

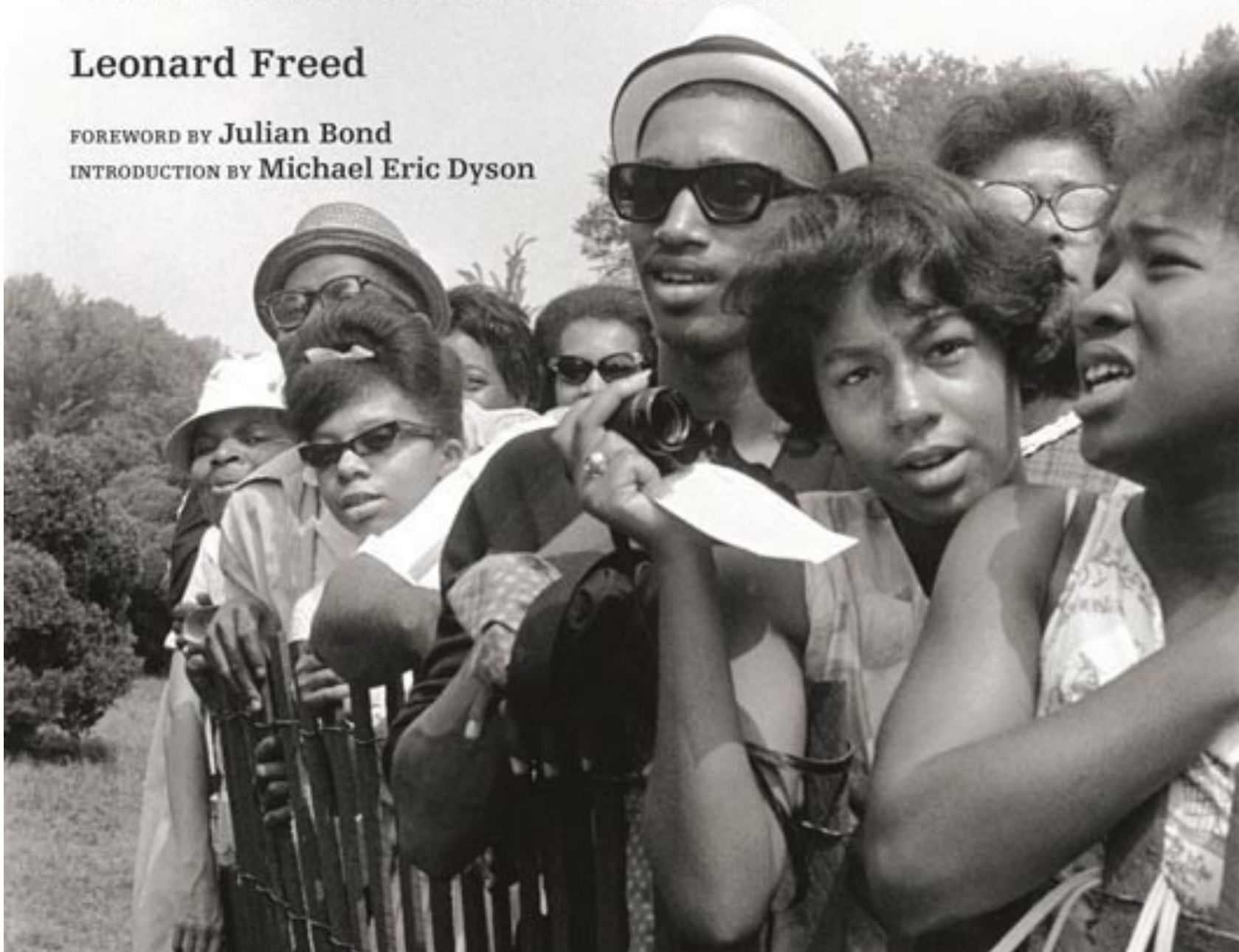
# This Is the Day

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

Leonard Freed

FOREWORD BY Julian Bond

INTRODUCTION BY Michael Eric Dyson



## AFTERWORD

### In Leonard Freed's Footsteps

Paul M. Farber

"When I photograph, I am always relating things to one another. Photography shows the connection between things, how they relate. . . . Photographing is an emotional thing, a graceful thing. Photography allows me to wander with a purpose."

—LEONARD FREED (1929–2006)

At daybreak on August 28, 1963, Leonard Freed arrived in Washington, D.C. He had returned home to Brooklyn earlier that summer from living abroad in Amsterdam with his German-born wife, Brigitte, and their infant daughter, Elke Susannah. The couple had packed their darkroom equipment from their apartment into their tiny Fiat 600, sailed with the car from Rotterdam to New York, and set up a workspace in the basement of Leonard's childhood home. Freed immediately got to work photographing the civil rights movement. He made an itinerary for himself on ruled notebook paper, where he detailed dozens of potential photo shoots, including protests, street festivals, and beauty pageants. For August 27–29 he wrote, "Negro March on Washington."<sup>1</sup> The day before the event, Leonard and Brigitte drove south and slept in a campsite outside of D.C. They awoke at 5:00 A.M. and drove into the city several hours ahead of the official start of the march.

Freed began his day on the periphery of the National Mall, capturing scenes on his handheld Leica camera. He walked from the base of the Washington Monument, where he photographed stacks of soon-to-be-dispersed protest signs (pages 16–17), to the White House fences, to the streets surrounding Ford's Theatre. Several blocks from the epicenter of the march, Freed captured some of his first photographs of the day under a sign that read HOUSE WHERE LINCOLN DIED (pages 14, 15). Freed made photographs of passersby as they crossed one another's paths by the famed theater. He envisioned this foot traffic as a prelude to the later gathering by the Lincoln Memorial. On that day Freed was tapping into the deeper currents of historical memory while citizens from a nation afflicted by internal division and racial trauma were gathering at its most hallowed grounds to transform it.



Figure 4  
Leonard Freed (American, 1929–2006), *Soldier at the Berlin Wall*, 1961. Gelatin silver print

Freed's approach was both site-specific and historically conscious. His parents were Jewish immigrants, both from Minsk, Russia, who had escaped a wave of pogroms in their native land around the time of the First World War. In 1952 Freed sailed to Europe and eventually settled in Amsterdam, where he honed his craft as a documentary photographer.

Magnum, the renowned international photography collective, influenced Freed's method. Although often licensing prints for news publications, Magnum photographers were encouraged to be socially engaged and self-directed, to tell stories in long photo-essays and books, and to register visual relationships between themselves and their subjects through their work. In August 1961 Freed traveled to Berlin to witness the construction of a then weeks-old Berlin Wall. Among his first photographs of the wall is a single shot of a black soldier standing at the edge of the American sector of West Berlin (fig. 4). The image is emblematic of a central contradiction of postwar American culture: the soldier guarded America's Cold War front-line abroad but was denied full citizenship rights at home. This haunting image inspired Freed to pursue a project about segregation, eventually resulting in a photography book titled *Black in White America*.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this project, Freed attempted to capture his subjects' fields of vision—the looks shared among the people he photographed, and at times with the photographer—as a way of demonstrating the story of America's tacit but clear racial boundaries.

While attending the March on Washington, Freed sought images in which he could bring the marchers and the layers of their social landscape into a shared frame. The day offered Freed a spectacle—not for

marveling from afar or at a fixed distance, but for exploring at a ground level. Freed meandered through the assembled multitudes on the Mall. The resulting images attest to his thoughtful photographic eye, as well as active footwork throughout the day. As the crowd surged, Freed paced its myriad movements. He faced the Lincoln Memorial, the Reflecting Pool, and the Washington Monument as formidable visual anchors. He also traversed the spaces around and between these structures, playing with his angles to accutate private moments and public displays.

In his photographs Freed portrays a woven collective of marchers: constituent groups holding banners representing their cities and states, union and clergy groups in uniformed regalia, a sweeping multiracial and multigenerational ensemble of participants dressed in their Sunday best (women in pearls, men with ties) on a sweltering weekday in August. The enormity of the event is best viewed through the sartorial details—the interplay of text and image on placards, the range of individual expression in close-up portraits. Freed sometimes snapped multiple frames of the same scene, moments in which marchers were in the midst of singing or chanting, attempting a cinematic-style capture. In each case, blurred faces or limbs that protrude into the frame further celebrate the dynamism of the event. One gets the sense that Freed was involved and also in the way.

By using a roving perspective and expansive frame, Freed's images of the march carry at least one historical peculiarity: Of the nearly five hundred images Freed captured that day, only one includes a glimpse of the day's keynote speaker, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (see page 63). The leader can barely be seen in a distanced, atmospheric shot taken at what appears to be the moment of his landmark "I Have a Dream" speech. As King speaks, Freed pivots, capturing both front and back shots of marchers looking up toward the Lincoln Memorial. With thousands of marchers separating Freed from King, this image serves as a collective and complex portrait of this historic moment from the participants' points of view.

Freed stayed on the Mall after the events of the day had passed, continuing to photograph into the evening hours. He reconnected with his wife, Brigitte, and they witnessed the last rendition of "We Shall Overcome" in which the remaining marchers linked arms and swayed. He continued to work as the crowd scattered away amid mounds of debris.

The following morning, the Freeds drove back to Brooklyn. By January 1964 they had returned to Amsterdam. Later that year Leonard made another trip to the United States on his own to travel through the South. He began this journey in Baltimore on October 31, where he photographed Dr. King at close range during a parade honoring the announcement of his winning the Nobel Peace Prize (see page 7, fig. 3). Freed then went back to D.C. to document black residents voting for the first time. In *Black in White America* Freed incorporates only four images from the march (two of which are shown here on pages 15 and 75),<sup>3</sup> as part of a larger story of racial struggle and reconciliation. Near the end of that book, however, he includes a long passage from the speech King delivered that day, opening with the words, "Even though we face the diffi-

culties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream."<sup>4</sup> The use of this quotation was planned before King's assassination, but when it appeared in the book's first editions, the passage read as both urgent and elegiac.

Freed moved back to the United States in 1970 and became a full-time member of Magnum in 1972. In August 1983 he returned to Washington, D.C., to photograph the commemorative twentieth-anniversary March on Washington. He again approached the gathering from an active and historical perspective. His photographs speak to Martin Luther King's spiritual presence, with messages about the state of his "dream" encoded on signage that also depicts mournful images of the slain leader. The 1983 marchers sought to gain federal recognition of King's birthday, and images of the group evince the cultural shifts of the previous two decades, particularly the emergence of identity-based social movements, such as those advocating full rights for women and the disabled, inspired by King's legacy. And yet the photographs also attest to the reality that King's dream had not been fully actualized. Freed documents the continued call for full equality in the face of persisting forms of segregation. At the same time, he shows potent images of citizens gathered together, standing as one in democratic communion.

Freed returned to the Mall at least twice again to photograph new marches: the National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights in 1993 and the Million Man March in 1995. Altogether Freed offers persuasive visual testament to a then-emergent but now-ongoing fact of American history: no large public assembly on the National Mall can exist without recalling the momentous imprint of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Freed photographed and followed in the footsteps of those who marched that day, the men and women who walked the crossroads of the nation's capital to advance a dream of freedom and to glimpse the dawn of a new day for America. ■

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#### NOTES

- 1 Leonard Freed Papers, Garrison, New York.
- 2 Leonard Freed, *Black in White America* (New York, [1967/68]; repr. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010).
- 3 Freed, *Black in White America*, pp. 22, 132, 140–41, 145.
- 4 Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in Freed, *Black in White America*, p. 202.