

**"The kind of guy who takes 'those' pictures":
An Interview with Charles Gatewood**

by A. D. Coleman

ADC: *You're the only American photographer -- maybe the only photographer in the world -- who's had a feature-length commercial film based on his work released, with himself actually the central figure in it. How does that feel?*

CG: It feels *fantastic*, because along the road there have been a lot of days when I've asked myself exactly what the fuck I was doing. A lot of that time I was working in the dark without much recognition or support, and I had to keep the faith. To have a "major motion picture," so-called, released about my work validates all those years of struggle and working.

ADC: *How did this film come about?*

CG: I published a book in 1975 called *Sidetripping*, with a text by William Burroughs. I started that book in 1966. It was years of shooting: the underground, the tail end of the '60s, and a lot of American subcultures. It was a pretty polished piece; when I put that book on the table, people started paying attention.

Mark Jury wrote me a letter, saying "I saw your book. I'm tremendously impressed. Let's get together." So we met, we became friends, and one thing led to another.

ADC: *Had you done any filming yourself at that point?*

CG: I've never done any film. In the last two years, I've been doing videos; I'm fascinated with images that move and talk. I think maybe I am a frustrated filmmaker, and all this time I've been denying it.

ADC: *Do you think that's a direction you're going to go in?*

CG: Yes indeed. I've just made three videos, as *products*. I'm going to make more, perhaps one day a film. I'm especially interested in all that information that a film delivers that you can't get in a still photo or even a body of still pictures.

ADC: *Let's talk about that idea of information, because it's central to your work.*

CG: My background is in anthropology -- University of Missouri and University of

Stockholm. What I'm really doing in my work is going into American subcultures in the same way an anthropologist would go into different cultures or subcultures around the world.

Now, I am a visual artist; that part of my work is very important -- the way I present material in a black & white still photograph. But I'm also a reporter -- a witness, or a mirror, if you will -- of unusual behavior. This is the reason I'm more interested in film and video these days -- the black & white stills weren't capturing that behavior in all its different aspects.

Two years ago I photographed the giant biker rally in Daytona Beach. I was tremendously disappointed in my take when I looked at the stills. There was no noise, there was no action; all that information -- all that swaggering and posturing, the stories and the personalities and the color and the motorcycle noise -- was *gone*. And I *missed it*.

So I went back last year and made a video that captured all that stuff. It satisfies me much more than the stills did. I'm realizing the limitations of the stills in the context of my work.

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CG: ... A lot of people have said to me, "You don't look like the kind of guy who takes *those pictures*." They've asked me, "Why do you do this kind of work?"

ADC: *Do you feel an obligation to provide an answer?*

CG: My work is so unusual that the questions -- Why do you do this kind of work? What does it mean? Where is it coming from? --are quite valid. I'm just now coming to terms with some answers; for a long time *I* didn't understand exactly where the work was coming from.

When I'm working, I like that *click* when I cross over and become the event - when I become one with the subject. Psychologists call that getting into a "flow situation." I *love* that feeling.

ADC: *That raises an obvious question in terms of social research methodology -- of "objectivity" versus bias, of the position of the outsider versus that of the insider. Of course, there's Heisenberg's "indeterminacy principle," that observation changes the thing observed ...*

CG: I could hide behind that. But my idea has always been that I'm me; I do whatever the fuck I please, I'm not here to please anyone else.

People ask me, "Where's your *chair*? What *university* are you connected with? Who is your *sponsor*? What are your *affiliations*?" And I have none. I don't belong to anybody or anything. I'm totally myself; I'm responsible to me, my own vision.

Now, it's a rule in social science that you aren't supposed to cross a certain line or you lose your objectivity. But this is kind of a circular argument. My approach has always been to participate, to enter into the worlds as much as I can, yet still come back with some information that might tell us all something about the nature of the experience.

The analogy that I've always used is keeping one foot in the real world and one foot *out there*. I've never wanted to go so far out that I couldn't come back. On the other hand, I've never wanted to stand back on the sidelines.

For example, a lot of people in New York tell me that they're trying to shut everything out. To me, New York City is starting to look more and more like *Sidetripping* -- the bums, all the graffiti and the ugliness, the confrontation between the poor and the rich, all the real horror show that's going on in the street all around them. *I'm* trying to see more and more of that, trying to let it in. *I* choose to look at that kind of behavior. *I* think it's important. That's what makes my work hard to deal with. ...

ADC: *What's important about that, and to whom is it, or should it be, important?*

CG: It's important to *me*, because it makes me feel high, it moves my blood around. You can read about yuppies all day long in *Newsweek* magazine, but I want to find out, for example, about these bikers -- why they get tattooed all over, what they're trying to say with their lifestyle. The more I get into it, the more fascinating and fantastic it becomes. I've seen things that might *fry* a normal person's brain. Aside from the outrageous photographic images I'm getting, I'm also doing some personal anthropology, finding out some real truths about some real behavior that's out there but isn't being talked about or seen.

ADC: *What's the value of it being talked about and seen?*

CG: The fact that it's happening on a big scale, and it's practically invisible as far as the media goes, is important. . . . If this knowledge doesn't become a part of history, it's not going to be in the books. It's not being recorded. The tattooing, the piercing, some of the sexual underground -- as far as mainstream America goes, they don't exist.

I guess that comes back to my being a recorder, a witness. I want to show people they not only exist but that they're vital --- that there's unbelievable stuff going on out there.

ADC: *What makes a subculture vital to you? Is it a projection of some aspect of yourself?*

CG: More and more, I'm realizing that, as I understand it now, the main answer to that question of *why* -- "Why are showing us this, Mr. Gatewood?" -- is that the subject matter makes me *intoxicated*. At the same time as it helps me express some of my fears, some of my observations, it makes me high.

I've always been extremely prone to excessive use of anything that would change my consciousness. I've found that these photographic experiences work a lot better than, say, alcohol, in the long run. They're certainly not as damaging to the mind and the spirit and the body . . .

The more I learn about transcendental stuff, and the more I read about intoxication, the more I realize that this is essentially genetically predetermined. I had a weird childhood also; that may have had something to do with it. But I think that, essentially, I was born to do what I do. I think it's biological. I've never really questioned it too much; I've followed my feelings, and this is where that's led me.

ADC: *What are the aspects of your childhood that you think may have contributed to this?*

CG: I grew up in Missouri, in the Ozarks, in an alcoholic family. I grew up never knowing what "normal" was. I think that's important. I knew that my family was different, and I always knew that *I* was different. But I still never understood exactly why.

ADC: *So you left there to go to school and become an anthropologist?*

CG: Yeah. But I realized quickly an academic career through a university in a

standard way was not my cup of tea. So I bought a Leica, went to Europe for a couple of years, travelled around, came back to New York in 1966, and the '60s were exploding. I knew immediately what my subject matter was -- it was all around me. From that point on, I never questioned what my work was about or what my subject matter was.

ADC: Neil Postman has argued recently that the area that he would call social research or social study, instead of "social science," is really an offshoot of moral theology, and that its real function is storytelling, in the most ancient sense: providing people with models, tales by which to live -- essentially, for moral instruction.

CG: That's fascinating, because I think essentially I am a moralist -- and I'm certainly a storyteller. I'm fascinated with any tradition that has to do with storytelling. And I've got my own stories to tell.

ADC: Let's talk more about Dances Sacred and Profane. The first actual filming happened at the Forbidden Photographs opening at the Robert Samuel Gallery in 1981. Now, at that point was Mark already thinking about doing a film?

CG: Yes, we had discussed it. Mark was fascinated by my access to some of these subcultures and by the kinds of pictures I was bringing back. I had a really crazy party at the Hellfire Club following the opening -- a basement S/M club in the West Village. He did some filming there that I think blew *his* mind; that really kicked off the project, which ended up as a filmed four-year odyssey of travels around the country to different scenes.

Mark and Dan Jury have really supported me, in more ways than one. Making this film -- this film cost, if you add together everything, about half a million dollars. They've been told time and again that it's not commercial, that it won't make it, that it's not going to go, to forget it, to drop it, shelve it -- and they've been stubborn, they've fought every step of the way to make it happen.

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CG: My work in stills provided the spark for the film, and the film really pulls it all together.

ADC: My response to it was that it finally made sense of your work, put it in

perspective.

CG: The totality of my work starts to come through, you start to see the whole picture. This is marvelous, because even *I* didn't know I was so fragmented. I was giving out such little pieces of information, piece by piece, that it was hard for *me* to get an overall view of my work.

ADC: *What do you hope will happen as a result of this movie?*

CG: The film puts my work out to a broad, broad, mass audience; people can rent this video cassette -- or buy it -- in Omaha, or Texas, anywhere in the U.S.A., anywhere in the world now.

This video will reach more people than all my shows put together, certainly, and perhaps all my *books* put together. It has the potential to bring my work to more people than everything I've done up to this point. And it's done with a lot of taste and style and care.

I also think this work may change some people's thinking -- about who they are, and what it's all about. The film is essentially about transcendence, liberation; it's a *spiritual* film. At one point in the film, Jim Ward says, "This physical body is not the real me." Think about that for awhile. Fakir Musafar says, "I leave my body when I do these rituals and I talk to God." Think about *that* for awhile.

There are ideas presented in this film which are quite extraordinary. They come directly out of my work. This film takes what could be a bunch of cheap-shot profane events, follows certain characters through their rituals, and ends up in a spiritual, sacred place.

ADC: *Seeing the film last year made me realize that no matter how eccentric or bizarre a number of the specific rituals portrayed are, they were all tied to traditions, in most cases ancient traditions. Things that I'd thought of as lunatic fringe, or social eccentricity, suddenly started to seem very central.*

CG: That's exciting, isn't it? A lot of the ideas in this film have started to percolate into *my* brain; I think the film actually has begun to change my thinking about a lot of things.

My own work is enriching me, it's teaching me things. Ultimately, that's the real benefit of this for me: My own work, filtered through other people's

consciousness, coming back at me, is showing me all kinds of new areas and new ideas.

ADC: *Sounds like you're saying the film revealed you to yourself.*

CG: Isn't that what the social sciences have always said they were about -- to explain mankind to mankind, to explain one to oneself?

ADC: *What thoughts do you have on the current photography scene?*

CG: Well, let's put it this way: I think there's more to photography than endless discussions of post-modernism. I don't care much for art theory; I'm not very theoretical about my work. I follow my feelings, I do my work, I take my pictures, I put them on the table. I think a lot of photographers these days are listening too much to the critics, reading too many art magazines, and are trying to figure out in an intellectual way how to put a picture together.

As you once said, "You can't make love by following a textbook -- nor, for that matter, by violating its instructions." There has to be soul, there has to be feeling. I hope that my work has more than just some technical ingredients; I hope that my work has spirit, and soul. A lot of discussions of photography these days forget about those things.

ADC: *When did you start publishing and distributing your own stuff?*

CG: The publisher of *Sidetripping* folded, almost immediately after the book came out. I ended up with eight thousand copies -- I still have copies all over the damn place, books under the bed, books in the closet. I realized I was going to have to distribute them as best I could.

Subsequently, in publishing my own undiluted vision I've run up against a great deal of resistance. My work isn't finished until it's published and seen -- I come from a photojournalistic tradition. Exhibitions are okay -- it's nice to see the original prints, it's nice to see a great show -- but exhibitions come and go. A good book lasts forever. So I decided a long time ago that the basic thrust of my presentation would be publishing.

It doesn't do me any good to sit around whining that no one will publish my work. So I did what had to be done, by publishing my own books; I published *Forbidden*, and on top of that I have *Wall Street*, plus I've got *X1000*. I distribute

them, and I get on with it. I'm going to get the work out, one way or another; that's all there is to it.

I'm doing the same thing now with videos: I've made several videos, and I distribute them myself. Anyone who wants to know about my books or my videos should get in touch with me directly -- Flash Productions, Box 745, Woodstock, NY 12498.

ADC: *Is the Dances video going to be available through you?*

CG: Well, it's being distributed by MPI Home Video, at \$79.95. But the commercial distributor snipped two minutes, and put a different title on it -- they're calling it *Bizarre Rituals*, subtitle *Dances Sacred and Profane*. They said people might think it was a film about *dancing*. They objected to one scene where Fakir has a three-pound lead ball swinging from his cock. So Flash Productions will be distributing what you might call the "uncut" version, with the original title.

ADC: *Do you do your own book layout and design?*

CG: I learned it all through the years; I know every step of production, and I do every step.

ADC: *How have the books been received critically?*

CG: *Sidetripping* made a big splash; the critical response was almost entirely, unanimously, positive. I can't remember *any* reviews of *Forbidden*. *Wall Street* has received quite a bit of acclaim.

ADC: *Do you think that's because the subject matter is less controversial?*

CG: A lot of people say of *Wall Street*, "We're glad to see you doing something that's not so bizarre and weird." On the other hand, *Sidetripping* is the book that really opened all the doors for me -- and I think ultimately is a more important book, for a couple of reasons. It did more to kick out the parameters of the medium a few millimeters than the other books. ... But my job is to do the work and get it out there; my job is not to tell the critics what to think or what to write. They can write whatever they want about my work; that's not my business.

ADC: *Do you think of your work as art?*

CG: Heart?

ADC: Art.

CG: *Art.* (Sighs) Is that for me to say? (Pause) I think of myself as an artist. I use photography in my work. I think some of the best stills can be taken as art, in a fine-art context. But, as a whole, my work is reporting. Maybe it could be called artistic reporting. I want to do more than just describe. I want to get inside and bring back some of the spirit of what's going on.

When I go out, I don't know what I'm going to bring back. I don't want to know. I want to go into the mystery; I want to go into the unknown, and maybe bring back a piece of unknown. I want to be surprised.

The *why* question -- "Why are you showing us this?" -- has always been the hardest question for me to try to answer. Obviously, I was saying something about everything being weird and fucked up -- in *Sidetripping*, anyway; my vision has tempered a little bit.

ADC: *Does this mean you no longer think that everything is weird and fucked up?*

CG: Well, there's certainly a lot of it out there. But I have a lot of inner peace these days. I'm not weird and fucked up inside, because I understand my addictions and I'm able to deal with them, keep the lid on. Meditation has helped tremendously. I suppose people do tend to mellow with age also. A lot of that work was done twenty years ago. I don't have all those rough edges I used to have.

ADC: *Any other things you want to talk about that have been on your mind?*

CG: I am planning a new book ... I'm doing a "Greatest Hits." I don't know the title of it yet -- maybe *Dances Sacred and Profane*.

You see, I meet people all the time who don't know my work and *should* know my work. Now, maybe, because of this film, they'll want to know more about it. So I think it's time for me to do a big, pretty book of all my best work from the last twenty-five years, and have it available in bookstores. I intend to publish it one way or another, so that people can really get an overview, in *book* form, of what my work is all about.

Also, I have quite a lot of new work that hasn't been published. So this book will contain some surprises, some unknown Gatewoods.

ADC: *Any other projects in the works that you could talk about?*

CG: I've just sold my first novel.

ADC: *Are you serious?*

CG: Yeah, I'm serious. But I don't want to talk about it.

ADC: *Oh, okay. Can you say the name of it?*

CG: No. That's all I want to say: I'm writing seriously; there's a soon-to-be-published novel that's mine. I know that's a tease.

ADC: *Will you be publishing it under your name?*

CG: No. Not this one. I've worked a long time to get my name connected in people's memory with my visual work, which is serious. There are some things about this book which are not serious in the same way; the book doesn't necessarily mix with the work I want to be known for.

But publishing this book has given me faith in my writing, so I'm working on something more serious now, more ambitious. I have a million experiences in my head that nobody knows about, and it's another way of telling those stories.

ADC: *You said you were a moralist*

CG: I think there's a strong streak of that.

ADC: *What is your morality?*

CG: We could be so much more than we are, and we don't know it -- we're unfulfilled. God is hiding inside of us, trying to get out, and we either forgot or we don't want to know or we're ignorant -- ignorant, mostly -- of that fact. Instead, we bought a cheap bill of goods. We're not living up to our potential; we don't even know what our potential is. I think, ultimately, that full potential is pure spirit.

ADC: *Do you think one can get there more effectively by intoxication or by meditation?*

CG: Well, the film deals with this -- with the idea of wisdom through excess. It could be argued that some people have had more true religious experiences on the disco floor than other people have had in church. There is a certain truth to the idea of wisdom through excess -- sometimes, if the right person does the right excess in the right way with the right consciousness.

I've always had strong transcendental feelings. They've come out in profane ways, for the most part. Now I'm starting to feel the spiritual moving in; I know that's because I've actualized some of those transcendental longings in the best

way I knew how. That led me to another place, which led me to another place ...

ADC: *If "stardom" comes as a result of this film, are you ready?*

CG: For fifteen minutes. (Laughter) Make that eighty-three minutes (the length of the film). We've been showing it at film festivals, all over this country and all over Europe also, for a couple of years. It's been at probably fifteen festivals. It's gotten great press -- good reviews. We had a commercial opening in San Francisco last summer; it was well received in the San Francisco community. But this is the New York premiere -- the big one.

ADC: *Are you looking for commercial distribution? Are you looking for midnight-every-Friday-night cult-film status?*

CG: We'll take it any way we can get it. Of course we're hoping for big commercial distribution -- world-wide. But just the fact that it's alive, and available, and that my work is getting out -- to millions of people, potentially. What more could I ask for?

I've worked a lot of these years in real obscurity, without much recognition; a lot of the time I felt alone. There were times when I asked myself if this was proper work for a grown man to be doing. It's gratifying to feel that it was all worth it.