

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 10
Christian McBride and Roy DeCarava's *David*
National Gallery of Art

[GENTLE MUSIC]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee. Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo. We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear? This podcast lives in that convergence.

In every episode you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

You can almost feel the heat radiating off of Roy DeCarava's photograph titled *David*. If you have sweat through the summer months in a big city, you know the feeling. You can see ripples of heat coming up from the pavement, feel the perspiration beading on your forehead and slipping down the nape of your neck. The titular David in this photograph is a young Black boy, maybe seven years old. He's leaning against a telephone pole. His brow is furrowed and sweaty. He wears a tropical print linen shirt that's held in place by one button, the collar askew and his midriff peeking out.

Though the photo was taken in the Harlem of the mid-20th century, David could just as easily be living there in 2021. The timelessness of this photograph spoke to jazz bassist Christian McBride, who knows the experience of summertime in New York City very well. And it's somehow both a universal experience—we can all feel that heat—and a deeply personal one, so much so that when we asked him to respond to this photograph in music, he felt his only option was to improvise a response.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: I see you a young man asking questions. I see a young Black boy in an urban setting asking questions. "Who are you? What is this? Why is this? Where am I going? Where are you going? Where did you just come from? Why are you taking a picture of me? What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" I kind of see all of that in David's face.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's kind of hot in the picture, right? Like, you can tell it's summer. And there's a particular heat to New York City in the summer, right?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Well, you know that, again—that's the other thing that really sort of spoke to me in this picture. Because even though that photo was taken, I'm assuming it was taken somewhere in Harlem, you know, that could have been—it *could* have been Philadelphia.

It could have been Detroit. Could have been Chicago. Could have been Oakland. You know, there's just a certain—that summertime, kids playing at the fire hydrant kind of thing, you know?

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder what you make of DeCarava's focus on Harlem. I mean, this photo in particular is 30 years after what we would think of as the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. But what do you think not only drew him to Harlem, but kept him going back?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Well, that was his home. He was from Harlem. And you know, that was always the cradle of Black culture. So much of what was so meaningful and impactful in Black America, for so many years, was right there in Harlem. So I think he understood that there's so much soul, there's so much reverberation of creativity here in Harlem. I can understand why he would focus on Harlem. I think if I were growing up in Harlem at that time, I surely would be—I like to think I'd be taking a lot of pictures. And I would rarely go below 110th Street.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on Roy DeCarava we turn to a familiar voice, Sarah Greenough, a senior curator at the Gallery, and the head of the department of photographs.

So let's talk about this picture and this child. And I wonder, what is it about this photo in particular that kind of grabs you? Why is it so interesting?

SARAH GREENOUGH: That's another very good question. This picture comes from a book of photographs that DeCarava published in 1955 called *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a wonderful title for a book. And it was one that he published with the very well-known poet Langston Hughes. He met Langston Hughes, showed him his pictures, and Langston Hughes immediately wanted to collaborate with him on this book.

The little boy that we see in this picture, whose name is David, is one of the people mentioned in the book. And I think one of DeCarava's extraordinary accomplishments was to show the poverty of Harlem, to show that there were little boys like David who were sad, who didn't have the adult supervision, perhaps, that they needed, but still to show their life, their integrity, their humanity.

And I think the thing that gets us about this picture: DeCarava hasn't captured him running down the street or skipping, doing any of the sort of normal things we might think of a child that age doing. He's standing there, his arms are behind his back, and he's staring out at us. It's a very still picture, like a lot of DeCarava's photographs. And I think that that stillness stops us. And it draws us to look at this little boy more carefully. And we see that his gaze is directly at DeCarava and thus sort of also directly at us. But he seems at the same time to be looking sort of past us, but perhaps also into himself. And it just makes it an extraordinarily compelling picture, I think.

African Americans had of course been depicted in photography before, but mainly photographed by white artists. DeCarava was an African American photographing from the inside. And he showed the extraordinary strength and dignity that he saw in his friends around him. He made pictures that are filled with love. At the same time, they're not sentimental. He made

photographs of Harlem in the late 1940s, early '50s, that were unlike anything that photography had seen before.

CELESTE HEADLEE: You look at this photo of this kid. I don't know, how old do you think he is—eight?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: That's a good—yeah, I would guess that. Somewhere between seven and nine.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So in 1952 he was—let's say he was seven. I mean, 10 years later, the civil rights era is going to explode. You know, it's interesting to me to look at the photo like this—and Roy DeCarava did not want to create a documentary, but in a way he *did* document. Like, that's where the insight comes from, in a way.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Well, when you capture a moment, sometimes—well, I think most of the time, you cannot control how people are touched by it. You can't control what emotions might arise in a person when they experience your work. I'm sure that a lot of artists have certain breakthrough projects or whatever it may be. And they're just as surprised as everyone else, like, wow, I didn't think that was going to make such an impact. So I understand what he was—he made it very clear, I'm not looking to do this. But when you grab a snapshot of a young child from a certain period, obviously if you're interested enough, you're going to go down that rabbit hole, and you're going to feel certain things. You're just going to start to write your own story.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Do you think it could have been a kid of another race? Do you see this photo as being particularly a photo of an African American boy?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: That's a very good question. I think probably the biggest thing that spoke to me is the childlike innocence, the childlike curiosity. Could it have been a non—African American child? Absolutely. I'm not sure what that would make me think of musically, but young David being a African American child, I've been him. I hope that some of David is still in me.

When I first saw it, there was a part of me that was like, hmm, I'm feeling something here. I like David. And then each successive time I came back to it, I just kept feeling more and more and more and more. So each time I go and look at that photo, it just seems to touch me deeper than it did the previous time I saw it.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Well, let's hear how it moves you musically, if you don't mind.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: I would be honored to do that.

[JAZZ ON BASS GUITAR PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Oh, man. All right, you have to tell me about some of the magic. You got to pull back the curtain here.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: So when I'm thinking about it, he's kind of checking me out. You know, he's kind of like, [BASS NOTES] "Who's this guy?"

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, those bent notes sound like questions.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Yeah, "Why is he talking to me? I'm not sure if you're a nice guy or not. You might be trying to hurt me, but I don't really know. [BASS NOTES] I'm holding back from you." [BASS NOTES] And then all of a sudden he's like, [BASS NOTES] "OK, you might not be that bad. I think I'll talk to you."

CELESTE HEADLEE: And we get the walking bass, which makes it feel like you're moving, right?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, he's feeling a little warmer around me now, like, "OK. OK, you're a nice guy. I trust you. OK, let's play." [BASS GUITAR PLAYING] And now I'm accompanying him to the fire hydrant. We're getting splashed. And he's telling me all about his day. And he's calling his friends over. And they grabbing a stick so we can get ready to play some stickball. [BASS GUITAR PLAYING]

He's telling me all about how much he loves Jackie Robinson. [BASS GUITAR PLAYING] And Nat King Cole is his favorite singer. [BASS GUITAR PLAYING] You know, so we wound up becoming friends in the end.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It sounds—by the part where you guys start moving around, I can almost feel him skipping.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Right. Exactly.

CELESTE HEADLEE: How do you get that? Like, this is a kid. Like, there's no mistaking that this is a child. How do you do that?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Well, the walking bass line conjures up that feeling of somebody walking, you know? [BASS GUITAR PLAYING] But I think when you put the little snap in there, you know— [BASS GUITAR PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, that's the skip.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: That's like an extra happy walk.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, so he ends pretty happy by the end.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Exactly. Yeah, we're besties by the end.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah, maybe you get some ice cream.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: That's right. Exactly right. [BASS GUITAR PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: When I look not just at *this* picture, which makes me—I look at it and I can kind of hear the sounds of the street, right? I know what it sounds like on that corner. When I went to look at other DeCarava pictures, I had the same sort of experience, like there was implied sound. And I don't know if that's because I know he was so connected to music, or because he's so connected to music that he created his photos to imply an aural landscape as well as a visual one. What do you think?

SARAH GREENOUGH: I think that that's entirely possible, that after he finished *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, his next sort of most important series of photographs was called *The Sound I Saw*, which was a series of photographs that he made from the mid-1950s into the 1960s of jazz musicians. I mean, he photographed many of the leading jazz legends of that time: Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday.

He was deeply connected to that sound. He even apparently was so fascinated with Coltrane that he would follow him up and down the Northeast, going to all of his performances. You know, it's that sense of sort of give and take and responding to the world around you. But also just the rich tonality and that unadulterated expression of feeling—as well as throwing over all the traditional sort of rules of—whether it's music with the jazz musicians or, in DeCarava's case, abandoning posing in clarity and not caring at all about getting a full tonal range in his pictures, but instead exploring some tones, particularly blackness and gray.

Many of the people that you see in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, you see them hugging or interacting with one another. And you get sort of a sense of movement. And with that movement, you also have a feeling that there's some sound in the background that's propelling them to embrace one another as closely as they are, or to be swaying in the way that they do. So I think that there are many ways you can imply sound. DeCarava is doing something very different, more subtle, more complex, I think. And it is something that I think is magnetic.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Would you want to meet the real-life David if he were still kicking?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Are you kidding? Absolutely.

CELESTE HEADLEE: He'd be in his 70s or 80s, yeah?

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Close to 80 now, right?

CELESTE HEADLEE: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE: Yeah, what would I say to him? “Did you know you would touch so many people?” Because I have a strong feeling—I mean, I'm sure that I'm not the only one that has felt that way when they saw that photo, you know? I would ask him, “How does it feel to be such a legend, being a lightning rod for such artistic expression for so many people? What's your life been like? What'd you do in the '60s and '70s? And what was it like when people found out—when your friends found out that you had become the subject of a legendary photo?” Yeah, I would want to know what his life has been like.

[BASS GUITAR PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks again to Christian McBride for joining us. You can find more information about everything in today's episode on the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast. And on that note, this is the final episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*'s first season. So on behalf of the National Gallery of Art, thank you so much for listening.

Sound Thoughts on Art will be back later this year with season 2. In the meantime, we invite you to sign up for the National Gallery's e-newsletter. Once you've subscribed, you'll get information about season 2 delivered straight to your inbox. And you'll also be among the first to see online features, programs, and other Gallery announcements. To sign up for the e-newsletter, go to nga.gov/subscribe. Oh, and in case you missed it, the National Gallery's West Building has reopened to the public. You can find out more on how to visit at nga.gov.

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast. If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also leave us a review, wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.