"I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people," declared Roy DeCarava early in his career. "Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc.... I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of Negroes which I believe only a Negro photographer can interpret."

The Harlem-born photographer accomplished his goal, as *Dancers New York*, 1956, and other photographs testify. [See map page 23] He has continued to focus predominantly on African American life in the city for almost fifty years, producing images that are intimate, lyrical, and searingly accurate. DeCarava knew from the age of nine that he wanted to be an artist, but he did not choose photography as a medium until the late 1940s. He had studied painting, then printmaking at New York's Cooper Union of Art and at several WPA/FAP-sponsored programs, including the Harlem Community Art Center. While he was working as a commercial artist to support himself, he purchased a $19.95 camera to help him record ideas for his prints. Soon he abandoned printmaking altogether.

DeCarava's intuitive gifts were noticed almost immediately. In 1950, New York's Museum of Modern Art purchased three photographs. Soon the museum, which was then perhaps the most prestigious photographic venue in the country, began exhibiting his works. In 1952, DeCarava became the first African American photographer to win the celebrated John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. The award enabled him, for the first time, to take leave from his job and photograph full-time. The results were a remarkable series of intimate scenes of Harlem—of its streets and interiors, of its men, women, and children—that Museum of Modern Art curator Peter Galassi later declared filled "a gaping hole in the world's image of Harlem: its image of itself." In 1955, 140 of these images were published with text by Harlem poet Langston Hughes* in the highly successful *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, the first photography book to focus on life in a black community.

The Art Institute's *Man Lying Down, Subway Steps*, 1965, exemplifies the style of DeCarava's earlier Harlem series. Here, he distills the hustle of city life into the silence of a sole encounter, a single image. Melded together is the personal with the social, a deeply felt intimacy with concern for the other. The image is both sorrowful as well as sensuous, with its sprawling, solitary figure enveloped in—indeed barely emerging from—DeCarava's characteristic rich, deep shadows.

DeCarava insists, however, that his photographs are not about darkness, but about light—without which we could see nothing at all. Using whatever light is available, the photographer captured his images with a hand-held
35mm camera—the instrument that relied on intuition and instant response, needing no further planning than an extra roll of film. "When you find it at the right moment," declared DeCarava, "it is not only particular, it is universal."

Also seized at that specific moment when, as DeCarava said, "expression reaches its zenith" are the extraordinary images from the series on modern jazz that the photographer began in 1956. Harlem was the birthplace of modern jazz during the 1940s, just as DeCarava was developing his photographic style. This newest evolution of the quintessentially African American music of jazz was called be-bop. Created by such legends as Charlie "Bird" Parker (1920-1955) and Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993), the essence of be-bop was not entertainment, but self-expression, plumbing the soul. DeCarava's celebration of this musical revolution—of musicians, jam sessions, fans, and clubs—are some of the richest and most sensitive images ever taken.

In *Dancers, New York*, two men jive onto the dance floor at a social club in Harlem. Their interlocking figures almost, but not quite, blend into the darkness of the background of the cavernous hall. Exuding a kind of modern beauty, their postures are both awkward and hip, supple and graceful. DeCarava captures the dancers not at the moment of climax, of dance pyrotechnics, but at that off-beat, untimed instance when their bodies most reveal the new music of be-bop.

With its reliance on spontaneity, intuition, and the immediate moment, be-bop resembles DeCarava's picture-taking. His quickness of eye echoes a jazz musician's spontaneity. Just as there could never be a wrong note when Parker, say, jammed with Dizzy Gillespie, brilliantly improvising as they played along, so too does DeCarava's composition have that quirky sense of something instantly invented, off balance yet right.

Yet DeCarava had difficulty with this image. The two dancers represented for him "a terrible torment." He goes on to explain: "What they actually are is two black male dancers who dance in the manner of an older generation of black vaudeville performers." Although black bands played in these Harlem nightclubs, most of the clubs served only white audiences. These dancers were pure entertainment, a kind of floorshow. DeCarava continued: "The problem comes because their figures remind me so much of the real life experience of blacks in their need to put themselves in an awkward position ... to demean themselves in order to survive."

The artist in DeCarava prevailed. "And yet," he declared, "there is something in the figures not about that; something in the figures that is very creative, that is very real and very black in the finest sense of the word." Art Institute curator Colin Westerbeck interpreted further: "The man in the lead, with that kind of amazing herky jerky motion, contorting himself into
the shape that's needed to keep his balance, is a surrogate for DeCarava himself—the man with the camera, sinewy, muscling his way through the crowd, taking the pictures as he goes, stretching himself to whatever is needed to make the images come out right.”

While DeCarava was immersed in his jazz series in 1958, he quit his job as a commercial artist to begin freelance photography for leading national magazines, including *Time, Life, Newsweek,* and *Sports Illustrated.* Since 1975, he has also taught photography at Hunter College, where he is Distinguished Professor of Art of the City of New York. His work is in such New York collections as The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., the Atlanta University museum, and The Art Institute of Chicago. A major travelling *retrospective* organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York was on view at the Art Institute in 1996 and travels through 1999.
Roy DeCarava

1. DeCarava photographed Harlem through its people—“...going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlors, churches, etc.” In the spirit of The Sweet Flypaper of Life, ask students to photograph their neighborhood through its people and compose poems to accompany the photographs.

2. Jazz music inspired DeCarava and many other artists discussed in this manual. While looking at works by such painters as Lawrence, Motley, and Bearden, play jazz and ask students to note similarities between the visual arts and music in composition and mood.

Have students discuss photography as an art form. Where does the artistry lie? In the eye and mind of the photographer? In the capabilities of the camera and the dark room? Have students debate its validity as an art form compared to that of painting or sculpture.