



# Capturing the Moments

The Cuban Revolution, Martin Luther King Jr.'s legendary speech, JFK's funeral ... to have been at any one of those historic events would be notable. For Flagstaff's Dan Budnik, the dean of Arizona photojournalists, that's just the beginning of a career that touched some of the biggest cultural events of the 20th century.

By **Nora Burba Trulsson** Photograph by John Burcham

**S**IT DOWN WITH PHOTOJOURNALIST DAN BUDNIK for early afternoon lattes at the Rendezvous lounge in downtown Flagstaff, and the stories start rolling out immediately, beautiful pearls strung together to form 20th century cultural history. Like the time he met Marilyn Monroe at Schwab's Pharmacy in Hollywood. Or how in 1958, as a member of the legendary Magnum Photos agency, he lived with the underground for six weeks in Havana during the Cuban Revolution: "You don't sleep in the same bed two nights in a row." Or how he rushed to the nation's capital in 1963 to cover President John F. Kennedy's funeral: "I can still see Jackie and Bobby Kennedy's faces lit up by flashbulbs at the Air Force base when they returned to Washington."

Hours later, the coffee has gone cold and the sun is setting, but Budnik's Zelig-like stories keep coming. It's no wonder: In his six-decades-long career, Budnik has shot everything from ballet superstars Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev, for *Vogue*, to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington. At 81, Budnik is the dean of Arizona photojournalists, and his body of work is one of the most important and impressive in the country.

The son of Ukrainian parents, Budnik was born on Long Island, New York, in 1933. Although he'd always been interested in art, Budnik persuaded his parents to let him live alone in Los Angeles as a senior in high school to become a California resident so he could study marine biology the next year at UCLA. "I rented a room from a family, and Marilyn Monroe lived around the corner from me," he says. "She was real. She drove a beat-up old car. Everyone took a chunk of her."

By the end of his year at Fairfax High School, Budnik became fixated on studying painting in Paris and returned to New York to earn money, but his plans fizzled. "I was 18, alone in New York with no money," he recalls. "I was kicking a tin can up 57th Street on a Sunday night, and the can landed in front of the Art Students League of New York. I took it as a sign and enrolled at the school the next day."

Budnik studied painting and hung out at the Cedar Street Tavern, a hotbed of abstract expressionist painters such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. One of Budnik's teachers, Charles Alston, the first African-American artist to teach at the school, befriended him, introducing him to the work of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as to the budding civil-rights movement. "The Alstons invited me for dinner," Budnik says, "and I studied with him at a settlement house in Harlem. It was a privilege that way." He also worked on photo essays about artists, including de Kooning and sculptor David Smith.

After a stint in the Army, Budnik decided that photography was going to be his life's work. A few years of the bohemian life in New York ensued ("I lived in a garret, and my refrigerator held dirty laundry"). Then, Budnik landed a job at the fabled Magnum agency, assisting photographers Cornell Capa, Eve Arnold, Elliott Erwitt and others.

One of his first big assignments for Magnum was covering the Cuban Revolution. He went undercover by posing as a tourist: "I couldn't tell anyone I was in Cuba. I told my friends and family I was in Puerto Rico. In Havana, I walked around with my camera, a swimsuit and a towel like I was always heading to the beach."

He also began covering the civil-rights movement, photographing King's legendary 1963 speech and his 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march. "I tried not to be predictable," says Budnik of his emerging photographic style. "For King's speech, I put myself behind him, not in front, to get the shot. I knew something special was happening. I heard Mahalia Jackson near King, telling him to remember the dream. King dropped his prepared speech and spoke from the heart. I got goose bumps."

Also in 1963, Budnik and other Magnum photographers rushed to Washington, D.C., to cover Kennedy's funeral: "I shot from the rotunda down onto his casket." As his images were to be used in the next edition of *Paris Match*, Budnik raced to the airport carrying his film, as well as that of the other photographers. "I had to ship

the film to Paris via Air France, and I was late for my flight back to New York," he says. "My plane was actually leaving the gate. I got a supervisor to let me on the stairs to the plane. I pointed like Napoleon, and they pushed me to the fuselage, where I banged on the door. The stewardess opened the door, and I leapt in. We made the deadline. That's how we did it back then."

By 1964, Budnik had left Magnum and begun shooting on his own, covering a variety of subjects for *Look*, *Life*, *The New York Times*, *Holiday*, *Stern*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Sunday Times Magazine*, as well as fashion, culture and society for *Glamour* and *Vogue* magazines.

Budnik decamped to Paris and London for several years, then returned to the U.S. to focus his photography on environmental and human-rights issues. He worked with folk singer Pete Seeger on his Hudson River Sloop Clearwater project, raising awareness about the polluted New York waterway and shooting it for *Look* in 1969. Budnik also received a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1973 for the project. He shot numerous other environmental stories for publications as disparate as *Sports Illustrated* and *GEO*.

By the late 1960s, he also became involved in Native American issues. "I was appalled at the racism against Indians at the time," he recalls. "I decided to try to make things happen." He worked with the Taos Indians, who were trying to have the federal government return their sacred Blue Lake land, and Budnik garnered Senator Robert Kennedy's support during a shared car ride to New York's LaGuardia Airport. Budnik also began working with the Navajo and Hopi people in their resistance to the Peabody Coal Co.'s strip-mining of Black Mesa. "I could have been photographing pretty models on ladders and making piles of money, but I chose not to," Budnik says. "I was, in effect, an unpaid lobbyist for Native American causes. That's what photojournalists do."

Budnik's involvement with tribal causes led him to befriend artist Georgia O'Keeffe, who had a shared interest in the issues. He often stayed with her in New Mexico. Late in her life, Budnik shot a series of iconic images of the artist, which were published in *People* magazine.

His Native American interests, including tracing the mysteries of rock art, led him to move to Arizona in the late 1970s, first to Tucson and, more recently, to Flagstaff, where he maintains a small office in the historic post-office building downtown.

Budnik shows little sign of slowing down. His images of King's "I Have a Dream" speech were used on the cover and inside pages of *Time* magazine last year to mark the 50th anniversary of the defining moment in the civil-rights movement. *The New York Times Magazine* ran a photo essay about Kennedy's assassination in 2013 — the 50th anniversary of that event — also using Budnik's images. His work is in numerous private and museum collections. He travels frequently to Hopi and other tribal lands to work on projects, and he is planning a book on his civil-rights images. Aided by Dutch photo historian Rixt Bosma, Budnik has launched a website and is cataloging his images.

In the meantime, there are the stories. More of them. Many more. "My life," Budnik says, "is very strange and wondrous." **ah**

For more information about Dan Budnik, visit [www.danbudnik.com](http://www.danbudnik.com).