

Jose “Cochise” Quiles

My Encounter with a Legend

I first took notice of Clayton Patterson—the man who wore black, resembled a biker and sported a menacing skullcap—photographing and documenting the chaotic encampment scene in Tompkins Square Park, in the summer of 1988, right after the infamous Tompkins Square Park police riot.

I later discovered that Clayton, along with his wife, artist Elsa Rensaa, fashioned and produced these classic hats at their place the Outlaw Art Museum. I had just been released on parole for an assault charge and was looking to form my own street gang and leave my mark on the streets of the Lower East Side. Gangs and crime were all I'd ever known. I had invited prospects from midtown, the South Bronx and Brooklyn to join my newly formed Satan's Sinners Nomads street gang, and we all met up at the notorious Tompkins Square Park. Eventually, the park would become our rendezvous and place of recruitment.

Our membership continued to multiply, and when the opportunity arose for our gang to inhabit the upper half of a newly renovated brownstone occupied by squatters, we took it. It was through Stacy—a neighborhood punk-rocker junkie and the girlfriend of one of the Satan's Sinners, Rocco—that we gained possession of her half of the tenement apartments. One day, for some reason, Stacy decided to badmouth Clayton Patterson and classify him as a snitch in cahoots with the NYPD. According to Stacy, Clayton was selling out the dwellers of the Tompkins Square Park tent city by secretly handing over some of the photographs and video footage he had shot during the park protests and thus gaining favor with law enforcement. When I heard this, I knew she was fabricating the whole story. But we had to make sure.

I decided to take a few Sinners to investigate the matter. We were astounded to find out that Clayton lived in a museum on Essex Street between Houston and Stanton Streets. We noticed that the top half of the building was decorated with exquisite skulls and other strange and phantomlike figures, obviously painted by him. Below was a large window with numerous photographs of smiling children and other neighborhood locals, neatly displayed on a board. I even saw one of

Spider, a dweller of the tent city and a member of the Satan's Sinners Nomads. The front door was covered in graffiti, the symbolism of the streets, and as I rang the doorbell and banged on the door, I wondered what sort of activity went on in there. The door flew open, and standing there before us stood the man himself, dressed in black and sporting his signature skullcap.

I asked if he was Clayton Patterson—though I already knew—and if he was sharing his photos of park dwellers with the cops. Clayton, unmoved by our presence, answered, “Not sure where you're getting your information from, but I can tell you I shot the riot tape that helped get the night classified as a police riot. I have been arrested and beaten a bunch of times for documenting police brutality and no, I do not work for the police.” As Clayton spoke, something in my gut told me that he was telling the truth. When we left, we headed toward Tompkins Square Park and asked Spider and other park dwellers about their relationship with Clayton Patterson and his work. The answers were all positive. Numerous tent-city dwellers spoke of how Clayton's photos and documentation helped their cause and the movement for the homeless and anti-gentrification activities.

I came to the conclusion that Stacy wanted us to hurt an innocent man whose work had blessed the community many times over. Rocco was ordered to cease further relations with Stacy, and she faded away. To this day, no one knows her whereabouts.

In the process of time, Clayton Patterson and I became good friends. We gave him full access to the Satan's Sinners Nomads, and his documentation of the Sinners eventually opened some doors for us. When Clayton found out about my interest in art, he encouraged me to pursue it and invited me to participate in some exhibitions where I was able to sell some artwork. He introduced me to Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., one of the founders of the Folk Art Museum, in New York City. Hemphill purchased some of my work. In time, through Clayton's Outlaw Art Museum, I would meet all kinds of people, including Charles Gatewood, Bill Heine, Lionel Ziprin, David Peel, Roy Sundance (former managing editor of the *Outlaw Biker* magazine), G.G. Allin and the

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Murder Junkies, Anne Ardolino, Thom deVita, Michael “the Pope of Dope” Cezar, Thom Corn, Aaron Rose and many others.

I was fascinated by Clayton’s style of art. I discovered that he worked in a variety of mediums, such as painting, etching, drawing, and sculpture. Clayton’s sculpture style is similar to so-called outsider or folk art. He incorporates found objects and vibrantly paints them and creates great wonders with them. His embroidered masterpieces are legendary. His embroidered caps have been worn by celebrities, including Matt Dillon and Rob Reiner.

Unfortunately, there would come a time where I would find myself in prison again, this time for two attempted murders. I was sentenced to a 12-to-24-year prison stint and did 18 years of that. But even in prison, I never forgot Clayton’s words to me just before I was sent up north to Sing Sing. He said, “Cochise, don’t forget, do art. Don’t forget to do art!” Through the years, I worked toward change and participated in all sorts of programs and eventually got my GED and peer counseling certificates from the University of the State of New York, the Education Department, and became a teacher’s aide. I worked to reach gang members incarcerated in the facility where I was doing time. But I also did art that cried out against gang violence. Thus I never forgot the words of wisdom from a legendary artist from the Lower East Side: “Just do ART.”