are revealed and, as Billie often said, "we take a closer walk with Thee". "These photos were why I was put on earth", she once exclaimed.

Twenty five years and 25,000 exposures later, her longtime friend Jon Dieges, who was awarded ownership of her photos, has edited, selected, and framed a dozen or so of the 400 or so of Billie's best photographs for this exhibit as a memorial tribute to her artistry, less ambitious than the book she had been planning, but at least immediately presentable to her many local friends.

We greatly appreciate Ojai Valley Bank's willingness to allow these pictures to be shown.

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