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"A sinister cabal of superior writers."

DVD Review: *Flyin' Cut Sleeves*

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Author: Greg Barbrick — Published: Nov 03, 2009 at 10:08 pm

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Flyin' Cut Sleeves is an amazing documentary, originally released on VHS in 1993. The new DVD reissue does not add anything to the original, but there is really nothing more to be included anyway. What came out 16 years ago is as powerful today as it ever was.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rita Fecher was a New York teacher assigned to a high school in the south Bronx. She was so shaken by the circumstances of her students that she began filming interviews with them. Most of these took place between 1969-73.

Many of her students were gang members, probably the majority in fact. One list has the number of gangs in the area numbering 42 distinct entities in 1972, and that did not even include the

female units. The Savage Nomads had a separate group called the Savage Nomad Girls for example. Likewise, the Savage Skulls had the Savage Skulls Girls Division.

These kids lived in absolutely desolate surroundings, as is graphically shown by the camera. They had little illusions about where their lives were headed. It is heartbreaking to watch some of these interviews; these are really just children, forced to grow up in a hurry.

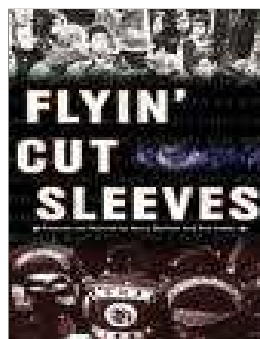
One group that wanted to do something besides wage petty turf wars called themselves the Ghetto Brothers. Cornell Benjamin, or "Black Benjie" as he was known, paid dearly for his idealism. For intervening between two gangs and trying to broker a peace, he was beaten to death.

It was an event that stopped everyone in their tracks, and made many of the leaders reconsider the course of their lives. Recoiling from this tragedy, many of the gang members quit the gangs and started working towards a positive change in the 'hood.

With funding from the New York State Council Of The Arts, Rita Fecher was able to go back to the south Bronx and interview many of her surviving former students. These interviews were conducted mostly between 1989-92 and update the lives of these extraordinary people.

The footage is raw, and most of it is pretty bleak. But there is a quality of hope that shines throughout *Flyin' Cut Sleeves*. It is a testament of strength, proof that the human spirit can surmount even the most daunting obstacles.

The DVD reissue of *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* is bare bones, there are no extras, just a trailer for a film called *Style Wars*. But this 60-minute documentary of some truly inspirational individuals is enough. *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* stands alone as a pretty powerful statement, no frills necessary.





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