



# FINDING VIVIAN MAIER

USA 2013, 84 MIN

JEFF MALOOF AND CHARLIE SISKEL

WINCHESTER  
FILM SOCIETY  
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AND PLANETARIUM

Vivian Maier (1926-2009), a nanny for much of her life, never exhibited her work, and made few prints. She photographed the street, mostly in Chicago, but also in New York and elsewhere.

Her images, from the 1950's and 1960's, feel like a localized glimpse of Robert Frank's *The Americans*, another take on that era's rich street photography—city boys playing tag in an alley, cops hauling off a drunk on Christmas Eve, haughty Wasps preening in front of the New York Public Library, and many thousands more. Her pictures, once Mr. Maloof looked at them, revealed a remarkable eye. But a 2009 obituary in a Chicago newspaper, placed by children who had been in her care decades before, simply mourned a suburban nanny. Parallel stories emerged—of a solitary pioneering vision and of a fiercely private woman caring for children.

*Finding Vivian Maier*, one of five films nominated for Best Documentary, retraces Mr. Maloof's Maier-ology and revisits the children (now middle-aged) who were Maier's charges. Maier even worked for Phil Donahue, then Chicago's reigning TV celebrity. "They laughed at Picasso, too," Mr. Donahue shrugs. "I just wanted clean socks."

French by origin, she was tall, ungraceful, and plain—a somber female Jacques Tati, standing above and apart from the lives that she observed. Maier's instrument was a two-lens Rolleiflex, a camera which requires looking down into lenses held at chest-level. She wore it around her neck like a stethoscope.

Her stealth street pictures relied on subjects being unaware of being photographed, but it was hard to be invisible or discreet as an oddly attired tall woman with a Rolleiflex. Then there were the self-portraits, often tricks with mirrors or shop-windows, playful and conceptual, with a poker-faced Maier looking straight ahead. The reticent woman seemed most comfortable in the picture frame, provided that she was the one who controlled the shutter.

Maier represented "the democratizing and addictive natures of photography," which helps explain her popularity now, says Marvin Heiferman in *Vivian Maier: A Photographer Found*, the latest book on the enigmatic artist. "The same way that we take pictures one after another compulsively, and let them sit on our phones—she did the same thing in an analog version of that," he said, "She's become a role model or patron saint of a certain photographic way of moving through the world."

The pictures are also selling, from \$2,000 to \$12,000. These are far from Diane Arbus or Cindy Sherman prices, but Maier's images attracted all sorts of new buyers, said Manhattan dealer Howard Greenberg. In 2009, Mr. Maloof, with Charlie Siskel (nephew of film critic Gene Siskel), began the self-financed documentary, a four-year project. Made for some \$300,000, the film took off at film festivals worldwide, eventually generating \$1.5 million at the US box office, and the Oscar nomination.

David D'Arcy, *Observer*

**WRITING CREDITS:** Jeff Maloof and Charlie Siskel **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Lyle Vincent

**CAST:** *Vivian Maier* Herself ( archive footage) | *John Maloof* Himself - Narrator | *Remainder of cast* - 'as themselves'

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