

MADE IN ST. LOUIS



Jacob Blickenstaff

Age: 46

Family: June Eding, accessories designer at juneodina.com**Home:** Brooklyn Heights, N.Y. He attended Ladue's Horton Watkins High School Class of 1997, NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study, 2001**What he makes:** Intimate photography of creative musicians. Publishes photo essays at ThatMillionDollarBash.substack.com**Exhibition details:**On view through April 10, at the Bruno David Gallery, 7513 Forsyth Boulevard, Clayton, brunodavidgallery.com**How to buy:**Visit in person or contact Bruno David Gallery, 314-696-2377, info@brunodavidgallery.com

St. Louis native brings decades of music photography to Bruno David gallery show

BY RICHARD H. WEISS
Special to the Post-Dispatch

When Jacob Blickenstaff opened his unique “Show of Hands” exhibition March 6 at the Bruno David Gallery, it marked a return — both geographic and creative. Blickenstaff grew up in University City and Olivette before moving to New York in the late 1990s, where he has lived and worked for nearly three decades.

Over that span, he has contributed images to over 50 album projects including notable covers for Natalie Merchant, Makaya McCraven, Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings, the Cactus Blossoms, Joe Jackson and John Pizzarelli. In the 2010s, he photographed numerous culture assignments for the New York Times to complement the work of its critics. His photo essays have also been published at NPR, in Rolling Stone and Mother Jones.

Bringing this body of work home, he says, allows the photographs to breathe in a quieter register.

“Being in St. Louis and not New York gives me more space,” he says. “It’s like the difference between playing an intimate venue and a stadium show. I can be more direct, quiet and subtle — which really fits the themes of this exhibition.”

Those themes have been a long time coming. For more than two decades, Blickenstaff has photographed musicians at work — onstage, backstage, in rehearsal rooms and recording studios — watching how music takes shape in real time. Faces have always been part of the story. But over the years, another element kept asserting itself in his frame: hands.

“Show of Hands” isolates musicians’ hands — fingers gripping guitar necks, palms hovering above keyboards, hands resting or reaching in moments of stillness — and asks viewers to consider what those gestures reveal.



Top left: Jacob Blickenstaff’s photo shows Daniel Lanois at work. He is a Grammy winning producer and pioneer of ambient music. **Top middle:** Joan Baez holds the hand of Linda Ronstadt during rehearsals for a Baez tribute. **Top right:** The hands of bassist Pino Palladino. **Left:** Sharon Jones performs at the Beacon Theater following cancer treatment.

JACOB BLICKENSTAFF PHOTOS

“I think I’ve been using hands in my photos for a long time,” Blickenstaff says. “But the challenge of this show, which came as a suggestion from Bruno David, was to use hands as the initial theme and then create around it.”

Once named, the idea opened a floodgate. As Blickenstaff revisited his archive, he realized how often hands had already been doing narrative work. Art history sharpened that awareness.

“When you go look at paintings and sculpture in museums, hands are always very important elements,” he says, citing Renaissance masters like Caravaggio, Bernini and Michelangelo. “They direct the eye. In portraiture going back much further, hands are carefully placed, sometimes holding subtle clues to the meaning and intent of the work.”

That lineage helps explain the show’s ambitions. “Show of Hands” is not about virtuosity alone. It is about labor, discipline, tenderness, age, vulnerability — the physical toll and grace of a life devoted to music.

“As I sifted through the images,” Blickenstaff says, “I found all those things and was

excited to expand the idea of music beyond technical skill.”

Many of the musicians in the exhibition are instantly recognizable figures. By removing faces, Blickenstaff shifts how viewers encounter them.

“I think the identity is there — it’s not just implied,” he says. “It’s more subtle and takes a minute to absorb.”

That identity is especially pronounced among understated performers like Pino Palladino and Daniel Lanois.

“They are an example of admired musicians’ musicians,” Blickenstaff says. “They transmit their music predominantly through their hands. Daniel is a mechanical and technical wizard — he twists a dial or triggers a custom switch with the same finesse as a violinist. And Pino just has these massive, alien-like hands that can contort and grab the bass in ways I’d never seen before. Observing their hands at close range informed my understanding and appreciation of them.”

Time and mortality also run quietly through the exhibition. Live music, Blickenstaff noted, is ephemeral — it exists briefly

in the air and then vanishes. Photography preserves.

“Photos serve as temporal reminders of the way something once was, a cultural scene that has changed or faded, or someone who aged or passed away,” he says.

Two moments crystallize that idea. One is a close-up image of Joan Baez holding the hand of Linda Ronstadt during rehearsals for a Baez tribute concert. Ronstadt, who has a degenerative condition and now uses a wheelchair, had come to support her peers.

“I looked over my shoulder and saw them sitting together, just calmly present for each other,” Blickenstaff recalls. He asked gently if he could photograph their hands. “It was maybe two frames in about five seconds.”

Another sequence centers on Sharon Jones, documented during her comeback concert after cancer treatment. Hands convey pain, vulnerability, camaraderie, spirituality, authority — and farewell. “There’s a photo of her waving back toward the audience as she leaves the stage that is both triumphant and poignant,” Blickenstaff says. “But it will always have the undercurrent of her saying goodbye.” Jones died from a recurrence of cancer 2 1/2 years later.

Richard H. Weiss is a former Post-Dispatch reporter and editor and chair of the River City Journalism Fund.