

# CLAYTON PATTERSON

by Erika F. Allen  
Photos by Adam Wallacavage

As Clayton Patterson sits back to reminisce, his appreciation for New York's old downtown scene is apparent—and so is his disappointment with how hugely times have changed. He is a jack-of-all-trades: historian, photographer, sculptor, activist and collector of all things Lower East Side, and he is one of the last little bits of authenticity left in the neighborhood. Dressed head to toe in dingy black, Patterson wears one of his custom designed hats that were once all the rage with everyone from Hollywood types like Matt Dillon to hip-hop groups like the Fat Boys. He talks about the highs—literally—and lows of his neighborhood, and it is clear that Patterson respects the potential of today's LES superstars. Above all, he still has a drive to remain a part of whatever culture is left in downtown Manhattan.

Patterson is not a native New Yorker. Originally from Alberta, Canada, he moved with his wife Elsa to the city in the late 1970s after just one visit years earlier. Patterson resided on the LES and showed his work mostly in SoHo, where his art enjoyed some acclaim on the gallery circuit. He compares the SoHo scene of that era to high school. "All about sex and drugs and being cool," Patterson says. "You can see the devastation. A lot of those people who it seemed like were really making it ended up dying of AIDS or something. I think in the end the whole scene was pretty deadly."

So Patterson defected completely to the LES, and the neighborhood should thank its lucky syringes: he brought with him not just culture, but justice.

For one, Patterson became an activist for the legalization of tattoos, an art that was outlawed in New York in 1961, forcing New York artists to toil in the underground while artists on the West Coast—where tattooing was legal—became famous. Today, as president of the New York Tattoo Society, an organization that convinced Mayor Giuliani to legalize the practice in 1997, Patterson helps to facilitate the city's annual New York Tattoo Convention.

Patterson twirls his long white beard with more excitement than usual when he talks about his other activism: his video documentation of the LES. The East Village in the 1980s was ridden with gangs, drugs and violence—and the police were notoriously corrupt. Patterson remembers this era as a time of tension and resentment, when young minorities were locked up for drug offenses, while police turned a blind eye to the habits of their peers and wealthy Wall Street types. Benjamin Ward was New York's police commissioner at the time. Under Ward,

it was widely reported that police officers were charged with stealing and selling drugs, and illegally using stun guns to torture suspects.

It was in this environment that Patterson spent his nights filming the junkies and transvestites who littered the streets and loitered around The Pyramid Club. He caught footage of the Tompkins Square Park Police Riot of August 1988, and turned this into an infamous three hour and thirty-three minute (333—half of 666) documentary. With a discrete handheld video camera, Patterson made this "half evil" video that documented the type of police abuse that tore apart a neighborhood teetering between self-destruction and gentrification.

In a 1999 *New York Times* article, photojournalist John Penley described Patterson's archives as "the most complete library in existence documenting the East Village and the Lower East Side." Patterson's footage shows journalists and civilians being clubbed and kicked by cops. Several court cases have used this footage to identify authorities charged with brutalities against civilians.

## WILLY WONKA OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Patterson's Clayton Gallery on Essex Street feels like Willy Wonka's chocolate factory—it appears not to have opened its gates in years. This is where Patterson shows his own work, and the art of some of NYC's best names. "In order to get in here you kind of have to figure it out," he says. "It's like an underground club. If you want to get in at four in the morning, you either know how to ring the bell or you don't. It's not for everybody."

The city's finest graffiti stars have scribbled across the pages of Patterson's gallery guest book. This space is where he features his "Outlaw Collection" of heroin bags found on LES streets, hundreds of graffiti stickers peeled from doors and light posts and photos of neighborhood kids. These artifacts represent the criminal culture that predominated the East Village during the '80s. These days, memories of the LES' gritty history are drowned out by the maze of high rises erected in the last couple of decades. But, as Patterson says, "These streets were drug streets." Dope bags were emblazoned with symbols from different distributors, with names like DOA and Poison. "When you see these," Patterson says, "all of a sudden you realize this is a brand."

A display case in the back of the gallery is reserved for Patterson's one-of-a-kind baseball hats. He makes these caps with his wife, each personalized and embroidered with drawings along the sides. They use an ancient machine, purchased at an auction back when places in the garment district began to go out of business as production moved overseas.

These caps, designed to fit better than those worn by major leaguers, became sought-after fashion items when celebrities like Mick Jagger and Jack Nicholson began to wear them in 1986. Patterson smiles slightly behind a mess of white facial hair and muses, "So I guess you could say I've been in the fashion industry as well."





#### WHAT MAKES A MOVEMENT

Patterson sees the old spirit of the LES in the district's fashion industry of today. "[Designers] are making the transition and overlapping in a lot of the same ways I do," he says. "But, they do it on a business level. I am not a businessperson. I admire these people because I can see that they are making the adjustment."

But in the next breath, Patterson continues: "You know, it's possible to kill a culture. Money can kill a culture. There was never another movement in Rome like the Renaissance. It's possible that this shit could be over. Bohemia is dead. Done. Finished. No question at all about that."

For a cultural movement to happen, Patterson says, "All it takes is a group of like-minded people and the ability to communicate and take over and maintain space. A lot of what these movements come out of is the hanging out. The boredom and the bullshit: that's the growing period. That's where things happen." He continues, "But the thing that's happened is the decentralization of location with the computer. Interconnection all over the world."

Patterson remembers his original home in Western Canada as frontier country. Back when he first came to NYC, the LES had a similar feeling. "I liked the rough and tumble aspect," he says. "[It] was like coming back to the Wild West."

The LES's outlaw aspects have become sterile with time. But Patterson tries desperately to preserve it, and give the district a sense of history. "Madonna, Jackson Pollack—these people came to the Lower East Side to learn things and get energies," he says. "It's almost like an orchard, where people come in and take these parts and take them somewhere else. That one little piece of fruit that they have from here, they turn into a whole career. But they never bring it back to the neighborhood."

Patterson's books, *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side* and *Resistance: A Radical Political History of the Lower East Side*, are meant to give the neighborhood a sense of its history, documenting the LES's essential role in the history of avant-garde culture.

**IN A NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, PHOTOJOURNALIST JOHN PENLEY DESCRIBED PATTERSONS ARCHIVES AS THE MOST COMPLETE LIBRARY IN EXISTENCE DOCUMENTING THE EAST VILLAGE AND THE LOWER EAST SIDE.**

And recently, the consummate documentarian became the subject. Two filmmakers, Ben Solomon and Daniel Levin made a documentary on Patterson under the working title *Captured: A Lower East Side Story*. The film was submitted for consideration to the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival.

The few purists who remain in the gentrified and changing landscape of the Lower East Side can rest easy. Clayton Patterson has captured the gritty essence of the neighborhood's history to make sure we will never forget.