



## On Photography: Gordon Parks, 1912-2006

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**“I bought my first camera in Seattle, Washington. Only paid about seven dollars and fifty cents for it.” -Gordon Parks**

Gordon Parks was in many respects a Renaissance man. He excelled at documentary photography, as a musician and as a director of significant motion pictures.

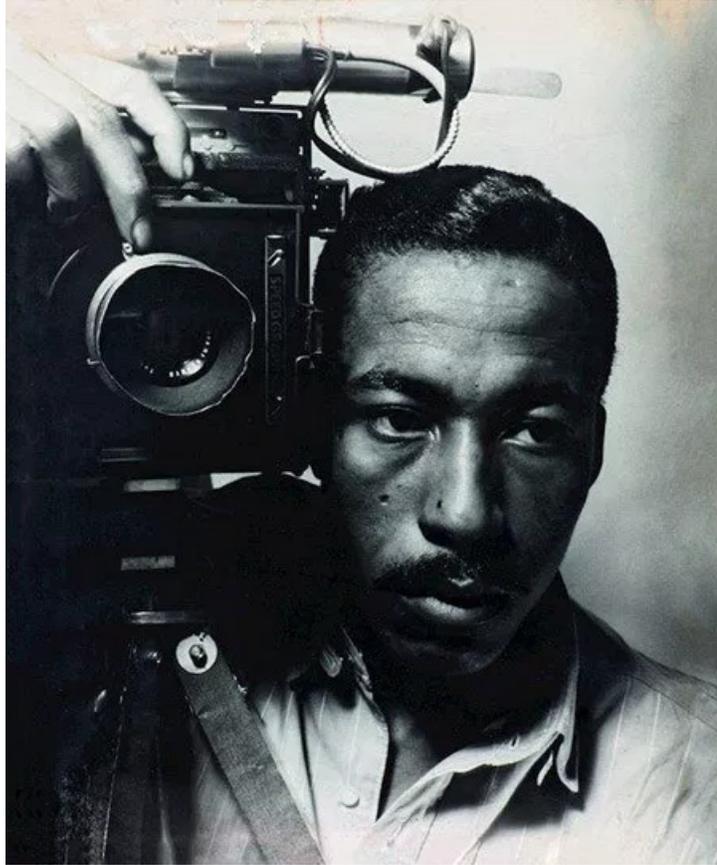
### Farm Security Administration (FSA)

Gordon Parks taught himself photography with his \$7.50 pawnshop camera. He found work at the FSA despite having no formal or professional training. He quickly developed a style. That style made him a famous, celebrated photographer of his time. He broke the color barrier in photography by creating evocative images that probed the impact on society of racism.

“ I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs. I knew at that point I had to have a camera.

## Fashion and humanitarian photography

Gordon Parks became a fashion photographer working for Alexander Liberman at Vogue who assigned him to capture a collection of evening gowns. He worked with Liberman and Vogue for several years where he developed a style of working with his models in motion rather than have them in static poses.



Parks created a photo essay on the leader of a Harlem gang in 1948 that led to him becoming the first African-American staff photographer/writer for Life Magazine, which at that time was the pre-eminent photojournalistic publication anywhere in the world. He continued at Life for 20 years covering racism, poverty and portraying celebrities and politicians. Parks's photos were a mainstay of the mid 20th-century society. His images have defined the era for later generations. They were part of the Civil Rights Movement. Parks was a fierce advocate for these social changes.

## Photographs and movies

Gordon Parks spent the three decades after Life Magazine making photographs, composing music and making movies. His first was based on his best selling novel "The Learning Tree." He was the first African American to write and direct a Hollywood Feature. He followed this in 1971 by making the blockbuster "Shaft." He also directed "Shaft's Big Score," "The Super Cops" and "Leadbelly," a biopic of the Huddie Ledbetter a blues musician. In 2000 he appeared in a cameo role in the "Shaft" sequel starring Samuel L. Jackson. In the scene, Parks is playing chess as Jackson greets him as "Mr. P."

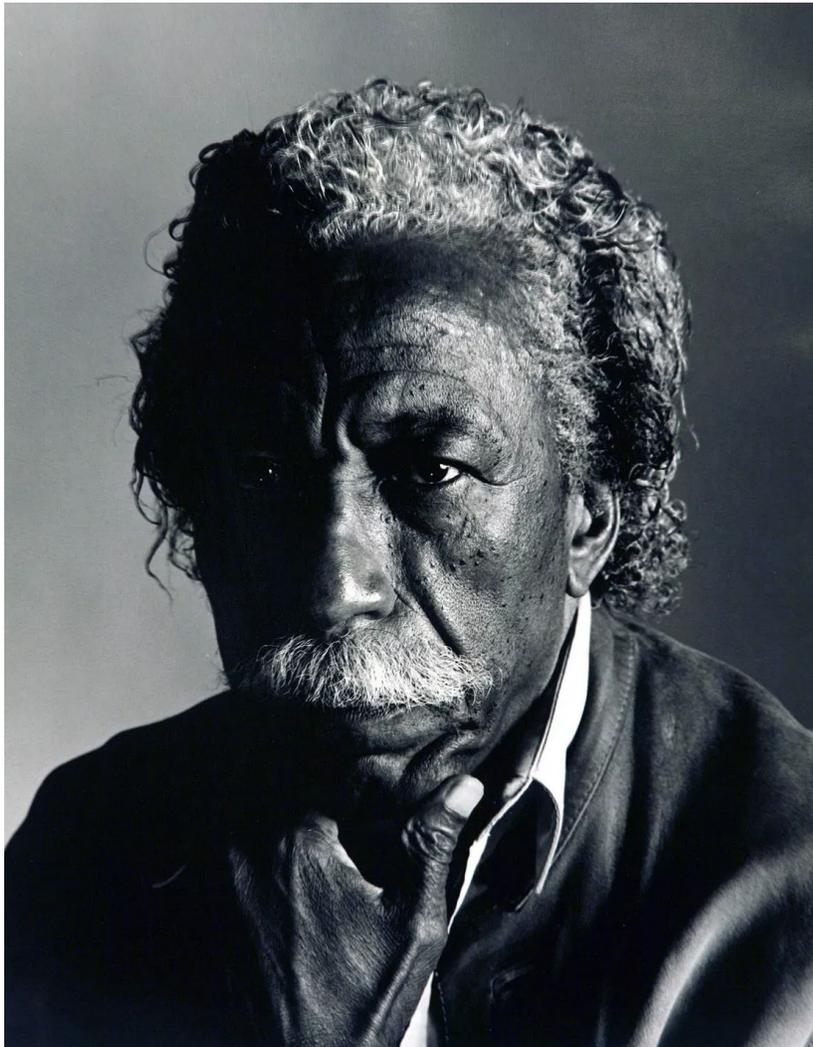
## Musician, composer

Parks played piano in a brothel as a teenager. He was a jazz pianist. His song “No Love” was composed while he worked in another brothel. He went on to write the “Concerto for Piano and Orchestra” in 1953. He also wrote the music for “Martin” a ballet dedicated to the assassinated civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Writing & painting

Parks began writing late in the 1940s. He wrote 15 books over the course of his life. This writing led to his filmmaking career. He wrote photographic technique books, novels, poetry and ultimately, fiction.

Parks used his photography as a basis for creating abstract paintings. His paintings were exhibited at the Alex Rosenberg Gallery in New York in 1981. The exhibit was titled “Gordon Parks: Expansions: The Aesthetic Blend of Painting and Photography.”



“ And now, I feel at 85, I really feel that I’m just ready to start.