

WINTER 2006 • VOL. XIV, ISSUE LI



Back In THE BRONX

CELEBRATING THE EXPERIENCE OF GROWING UP AND LIVING IN THE BRONX

The Wanderers

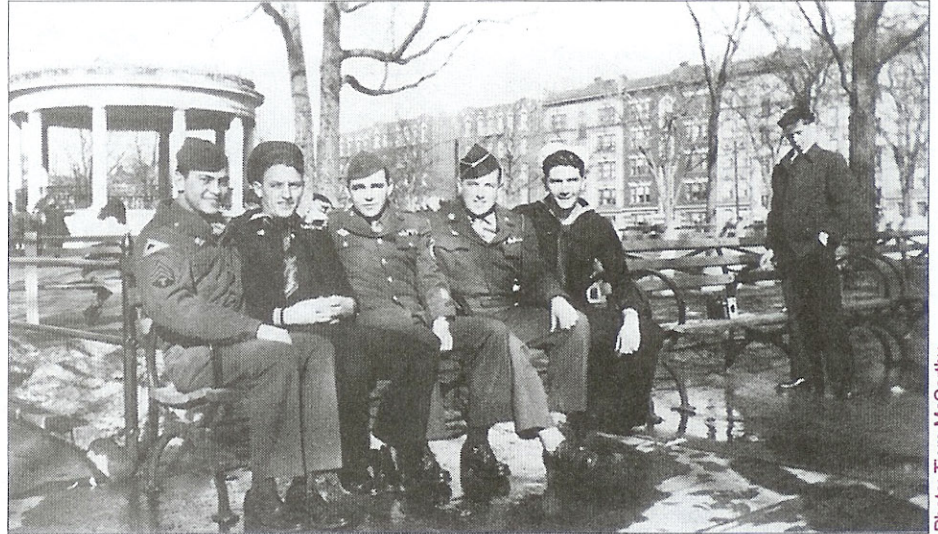
By James Hannon

In 1979, a movie by the name of "The Wanderers" came out. It was based off the book by Richard Price and starred a then-unknown actor named Ken Wahl. It also had a tremendous supporting cast that I wish I could name.

My sister's boyfriend Louie really sold this movie to me a year or so earlier telling me they were filming it near the **Dollar Savings Bank** on the **Grand Concourse & Fordham Road**, and that they had a bunch of old cars lining the surrounding streets. I was definitely looking forward to it.

So when it finally came out, I was horrified that it had a rating of "R". I was 12 years old and was five long years away from being eligible to see this movie. Ratings actually meant something back then and I couldn't imagine any kid's parents letting them see "R" movies ever. I was crushed that I couldn't see it – my 19 yr old sister Theresa and Louie went to see it and told me that it was great – and that it opened with a shot of the **RKO Fordham Movie Theatre** and **Alexander's Department Store**, and had a lot of other Bronx locations. I thought my neighborhood was as far from Hollywood as you could get, but this forbidden movie was filmed in my neighborhood – and I couldn't see it!

I got over this disappointment as kids do, but it was always in the back of my mind. Years passed, and it never made it to TV. I figured it



Poe Park

Photo: Tom McCarthy

was just something I would never get a chance to see.

Then in the early 80's, two wonderful products came out – the VCR and the Video Rental Store. It took my family a while to get a VCR. But in June 1985, I got my first real part-time job at **Sears Roebuck** on **Fordham Road**. And with my employee discount and my dad chipping in half, we bought our first VCR.

Video Villa was the premiere video store in my area, and with my second or third paycheck I signed up for a lifetime membership. They went out of business quite a few years ago, but if they ever come back I'm ready to rent!

One of the first movies I rented there (or anywhere) was the *Wanderers*. I was now 18 and fully eligible to see "R" movies! My dad and I sat down to watch it

– although he was more interested in the VCR technology than the movie, but I was hooked from the opening shot of **Alexander's** to the alleys behind **Dollar Savings Bank**, to **Allerton Avenue**, and to the **Grotto**. This movie truly was worth the long wait.

Louie (now my brother-in-law), was thrilled to find out that I had finally seen the movie. He pointed out a few locations that I didn't recognize. But when he told me that the gangs in the movie actually existed, I was shocked! His father would tell him stories of seeing the **Fordham Baldies** cruising around the neighborhood in the mid-50's.

Not thinking as clearly as I should've at the time, I told my brother-in-law, "Yeah I remember them when I was a kid – they used to hang out in **Poe Park** and

Reminiscing

play music with their tambourines - Right?" To which he started laughing. He settled down and informed me that the bald guys in **Poe Park** playing music were not the **Fordham Baldies**, but the Hare Krishnas! He still teases me of that brain-freeze to this day!

Over the years, I have watched that movie probably hundreds of times – It became my belief that everyone from the Bronx should see this movie at least once. Eventually some video store was selling a used copy of the VHS tape for \$20 dollars (new was over \$80 at the time) and I grabbed it. Eventually I wore that tape out, got another used copy, and eventually got the DVD.

Recently, the Wanderers movie (and Steve Samtur from **Back In THE BRONX**) inspired my life yet again. During my mid-career crisis, I decided I wanted to become a filmmaker and eventually released a documentary in July 2004 on a band called Richard and the Young Lions. Don't feel bad, not many Bronxites have heard of them – even though they were #1 in Detroit. When they played on New York radio during the summer of 1966, there was a disc jockey strike, so nobody in New York ever found out the band's name or the song name that they were playing ("Open Up Your Door")

Now that my documentary was finished, I began to look for my next project. After many false starts, I started getting frustrated about what I was going to do next. Then, Christmas 2005 came around and I was shopping the Back in the Bronx catalog. I saw



Fordham Road & Webster Avenue

the Loew's Paradise Theatre DVD advertised and just had to get it, because I had spent many hours at the Paradise growing up. I got the DVD and was watching it on Christmas Eve with family when a light bulb popped over my head – I had been looking far and wide for a new project, and realized that there is a lot of interesting stuff in my own hometown (or backyard - as you'll see later)

I contacted Steve about doing similar projects, but nothing we spoke of really caught my attention... As we were talking, I was casually flipping through the catalog, and saw his Bronx chessboard advertised – which had the **Fordham Baldies** as the pawns! At that one moment, everything clicked - I would do a documentary on the real-life gangs of the Wanderers movie!

I did a lot of research and hit all the Bronx websites that specialize in reconnecting Bronxites and hooked up with a few extremely helpful people who knew the gangs intimately, and found out some truly amazing things.

In these conversations, I found that the infamous Ducky Boys got their start with a bunch of friends hanging in the schoolyard of **P.S. 46** in 1957. Now that may not be as thrilling to many of you, but it

blew me away. You see, from 1969 to 1993, I lived on **East 196th Street** and **Briggs Avenue** – which was right across the street from **P.S. 46** – literally my backyard! I had spent many hours growing up in that schoolyard playing Off-the-Point, Wiffle Ball, and Skully with our personalized bottle caps (Yoo-Hoo glass bottles made the nicest caps (after you scraped them on the sewer a few times), but they were no match for the melted crayon filled RC Cola caps which would shatter the glass caps on impact.)

Another little piece of information that I found is that Dion surprisingly was a **Fordham Baldies** and that supposedly the gang was not intended to be hairless, but got their name because their leader was a guy named GariBALDI.

I love to hear stuff like this, so if you have any stories, pictures, or anything that you would like to share with me about Bronx gangs of the 1955-1963, please e-mail me at JamesHannon@Lantern-Media.com. If you would like to know more about me and my previous projects, please check out <http://www.Lantern-Media.com>.

