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## **Photog snapped teen life in '50s**

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You can almost smell the Brylcreem in Joseph Sterling's photographs of Chicago teenagers in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

They are a time machine back to an era of drive-ins, sock hops and soda fountains, filled with boys who tried to look like James Dean, and girls who wanted to be Natalie Wood.

World War II was over. Employment was high, and so was disposable income. As sure as Elvis had a pelvis, U.S. teens were becoming an economic and cultural force.

The photos in his book *The Age of Adolescence* are a mix of "West Side Story" and "American Graffiti." There are leather jackets. Ratted hair. Ducktails. Cigarettes. Acne. All displayed by the kind of in-your-face greasers whose lives were celebrated in a musical that traces its origins to Taft High School: "Grease."

Some of the youths look challengingly at the camera, like wannabe JDs -- 1950s slang for juvenile delinquents. In fact, Mr. Sterling was boy-handled when he shot some of the pictures.

"He got roughed up, and then they turned around and gave him a couple of dollars to bring back pictures" of themselves, said Paul Berlanga of Chicago's Stephen Daiter Gallery, which carries his work.

Mr. Sterling, 74, died Monday at Advocate Condell Medical Center, Libertyville.

He took the photos that would become his masterwork when he was barely out of his teens himself. "He was only two or three years older than a lot of these people. He fit in," Berlanga said.

Mr. Sterling shot the pictures in Chicago and his native Texas from 1959 to 1964. They made up his master's thesis at Chicago's Institute of Design, said Art Institute curator Elizabeth Siegel.

After his school years, he did commercial, industrial and business photography. So he was delighted when the adolescent photos caught the attention of Greybull Press -- nearly half a century after they were snapped. Publisher Roman Alonso was entranced when he happened across a vintage catalog of Mr. Sterling's work. Greybull tracked him down and put together Mr. Sterling's first book in 2005, when he was 68.

Mr. Sterling came to Chicago to study after one of his teachers in El Paso showed him photos by Harry Callahan, an instructor at the Institute of Design, said photographer Joseph Jachna.

The Institute was "the single most influential school of photography in the U.S.," Berlanga said.

Mr. Sterling studied with Callahan and Aaron Siskind, "among the first artist-photographers in the Midwest," said filmmaker/photographer Bob Tanner. "They really looked at photography as an art form."

Mr. Sterling's shots are remarkable for their intimacy, experts say. "You know how these greasers could be," said Tanner. "But you know, he was a big guy, and he was persistent, and after a while, they left him alone. He just became a fly on the wall."

"Once you see Joe's pictures, they'll be embedded in you," said Jachna.

A famous print, dubbed "Legs," shows teen boys looming over girls at the beach. One of his shots of adolescent youths appeared on the cover of Aperture magazine in 1961, Siegel said.

Many of the photos were snapped at the beach, and they have a tactile quality that makes the viewer feel sand on skin. "He loved the beach because people were relaxed there, and you could mingle, and you could get all kinds of angles and emotions," Berlanga said.

His work is in New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and George Eastman House.

He is survived by his wife, Deborah. A funeral service is scheduled at 11 a.m. today at Kristan Funeral Home, 219 W. Maple, Mundelein. Burial will be in Ivanhoe Cemetery.

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