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The Lower East Side, Up Close and Personal

By John Strausbaugh

If you have attended any public gathering on the Lower East Side or in the East Village over the last 25 years -- a punk rock gig, a community board meeting, a poetry slam, a Santeria service, the infamous Tompkins Square Park riot in 1988 -- chances are you're somewhere in Clayton Patterson's archives. He was the bearish man with the billy goat beard and the biker fashion sense mingling with -- but never blending into -- the crowd, observing everything through a still or video camera.

As obsessive as he is ubiquitous, Mr. Patterson has taken hundreds of thousands of photographs and thousands of hours of videotape in his adopted neighborhood. Where Jakob Riis and Weegee photographed the area "as a project or a job," Mr. Patterson said with a smile in a recent interview at his home on the Lower East Side, "I do it as a disease."

He can't stop, even after more than a dozen arrests by camera-shy police officers. He has amassed a huge day-by-day visual history of the area, told mainly through unpretentious portraits of its myriad and diverse faces: tenement kids and homeless people, poets and politicians, drug dealers and drag queens, rabbis and santeros, beat cops, graffiti taggers, hookers, junkies, punks, anarchists, mystics and crackpots.

"It's not an archive of the rich and cool," Mr. Patterson noted. "It's about the tragic, glorious, sometimes depressing history of the Lower East Side."

A number of Mr. Patterson's snapshot-casual portraits appear in a hefty book, "Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side," published this month by 7 Stories Press. Edited by Mr. Patterson, Paul Bartlett and Urania Mylonas, the collection of 100 interviews and personal essays documents the neighborhood's long and vital role in avant-garde and independent film and video.

Born into a working-class family in Calgary, Alberta, in 1948, Mr. Patterson studied printmaking and came to New York City in 1979 to take a job in a commercial print shop. He and Elsa Rensaa, his partner for more than 30 years, came first to Brooklyn, "where we lived for probably three weeks," he recalled. "We just found it too suburban."

They moved to Broome Street near the Bowery, where their neighbors included a pre-fame Keith Haring, then to the Bowery itself. In 1983, "after applying to 42 banks," they managed to secure a mortgage on 161 Essex Street, a small building between Houston and Stanton Streets. They moved into the second floor, over a Hispanic dressmaker.

"Our first night here we looked out the window and saw a guy get shot across the street," Mr. Patterson said. "Very few white people came below Houston Street. It was about at the level of Avenue D in terms of who lived here, the drugs, the violence."

Drug dealers and their crews ran the streets in those days. Mr. Clayton's archive includes a large collection of empty heroin bags he found as he walked the neighborhood, each stamped with a logo and brand name identifying the dealer who sold it -- evocative names like Body Bag, Redrum, China Cat and Hellraiser.

In 1986, Mr. Patterson opened the storefront Clayton Gallery, where he demonstrated little affinity for the nearby SoHo art scene. "I found it too conformist and careerist," he said. "I've always been more interested in visions and ideas that are outside the corporate art mainstream."

Over two decades, he has shown work by a Hasidic Jew and a Hell's Angel, tattoo artists and a Santeria priest, the leader of the Satan Sinner Nomads gang and an occasional underground celebrity like the Beat writer Herbert Huncke or the Warhol superstar Taylor Mead.

Probably of most interest to locals was what neighborhood kids called the Wall of Fame. Every day for years, Hispanic youths from the tenements

and public housing came by to have Mr. Patterson snap their photos and display them in the gallery's window. There was always a gaggle of kids out front, tapping the window and laughing: "Mira! Mira!" Despite the roughness of the neighborhood in those years, Mr. Patterson's building was never vandalized (though he cheerfully agreed to have the front door tagged with graffiti), and he and Ms. Rensaa were never bothered. They were the Wall of Fame couple.

Those kids are gone, pushed out over the past decade by the inexorable encroachment of million-dollar condos and hipster bars. They are faces in Mr. Patterson's archive now. You can flip through the photos and watch them grow up -- and then they vanish.

"These are real people," he said. "But until you see the photographs, you won't even remember they were here."

In 1988, Mr. Patterson began using his cameras not just to document events but also to participate in them, when he and Ms. Rensaa shot three and a half hours of videotape showing uniformed police officers attacking political protesters at Tompkins Square Park. Their startling tape was instrumental in spurring subsequent police department reforms and helped a number of victims win lawsuits against the city.

Mr. Patterson notes with some bitterness that he never made a dime from the tape. What it made him was a lot of enemies on the force. After 1988, there wasn't an officer in the area who didn't seem to know and usually dislike Mr. Patterson, who developed an uncanny knack for showing up with his camera at, it seemed, every drug bust, tenant eviction and political rally.

In 1992, Mr. Patterson said, a police officer used his baton to knock out a few of his teeth for filming a confrontation with squatters at Avenue D and East. Fourth Street. He was arrested 13 times over the years "just for taking pictures," he said, resulting in one misdemeanor conviction for obstructing governmental administration. Mr. Patterson fired back with a few lawsuits for unlawful arrest and violation of his civil rights; he lost two, and a third is under appeal.

Frustrated and exhausted after 15 years of such confrontations, Mr. Patterson is looking to quieter pursuits. "It's now time for me to mine the archives," he said.

"Captured" is one result. Although the book is studded with household names from Ginsberg, Kerouac and Warhol to Jarmusch, Buscemi and Ramone, Mr. Patterson's concern, characteristically, was to highlight unsung heroes and local legends. He is now compiling a similar book on the history of radical political movements in the neighborhood.

"History" is the key word, he said. "For over a hundred years, the Lower East Side was a magic crucible where people were inspired to great art and ideas. The Lower East Side probably changed the history of America five hundred times."

In just the last decade, he believes, he has seen the end of that era, as soaring real estate prices have largely emptied the area of its artists, bohemians, radicals and immigrants. The third annual Howl! Festival of East Village Arts, now through Sunday, seems to him as much a nostalgia trip as a celebration of current artistic and intellectual life.

"What we have here now is bars and college students vomiting on the streets," Mr. Patterson sighs. "Nothing will rise out of it. It's all vacuous and lacking substance. When I go out my door now, I don't see anyone I know. I see the loss of a community."