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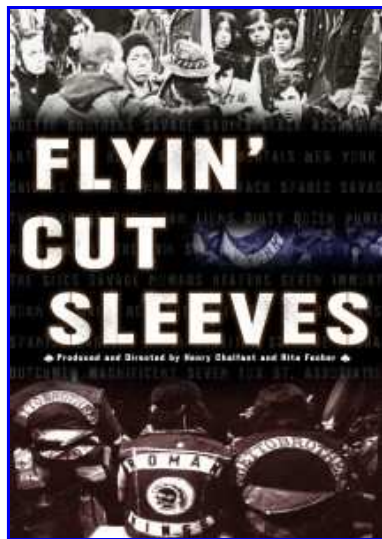
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Documentary Review: Flyin' Cut Sleeves

Submitted by [odeisel](#) on Saturday, 12 December 2009 [No Comment](#)





By Malice Intended

We often view the street gangs of generations past as being a preferable alternative to their seemingly more murderous contemporaries. As legend has it, they preferred fisticuffs to gun battles and rarely if ever killed each other. Such perspectives are fueled more by nostalgia than anything else. The reality of the gangs that roamed America's streets in the 1970's was much harsher. They weren't merely products of gangbanging traditions handed down from elders, but products of the squalid and hellish conditions they grew up in. They lived in the sort of poverty and despair that the current generation couldn't possibly fathom.

Flyin' Cut Sleeves is a documentary of Bronx street gangs in the 1970's. It was the brainchild of Rita Fecher, who taught in a South Bronx school during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Rita noticed that many of the kids in the school were gang members. She took a vested interest in the lives of these kids, and in 1973 she decided to document their lives. 20 years later, she returned to those same streets, eager to find out what happened to those kids. *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* is the culmination of her research. Not simply a cold and clinical case study, but a labor of love.

The film opens with some startling statistics. In 1972 there were 34 gang homicides in The Bronx. In 1973, 40% of the residents in the South Bronx were on welfare and 30% were unemployed. These stats set a grim mood by shattering any misguided notions viewers may have about what it meant to be part of a street gang in that time and place. This is not the world established by so much Hip-Hop folklore, but a world that most New Yorkers would like to forget.

The documentary itself is comprised of interviews with the presidents of the various gangs from that time period. We see vintage black and white footage of them as young kids. We are introduced to former Savage Nomads president Ben Buxton aka "Black Benjie", former Savage Skulls President Felipe "Blackie" Mercado



, Former Ghetto Brothers president Benjamin Melendez and former Savage Nomads Girls president Nelly "China" Velez. We also see color footage of them as adults 16 years later, raising their own families and leading relatively normal lives.

We learn how the murder of Cornell Benjamin led to the historic Hoe Avenue peace meeting on December 7th 1971 (a fictionalized version of which became a major set piece in the cult classic *The Warriors*) and are treated to rare footage of the event. We are shown that many of the gangs indeed had an organizational structure and familial atmosphere.

The film gives insight as to how many of the gangs made the transition from gang banging to political awareness and

community activism. We see how this activism continues in their adult lives, with some of them becoming social workers and little league coaches in adulthood. This stands in stark contrast to modern day O.G's, many of whom continue to bang well into adulthood and even go so far as to bring their own children up in gang life.

On the technical side, Rita Fecher and Henry Chalfant act merely as recorders of history. This is not an artistic endeavor, but as a document of sociological relevance. As such, it is very informative and straight forward. This approach may alienate casual viewers who are merely seeking thrills via titillating elements like war stories and action movie style editing. *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* is a human interest piece, more concerned with the lives of the participants than the infamy of



their exploits.

Flyin' Cut Sleeves offers a clear and balanced view of an era that is often glamorized and reminisced about. Its tone and sincerity stand in stark contrast to the street documentaries we have become accustomed to in recent years. Here, you will not find former bad guys telling tall tales and giving exaggerated accounts of their glory days. These are battle hardened adults, lucky to have made it out of an existence that threatened to swallow them whole. That any of them manage to lead a half way normal existence is a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit.



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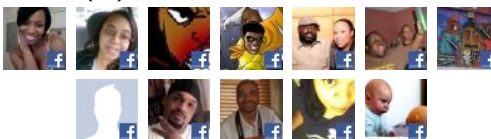
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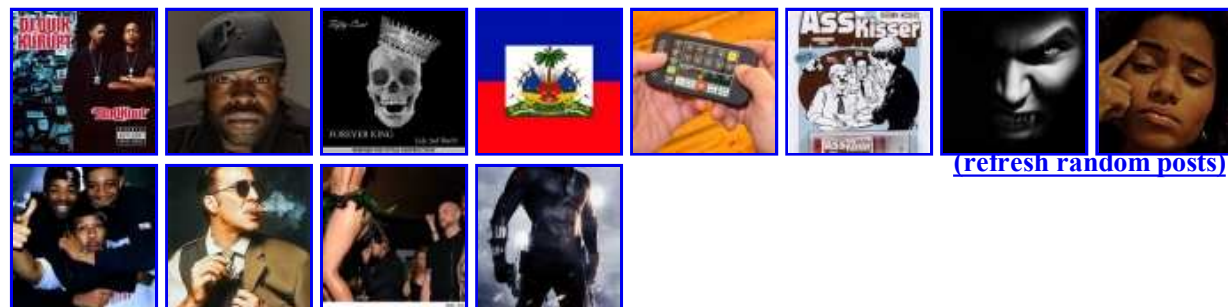
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