

FIRST LOOK

The Photographer Who's Been Capturing Historic New York Moments for 50 Years

By Adam Sternbergh and Jean-Pierre Laffont

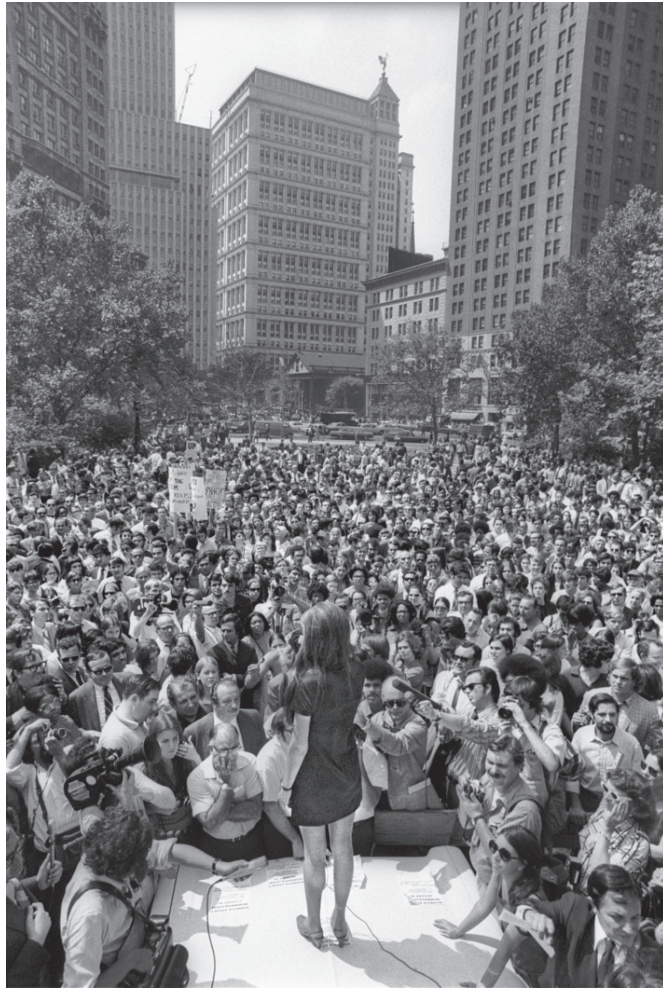
July 27, 2017
8:00 am



Robin Williams and a street performer in front of the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, September 1981.
Photo: JP Laffont/JP Laffont

Jean-Pierre Laffont is not a native-born New Yorker — he was born in Algiers in 1935 — but he is, in every sense, a true New Yorker. He moved to the city from Paris in 1965 and has been based here ever since. As a photojournalist, he co-founded the Sygma Photo News agency, which became one of the largest in the world. Moreover, he's been an inspired chronicler of New York street life in its many evolving forms. His latest collection, *New York City Up and Down*, features photos taken during his half-century here — including this serendipitous shot of Robin Williams, outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, joining in with a street performer in 1981.

“The fifth element of New York is people,” writes Joan Juliet Buck in the book’s introduction, “people as mass and people as fighters, winners, losers, stars.” In this photo, it’s less the star who captivates us (though Williams is pretty captivating) than the crowd that’s gathered to watch him in that familiar New York summer ritual of wandering the city and waiting to see what comes next. “New York needs audiences who will pay to watch Broadway shows (and, in the old days, peep shows), dress up for prizefights, sit exposed to the elements on the roofs of tour buses, attend premieres, and salute heroes by raining shredded paper on their parades,” Buck writes. Or catch a young star performing on the sidewalk for a fleeting moment that, thanks to the lens of an expert witness, lives eternally.



Gloria Steinem speaks at a march at Bryant Park on August 26, 1970. Photo: J P Laffont/J P Laffont



On the one-year anniversary of its Broadway debut, the cast of the rock musical *Hair* gave a free performance in Central Park in April 1969. Photo: JP Laffont/JP Laffont



Admirers of Louis Armstrong stand outside his funeral on the streets of Corona, Queens, 1971. Photo: J P Laffont



A disguised police officer infiltrates an uptown meat market in 1973. Photo: J P Laffont



The funeral in Brooklyn for black prisoners killed at Attica Prison in Brooklyn on September 26, 1971. Photo: J P Laffont/J P Laffont



Because of a transportation strike, the Ringling Brothers Circus was unable to move its animals from New Jersey to New York City. It was eventually determined by city authorities that the Holland Tunnel would be shut down for the night and the animals could travel through it. This unusual event inspired the annual "Animal Walk," beginning in May 1971. Photo: J P Laffont/Jean Pierre Laffont



Pope John Paul II's first visit to New York City, at St. Patrick's Cathedral on October 2, 1979. Photo: J P Laffont



Salomon Brothers (shown here in January 1988) was once considered the most-profitable Wall Street company. It became part of Citigroup in the 1990s, but was finally shut down in 2003 after numerous scandals. Photo: J P Laffont



Elyzabeth and Sophie Markevitch, the daughters of famous cellist Dimitry Markevitch, take a break from playing in Riverside Park to watch the train pass underground, in summer 1965. Photo: JP Laffont@JP

New York City Up and Down will be published on August 1 by Glitterati Incorporated.

**This article appears in the July 24, 2017, issue of New York Magazine.*