

# Capturing Clayton

words by Gerry Visco

Being a renegade has its costs. Photographer, writer, outlaw historian and activist Clayton Patterson could tell you all about it. Apart from having several teeth knocked out by the police during a demonstration, being arrested 13 times, and his stint in a jail cell for refusing to give up the infamous 3 hour and 33 minute videotape he took filming the notorious Tompkins Square Park Police riots in 1988, he has also been overcommitted to activism and involvement in his community on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Over the years, he's documented his neighborhood during its height of raw creativity, with its population of artists and eccentrics, through thousands of photographs, videos, and artifacts. After a lifetime of capturing the denizens of downtown, Patterson himself has been captured by three twenty-something filmmakers in a new 92-minute documentary entitled *Captured*, which is being previewed worldwide prior to its official release later this year.

Directors/producers Ben Solomon and Dan Levin, along with editor/producer Jenner Furst, have spent countless hours during the last three years making this film on a shoestring budget. The trio is currently promoting the film, with the help of executive producer Marc Levin, Levin's father and award-winning producer and director of the feature film *Slam*. The budding auteurs began work on *Captured* immediately upon graduating. Solomon recalls the beginning stages. "During our senior year at college, we approached Clayton, after spending a lot of time with him—we'd always talked to him about his plans for the archives." Of course, it was a challenge getting Clayton to agree to work with them at first. "He's protective of his material," Solomon explains. "There wasn't an outright no from Clayton, but he was a bit apprehensive. It took some coaxing and intellectual massaging to work everything out." *Captured* dramatizes an exciting and freewheeling time when they themselves were mere infants, and demonstrates how much New York City has changed in only a few decades. They shot the film with a Panasonic DVX 100 A, incorporating much of the original footage lensed by Patterson himself on the streets of the Lower East Side.

The young filmmakers were drawn to Patterson for many reasons. He is quite the personality in his biker get-up, wiry



beard, and sporting the skull caps he and partner Elsa Rensaa design. His artist's pulse has always been on the youth culture, photographing subjects the filmmakers were interested in, such as graffiti, art, and a wide range of characters from the streets of their childhood—drug dealers, rabbis, hookers, poets, and drag queens. Patterson gives Solomon, Levin, and Furst plenty of credit for sticking to the project. "They had tremendous patience, spending hours and hours tweaking, shaving off minuscule amounts to make it fit together. They had determination, vitality, and strength. They didn't do things the easy way. It was pretty heroic."

Patterson's videos and photographs have preserved the imagery of a neighborhood whose individuality is rapidly evaporating thanks to escalating rents and over-development. Meanwhile, he continues to document the remaining residents and places through photography, videography, and by editing a series of books that provide a rich history of the Lower East Side. According to Levin, "Clayton's photos and videos allowed us to see the real New York. When we showed the film to 16-year-old kids, with the way 8<sup>th</sup> street used to look, they'd say, 'Holy shit, isn't that a Gap now, isn't that a Starbucks?'" Patterson has dedicated his life to his depiction of the heady creativity and lawlessness of the Lower East Side during the last 30 years. The irony is that just as his beloved community is being transformed into a bland enclave peopled by yuppies and wannabe hipsters, his work is finally being recognized.