

film



Matt Dillon, 1989



An arrest, 1992



Cochise, president of L.E.S. street gang Satan Sinner Nomads, 1992



Mr. Fashion, Pyramid Club, 1986



Tangela, Pyramid Club, 1986



Dixie and Peter Kwaloff, aka Sun PK, Pyramid Club, 1986

# RA RA RIOT

**IN THE NEW DOCUMENTARY CAPTURED, THIRTY YEARS OF CLAYTON PATTERSON'S REPORTAGE-STYLE PHOTOGRAPHS AND FILM CLIPS BRING THE L.E.S. BACK TO ITS FORMER ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES GLORY**

If you listen to Clayton Patterson, the Lower East Side owes its recent history as a hub of alternative arts (and capital of the American fringe) to cheap rent. The economic argument isn't anything new, of course, but Patterson makes it sound convincing: the 61-year-old expat Canadian artist and photographer has been living on Essex Street for the better part of the last three decades, compiling an image library of the neighborhood during its cultural glory days. His archives are so extensive, he could be considered the unofficial historian of the L.E.S.—which he is in *Captured*, a new documentary out on DVD this spring.

Patterson and his partner Elisa Rensaa (the two have never married, though they've been together since 1972) moved to the neighborhood in 1979, living on the Bowery in the same building as Keith Haring, where they found work with their landlord fixing up apartments around the area. The point was to avoid having a day job, which, back then, was doable: the city was broke;

rent was dirt cheap; and the L.E.S. had been ceded to poor immigrants, junkies, the homeless, and, naturally, artists—some of whom were a combination of all four. Patterson notes that the streets below Houston and east of Clinton were particularly dangerous, and that the night he and Rensaa moved into the building where they live today, they watched a man get shot across the street. The upside was that for residents—many of whom were in some kind of creative field—the L.E.S. meant community and a sense of extended family.

But, like S.E. Hinton observed, that was then, this is now. Gentrification has brought the neighborhood \$3,000-per-month studios and a slew of boutique hotels, turning CBGB into a John Varvatos flagship and a museum of sorts commemorating the raw energy the area once had. Though Patterson doesn't miss the drug dealers, he says the influx of new money has smoothed over the L.E.S.'s rougher edges, leaving a bland homogeneity in its wake. "The muse has moved on," he explains. (Patterson's echoing the old—and questionable—adage that New York was better just before you moved here.) And, as demonstrated by *Captured*, he's got the authority to stand behind his words.

Codirected by Dan Levin, Ben Solomon, and Jenner Furst, the film follows Patterson and Rensaa as they themselves document the subcultures of the time. From his photographs of street kids and drug dealers to those taken during drag performances at the Pyramid Club on Avenue A and hard-core shows in the late '80s, the documentary uses Patterson as a foil for the history of the neighborhood. "He'd never been a part of the mainstream," Furst says. "But the point of what we were trying to get across is how he went from being a voyeur to being a provocateur. For him, everything changed on August 6, 1988." Patterson agrees: "That's when everything sort of came together. For me, it was a magical time."

That evening marked the start of the Tompkins Square Park riot, when police charged a crowd of people protesting an

ordinance that gave the previously twenty-four-hour park a curfew of one a.m. At the time, Tompkins Square was notorious as an open-air heroin market, and hundreds of the homeless had set up camp there; neighborhood residents viewed the raid as police brutality. They had the evidence to prove their claims: Patterson and Rensaa spent the evening videotaping the riot, winding up with hours of footage that landed Patterson in the national spotlight, with guest appearances on *Oprah*, *Geraldo*, and CNN, among others. (His tagline at the time: "Little Brother is watching Big Brother.") Patterson's subsequent fame transformed him into a de facto social activist—and made him a personal enemy of the cops—especially as he continued to hammer the point home on his Manhattan Neighborhood Network show, *Clayton Patterson Presents*.

The documentary hinges on footage of the riot (accompanied by songs from A.R.E. Weapons and composer Phillip Quinaz), but also on the filmmakers' understanding of Patterson as an outsider artist who stumbled into the role of historian. Levin and Solomon grew up in New York and watched the city change firsthand; their memories and Patterson's photos—the archive is estimated to rest comfortably in the one hundred thousand-plus range—form a poignant vision of a pre-Giuliani New York. "When he dies, who knows what's going to happen to all those photographs?" Furst says. "We don't want to see them thrown out. There's a reason why this is our first film, why we made him the subject of this movie. We want to be the arbiters of his story. With a little luck, they'll make Clayton's house into a museum. But someone's got to make him understood first."

**Jonathan Durbin**

Downtown Manhattan, 1986–1992  
Photography Clayton Patterson

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