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## Willy Spiller's Photographs from the New York Underground 1977 – 1984

Written by Dr. Tobia Bezzola



Main image: SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984. All images © Willy Spiller, courtesy of Sturm & Drang Publishers



In 1979, there were 250 serious crimes reported in the New York subway system – per week. There were six murders in the first two months alone. No other subway in the world was more crime-ridden and infamous. New Yorker Willy Spiller braved the labyrinth transport system for a photography series that says so much about the modern tone and texture of the world's most iconic city. In a foreword to a new photobook, published by Sturm & Drang, Dr. Tobia Bezzola writes of Spiller's achievements.

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The treacherous conditions made headlines around the world, while literature and movies of the time reflected the sad statistics: “underground darkness,” comparable to a “slaughterhouse,” is how Willy Spiller’s friend, the author Paul Nizon, described the scenery.



*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

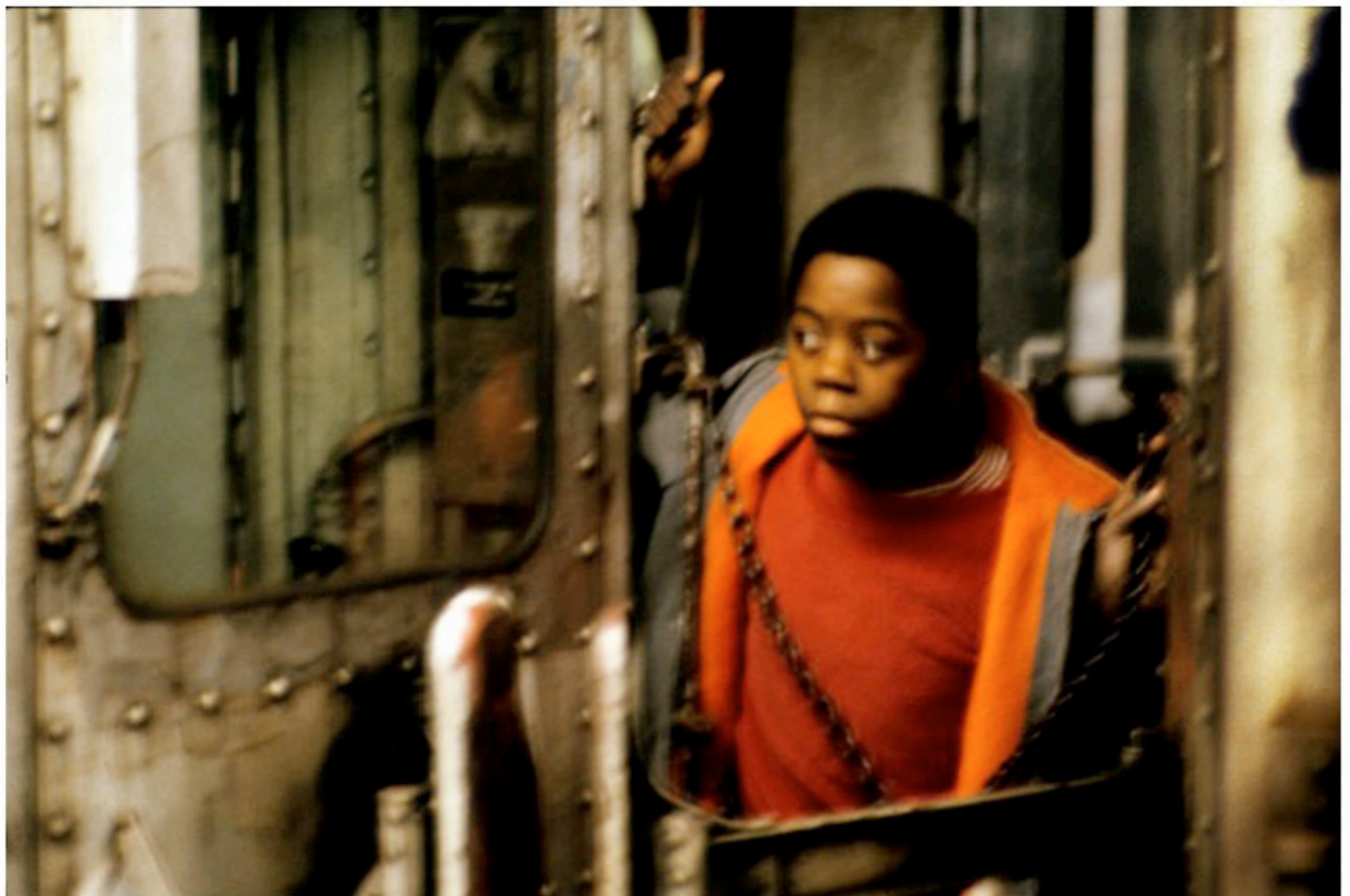




*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

When the American photographer Bruce Davidson started a project in the New York subway in 1980, he prepared as if going into battle—decked out with brass knuckles, jack knife, pepper spray, combat boots and an army jacket.

First published in 1984, the public interest in these images has steadily risen over the last several years – as Willy Spiller has noticed, not without a chuckle.



*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*





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But why? Is it simple nostalgia for more grittiness, crime and the seedy environment of the underground? That is hard to believe: nobody would yearn for a time when Manhattan was dangerous terrain and riding the subway took real courage.

If we take a closer look at these photographs, we start to wonder how in the hell they could ever be mistaken as illustrations for a story on apocalyptic city life in the first place. They neither intend to scare us, nor do they document the sordid conditions.



*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*





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These images hardly tell a story of crime and danger. In hindsight it is surprising that the Subway book, published in 1986, tried to imply exactly that dramatic dictate in text and packaging. It seems that the only way to tell this story in the mid 1980's was through crime and the danger lurking behind the turnstiles.

With the passing of time, we have gotten a more objective look at this tableau. Spiller didn't do expeditions down there, he wasn't meant to deliver shock-factor like Reality TV from hell.

He was aware of the tagline "hell on wheels" but he used the subway simply as a means of transport to get to his assignments as a photo reporter.





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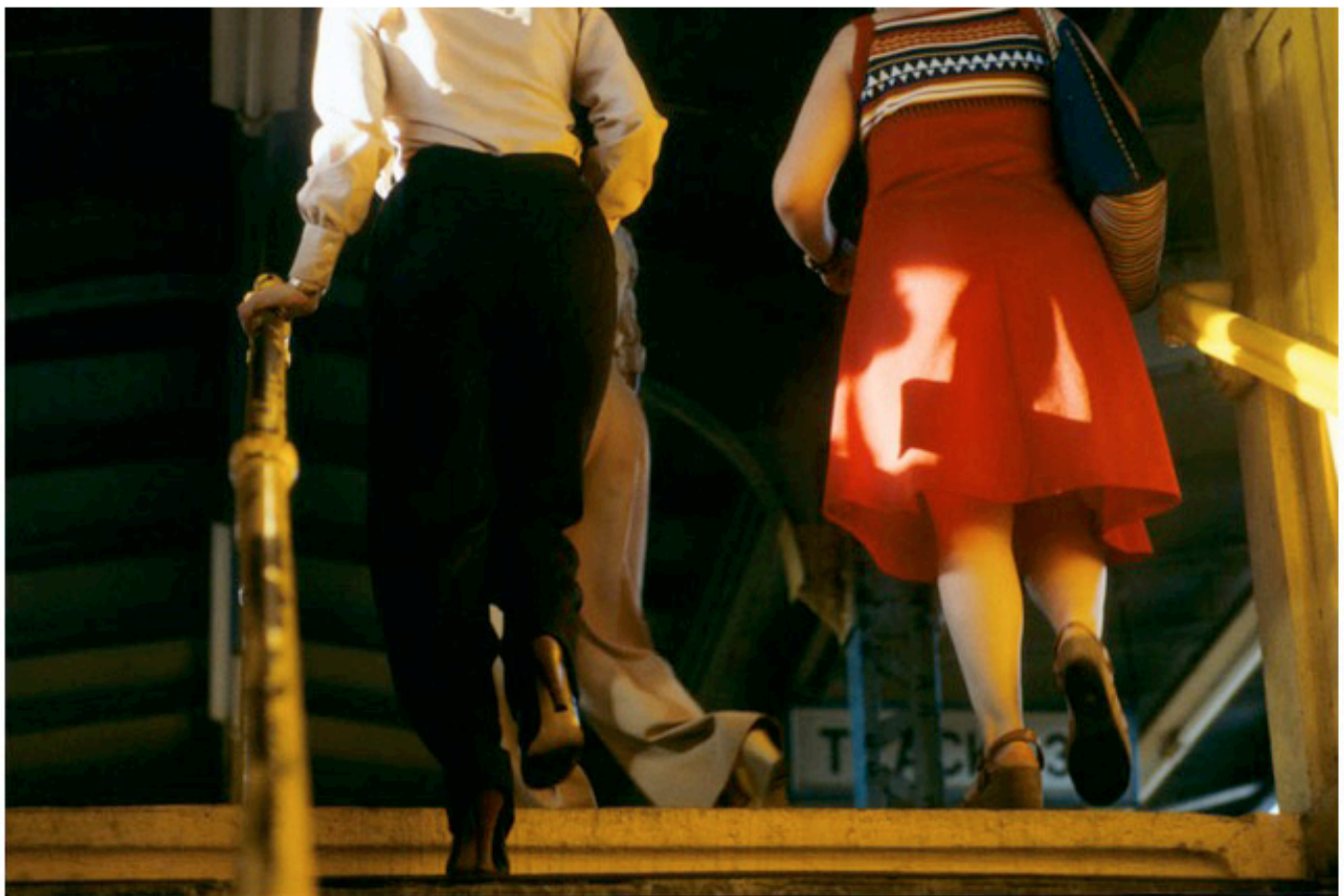
*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*



The subway was not an assignment or project to him, simply daily routine. The quickest way to head from downtown to Lincoln Center while on a job. And then taking a few photos while riding the train – that's it.

His outfit was not a combat uniform, he didn't camouflage his appearance – he looked dapper in fashionable shirts, sometimes sporting a bowtie and a jacket.

Relaxed and with a casual attitude he explored the underground as a natural extension of the orbit that traverses New York City. He chatted, he flirted and more often than not took a picture.



*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*



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His charming chutzpah is the root of the extraordinary quality of these photographs. It seems only logical that this wildly colourful underground performance appeared highly exotic, fantastic and often bizarre to the eyes of this young greenhorn just arrived from the innocent city of Zürich, Switzerland.

And this young photographer didn't even pretend to be a cool local – he was proud of his innocent gaze with open eyes, his curiosity and his amusement.

New York, to him, was his new hunting ground and he tried to get as close as possible to the citizens, exactly in the same fashion that made him a brilliant, promising photo reporter in his hometown earlier.





*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

So naturally, Spiller's view of and into the faces traveling through the meandering system of tunnels and stations is never fearful or clandestine.

A relaxed feeling of assertiveness is what talks to us in these images, telling us stories of the absurdity and poetic fascination in this subterranean setting.

We don't find any hint of sensationalism and voyeurism, there is no polemic, no drama, no dismay in these photographs.



*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*





*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

We are instead reminded of a boyish fascination with trains and the colorful energetic rush of passengers going from point A to point B. At no time do we get the feeling that there is an awareness of the inherent danger of being robbed by his fellow passengers.

Willy Spiller doesn't discover darkness in the underground but rather an idiosyncratic, vivid realm of its own. It's a shimmering, glitzy world where flickering neon and electric flashes dance together and plumes of stale, warm air fill the place – not unlike a discotheque on rails.





*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

Willy Spiller excitedly and spontaneously follows the colorful traces through tunnels and trains and captures them on his Kodachrome slide film (completely unaware and unaffected by the work of Evelyn Hofer, Ernst Haas, Saul Leitner and Danny Lyon, the pioneers of documenting New York in color).

As the clever ethnologist of the common, the everyday life, Willy Spiller is not seduced by the media tale of crime and punishment underground.





*SUBWAY NEW YORK, 1977-1984 © by Willy Spiller 2016*

He naturally discovers a thousand other situations worthy of a camera click, ordinary situations that others would simply overlook. Exactly because Spiller doesn't behold the everyday dose of sensationalism, he views the routine and everyday life as the sensation.

This is the reason these images will speak to a younger generation and generations to come in such a rich and descriptive voice.

*Willy Spiller's Hell On Wheels: Photographs from the New York Underground 1977 – 1984 is out now from Sturm & Drang Publishers. More information is amiable [here](#).*