

Rivington Starchild

Rivington Street: A Star Is Born

I was born in Queens, NYC, in 1984. When I was nine, after I became accustomed to brand-name cereals, Saturday morning cartoons and American holidays, my stepfather took my mother, my newborn sister and me to live in the Dominican Republic. Unable to fully grasp the move, I complied with my surroundings and wore my first pair of khaki pants and a blue button-down to my first day of Colegio La Zurza.

This was my new home—at least, it was what I was being told was my home. Within a few weeks, I felt like an alien. The jokes had new nuances. Spanish, which was the only language spoken in our home, was never the language I preferred to express what toys I wanted for Christmas or what TV dinner I preferred. I had been torn away from a culture that paid loads of advertising dollars to make sure that a kid like myself knew a golden arch meant I need to eat, now; but I no longer had McDonald's.

There began my infatuation with America and my yearning for anything that would identify me as a GRIN-GO. I visited NYC during summer breaks and Christmas vacations, it becoming more evident during each ride back to JFK that I was not supposed to leave. I was meant to be in the Dirty Old Town. It also became evident that I was not just an American, but more: I was a New Yorker. My New York City was Puff Daddy and Biggie, Uptowns (Air Force Ones), blow-out haircuts, Mobb Deep, Nas, Wu-Tang, Vons, fire pumps and Mountain Gears. From my new island, I closely monitored every trend, every new rap record, every Source and Vibe magazine, all to make sure I was up-to-date with the happenings of the city. This developed into a deeper love for my city and a devotion that to this very day grows vast and deep as I turn any corner in any remote city of the world.

When I met Clayton Patterson, I went to him with a tall order, in search of my real father. Clayton, based on what I had told him about my dad, thought he might have photographed him at some point during the early '80s. I was almost sure to not find a photo of "el Guli" (my father's alias). Big Dominican drug dealers wouldn't be willing to get their photos taken for any cultural

archive. Rivington Street was where my father made most of his earnings. He would point out the street name to my mother and say "My kid will be a star: his name is going to be Rivington." El Guli was murdered six months after I was born. Clayton passed me a few photo albums and his *Front Door Book*. I marveled at the quantity of profiles Clayton had shot over the years. Girls in Cross Colours, hoop earrings and dark lipstick. Dudes in Polo and Nautica logo Ts, Tommy Hilfiger jeans and Eastland boots. This was the New York I once felt I belonged to. These kids were there to walk those streets in style, and Clayton was there to capture it all. The idea of finding my father in one of these photos still remains a possibility, since I've only managed to scratch the surface of Clayton's archive, but my New York dreams were fulfilled immediately.

In Clayton I found someone who (like myself) was fascinated by the particularities of the city's gangsters, its squatters and cross-dressers. I found someone with the eye to capture the subtleties that made our experience as New Yorkers different from that of residents of any other major city.

Some years after this initial meeting, Clayton and I reconnected. I have a band, DAMEHT, that is dedicated to what New York City represents. Our idea to embody the city's seminal cultural movements was also a very tall order. We needed not just to manipulate the process but to capture it in our style, our songs, our daily routine of loitering and coffee drinking. We needed to be as Clayton was during his police-riot tapings, present and rolling. Clayton has become our guide to evoking the city's spirit. Clayton became a guru/mentor and, most important, he became one of my dearest friends. An outlaw artist and friend to the misfit. On the other hand, Clayton thrived and fueled his purposes. Sitting in his storefront at 161 Essex, I have gotten to know Clayton Patterson through endless conversations on art history, outlaw culture, Lower East Side happenings and what drove him to dedicate his life to documenting this particular 'hood. Clayton speaks about contribution as no one I have ever met. He is a contribution to the people of the Lower East Side.

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Through working with Clayton, I have explored a type of originality that redefined my previous ideas of the elusive term. Through meeting his circle of friends and collaborators, I became aware that everything that I had thought was my very own brilliant idea was common ground that we all shared. In fact, his circle would help me refine my new approach to an old idea. It's the same trans-generational conversation that Comte de Lautréamont had with André Breton. The same conversation that Dizzy Gillespie had with Basquiat, and that we all have with each other. The higher blessing is to have these artists around to share stories and engage in conversations with.