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NEWS

Burton Wilson, known for photos of Armadillo music scene, dies at 95

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Burton Wilson, whose photographs from the Armadillo World Headquarters and Vulcan Gas Company became some of the most lasting historical documents of music in Austin during the 1960s and 1970s, died Monday at age 95.

Wilson shot iconic blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Lightnin' Hopkins and major rock artists including Bruce Springsteen and Frank Zappa, and he captured the collision of country and rock spearheaded by the likes of Willie Nelson at the Armadillo in the early 1970s. He also documented the venues themselves, along with the concertgoers who epitomized the culture of the era.

Born Oct. 19, 1918, in Vermont, Wilson got a degree in sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1941 and served in the U.S. Army during World War II. After the war, he moved to Dallas and then Austin, where he studied photography at the University of Texas under renowned documentary photographer Russell Lee.

An interest in blues music led Wilson to the Congress Avenue nightclub Vulcan Gas Company, where he was the house photographer from 1967 until its closure in 1970. He then moved on to the newly opened Armadillo, where he offered to shoot photos for proprietor Eddie Wilson (no relation).

“This very calm gentleman showed up and asked if he could take pictures,” Eddie Wilson remembered on Monday, adding that he’d already become familiar with the photographer’s work.

Burton Wilson was 51 at the time, and that was unusual for the venue. “We didn’t have an awful lot of 50-year-olds coming to the Armadillo,” Eddie Wilson said.

The photographer's attitude and demeanor turned out to be a strongly positive influence on the fledgling operation. "He was the best role model that my crew ever had, for just teaching good manners by example," Eddie Wilson said.

Burton Wilson earned the respect of his subjects because of his unobtrusive approach to photography. "I think a lot of the musicians liked me because I didn't pose them," Wilson told former *American-Statesman* writer Michael Corcoran in 2007. "And I didn't take a lot of shots like you see them do now. I had to buy my own film, so if I felt like I got a good shot, that was it."

The lasting value of Wilson's work left an impression on many local music photographers who followed in his footsteps. "His photography, and the things he told me, informed me so much, just in the way he looked at it as a journalist," said Todd Wolfson, who has been shooting musicians in Austin since the 1980s.

Wolfson remembers examining some of Wilson's archives at the South Austin Popular Culture Center, which hosted an exhibit of Wilson's photos last summer, and being astonished at the record-keeping detail. "He had these books where he'd printed up a contact sheet, and he'd write the number of the contact sheet down, and the frame number, and every little detail about it."

Wolfson said he was also influenced by Wilson's attention to less obvious photo opportunities, such as "getting the sign that says it cost \$3 to get into the show. Because someday people will see that and go, 'They really paid \$3 to get into this show?'"

Wilson took pictures at the Armadillo for the first five years of the venue's 10-year run. "That was the most important period to capture," Eddie Wilson said. "In addition to the acts, he got the changes in the place."

Among the historic Armadillo events Burton Wilson was on hand to photograph was Springsteen's two-night stand in 1974. Wilson snapped a shot of Springsteen in a custom-painted "Rosie" T-shirt that he wore onstage.

"If not for Burton's picture, nobody would've had proof that that shirt existed," Eddie Wilson said. "By the time Bruce finished his first set, that (artwork) had run completely off his shirt."

Around 1975, Burton and his wife moved to California. "But they didn't stay very long; they came back, thank goodness," Eddie Wilson said. After his return, Burton remained an active shooter of music events for many years, as evidenced by his book "The Austin Music Scene, 1965-1994: Through the Lens of Burton Wilson," published in 2001 by Eakin Press.

Eddie Wilson and his wife, Sandra, regularly visited Burton at his home in the Westminster retirement community.

In what would be their final visit last week, Eddie snapped a photo of Sandra next to his old friend, who is grinning widely in the shot. It fits well with something Burton had said to them recently: “I’ve always been happy. Happy doesn’t get you anywhere, but it’s so much easier than being unhappy.”

Wilson’s wife, Katherine, preceded him in death. Survivors include their son, Minor. Funeral arrangements are pending.

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EDDIE WILSON

Threadgill's owner Eddie Wilson took this photo of Burton Wilson (no relation) and Eddie's wife, Sandy, on what would be their final visit last week. [More Info](#)