"I've learned that sometimes people are not ready for what you know and what is obvious to you." *-Glen Friedman*

Where Were You

An interview with Glen Friedman

Photography Courtesy of:
Glen Friedman

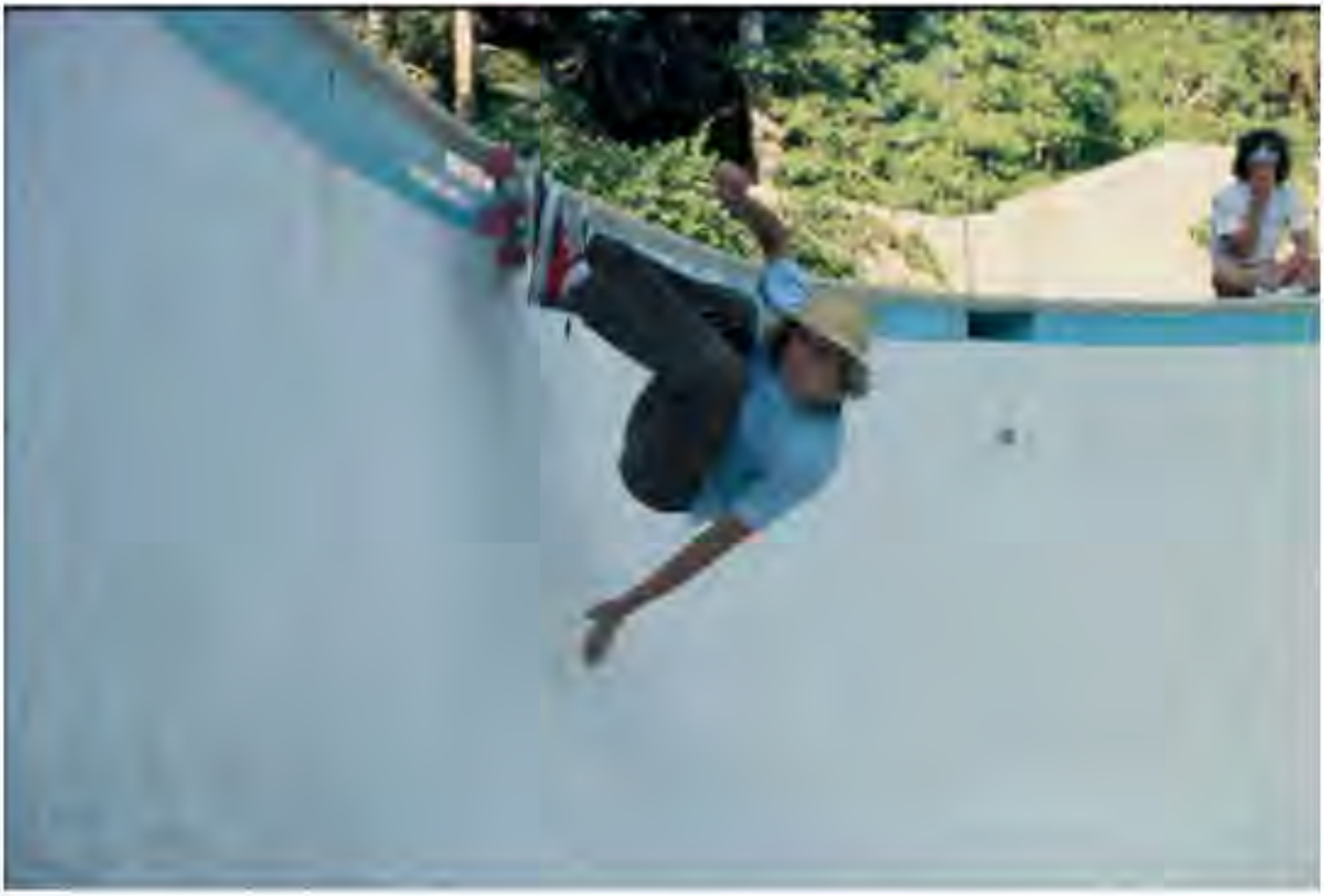
Glen Friedman is one of the most influential photographers of his generation. Over the years he has been at the forefront of some of the most revolutionary and symbolic cultural movements that have sculpted American culture. The beauty behind his work is that inspiration and passion that has fueled his views and motives.

He moved from the East Coast to Los Angeles at the age of two with his mother and brother where he grew up in till the mid eighties when he relocated back to New York. Growing up as a skateboarder in the late 70's he found him self bored and annoyed with the attitudes and social activity of the young community that surrounded him. He found himself spending most of his time skateboarding with an older crowd in the schoolyards of West Los Angeles. This is where it all began. These were the days that would soon be forever recognized as the legendary "Dogtown Days." This is where it all began.

Glen had his published photograph was shot on a camera he had borrowed from a friend. This was the first roll of color film he had ever taken and at the age of fourteen. His most recognizable work from over the years has been some of the early iconic "Dogtown" images of skateboard pioneers such as Tony Alva, Jay Adams, Duane Peters, and Stacy Peralta. As well as artists such as punk and hip-hop recording artists Black Flag, Minor Threat, Bad Brains, Fugazi, the Beastie Boys, Run-D.M.C., and Public Enemy.

His work has over the past three decades has been published in many international publications and exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide including the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution and the Experience Music Project Museum.. In the early eighties he published his own photo punk-zine, My Rules, that sold over 10,000 copies. Glen has also published seven books of his own work and contributing to many more.

This interview features a discussion with Glen Friedman about his inspirations experiences through out the years, from the early days the years up and till now



L.F. - **What inspired you in the beginning?**

Glen - I don't think it was so much about photography, than it was about sharing those cultures that I was interested in with other people with an energy that I felt would excite and inspire them.

L.F. - **You were a young teen in junior high during the mid-seventies when you first began shooting photos of the Dog Town Scene. Tell us a little about that period of time.**

Glen - That's where I cut my teeth. Everyone was skateboarding, I was skateboarding, and I happened to be in the center of where this was going on like nowhere else in the world. The guys I would see almost on a daily basis were just doing things that I had never seen before. No one had ever seen before. They were just being invented as we went along. Skateboarding has been around since the early 60's, but these urethane wheels changed everything. I was so energized from this whole scene; it just became my everyday life as a teenager. Most of the guys that I was around or friends with during junior High School, their lives were centered on surfing. I moved from the east coast, so it wasn't really in my blood like it was in theirs to go to the beach everyday. So it was skateboarding for me. That was really it. It was primary, not secondary as it was with most of the surfers. I valued what we were seeing everyday so incredibly. It was my own life. Separate from my family, separate from everything else. It gave me a sense of being an individual for maybe the first time ever. When you are a kid growing up you are usually in someone else's shadow, whether it's a coach, your parents, or an older sibling. Skateboarding was kind of the first place I got out of that shadow. Because of that and because of its importance of it in my life, seeing what was going on around me, inspired me more to be a part of the scene.

At that same time a magazine re-emerged, it had four issues in the early sixties and then folded, but it came out again, Skateboarder Magazine. It was put out by Surfer Publications, which put out Surfer Magazine, which was an award-winning magazine. I mean on the level of National Geographic with their surf photography. Particularly when compared with the other surf magazines out at the time. There was only one or two. So Skateboarder had this beautiful magazine, and I was looking at it as every other skateboarder was at the time, I was thinking what I was seeing on

a daily basis was a lot cooler than what I was seeing in this magazine. This magazine isn't doing justice to the sport, the activity, the art, and the lifestyle that I am witnessing on a daily basis. Maybe the Dogtown articles that Stecyk wrote did them justice. Everything else in the magazine other than Stecyk's work was certainly sub-par compared to what I was witnessing on a daily basis. So I took it upon myself to start taking skateboarding pictures to maybe help push this thing a little further. I thought skateboarding was greater than anything that I had ever done. I wanted every one to do it. I didn't need it to be a little clique and to be cool. I wanted people that played little league like I did to become skateboarders. I thought skateboarding was just fucking incredible.

So, I started shooting these pictures of what I was seeing and started submitting them to advertisers and to anyone who I thought would help get them out there. I didn't think that I could get them in to an editorial right away. I was taking pictures with a pocket instamatic, and I just started sending these prints that I would get from the local photo mat. Eventually I got stuff sent back or never heard from people then eventually one day I heard that I had to use a particular type of film. You couldn't just shoot on a pocket instamatic and get stuff published. So I took some 35mm film, found a pool that no one else had skated yet and brought some guys that really knew how to ride well. Jay Adams, Paul Constantineau and a few other people. I took pictures using a 35 mm camera. I shot these really great pictures of this pool of the avant-garde of skateboarding at that moment. You know, Jay Adams in a pool!

I shot one roll of color and one roll of black and white. I showed them to some of the guys including Stacy Peralta and Jay and they were like, "These are really good photos Glen. Maybe you could do something with them. You should maybe send them down to the magazine." I said, "I don't know anyone down at the magazine." They were like, "look, the guy you want to speak to is the editor, Warren Bolster."

Then I think I met Stecyk one day. He was a very incognito guy. No one really knew what he looked like back then unless he actually photographed you. But I bumped into him and he said, "Yeah, send them down to Warren Bolster or give me a call." I called the guy up and pretended to be older and told him; "I'm sending down my originals and I needed to get these back and not to lose them these are all I got." I guess Stecyk had told him that I would be sending something down. I don't know what it was, but they were pretty open to it. The next thing I knew I got a tear sheet back, and I had a full-page subscription ad in a magazine and I was only fourteen when I took it. It was on from there. I was stoked that I got this radical photo in a magazine. The first time anyone was ever getting out of a pool. For a lack of a better term an aerial, but it wasn't an aerial yet. He was just flying out of the pool. He wasn't even making it. People were intrigued, they though that maybe he was making it. But he wasn't. Everyone said, "Did he make that?" But, if you look at the picture now there's no way he could have made it. But it was radical, and that's why it got printed. I was inspired to keep doing that work from that point because my perspective was validated. I was seeing more radical stuff than was in the magazine prior to that, and I was going to be able to capture it and share those moments with people.

***L.F.* - How did the transitions in your work from skateboarding, to punk, to hip-hop come about?**

Glen - From skateboarding to punk rock then from punk rock to hip-hop was really just an obvious progression of youth spirit at the time. Skateboarders were always listening to fast, loud, hard music for the most part. Punk rock was the next fast loud thing that came along. Then punk rock was faster and harder and more aggressive and that's what skateboarding was all about. For skateboarders to get into punk rock it was a no brainer. All of sudden people were listening to the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, which just blew peoples minds when that album came out. People can't really imagine it now, but it was hard to believe that this was even being recorded. There really wasn't anything like it before. And then to hear it come out was kind of mind boggling to tell you the truth. It would be only natural for kids that were skateboarders that were generally a very progressive group of kids to get into punk rock. And that's basically what I did, I was just following what any skateboarder would do, I was a skateboarder. I got into punk rock because it was energetic and exciting. Much the same way that I was inspired by skateboarding. When punk rock came along you're going to shows and not sitting in the nosebleed section, but actually leaning against the edge of the stage. Again I was just in awe and totally inspired. I wanted to promote it. I wanted to spread it out.

By that time I was dealing with Skateboarder Magazine that had a million readers so I started hounding them and trying to get them to cover some of this punk. Of course there were a lot of older guys in the editorial staff and it took them a longer time to warm up to but they did see that it was something that all the best skateboarders were gravitating towards. So if they wanted to be honest to their audience they had to show what all these pros were into. They couldn't deny

it any longer when the skateboarder of the year in 1978 was Steve Olsen, who went up to accept his trophy and posed with his finger in his nose in a polka dot tie, which was pretty radical at the time. That's how skateboarding and punk rock kind of came together. I was so inspired that I took it as a personal responsibility to try to promote it in anyway that I could. I started photographing these bands in a way that they hadn't been before. Most people taking punk rock photos weren't very good or just didn't have the outlets to get the bands exposure like I did at Skateboarder Magazine and later Action Now Magazine.

Punk rock started to get a little bit generic. Even though I had produced an album that had become the biggest selling album of the decade. We didn't expect that, and I didn't think it was that important. To me, Black Flag. The Dead Kennedy's, Minor Threat, and several other bands were all much more important than what I was doing with Suicidal Tendencies. But they were friends of mine. It was almost like a family responsibility because Mike's older brother was Jim from Dogtown. He was someone who had always looked out for me when I was younger and I really liked what Suicidal was doing.

Conveniently so, at the same time this new art form of hip-hop was emerging. I had been getting these tapes from people from the east coast after "The Message" came out in seventy-nine, which was almost like a novelty song. I mean it was good, but there was this other stuff coming out. And I thought, you know, I'm going to get in to this. I really like this. This is totally amazing. This is like the black kids version of punk rock. With all the doors I had broken down with coverage of skateboarding and punk rock in the skating magazines and even more mainstream magazines eventually, I then had this opportunity to get hip hop into the more mainstream, previously white, music magazines or rock magazines. So I took it upon myself to spread this word.

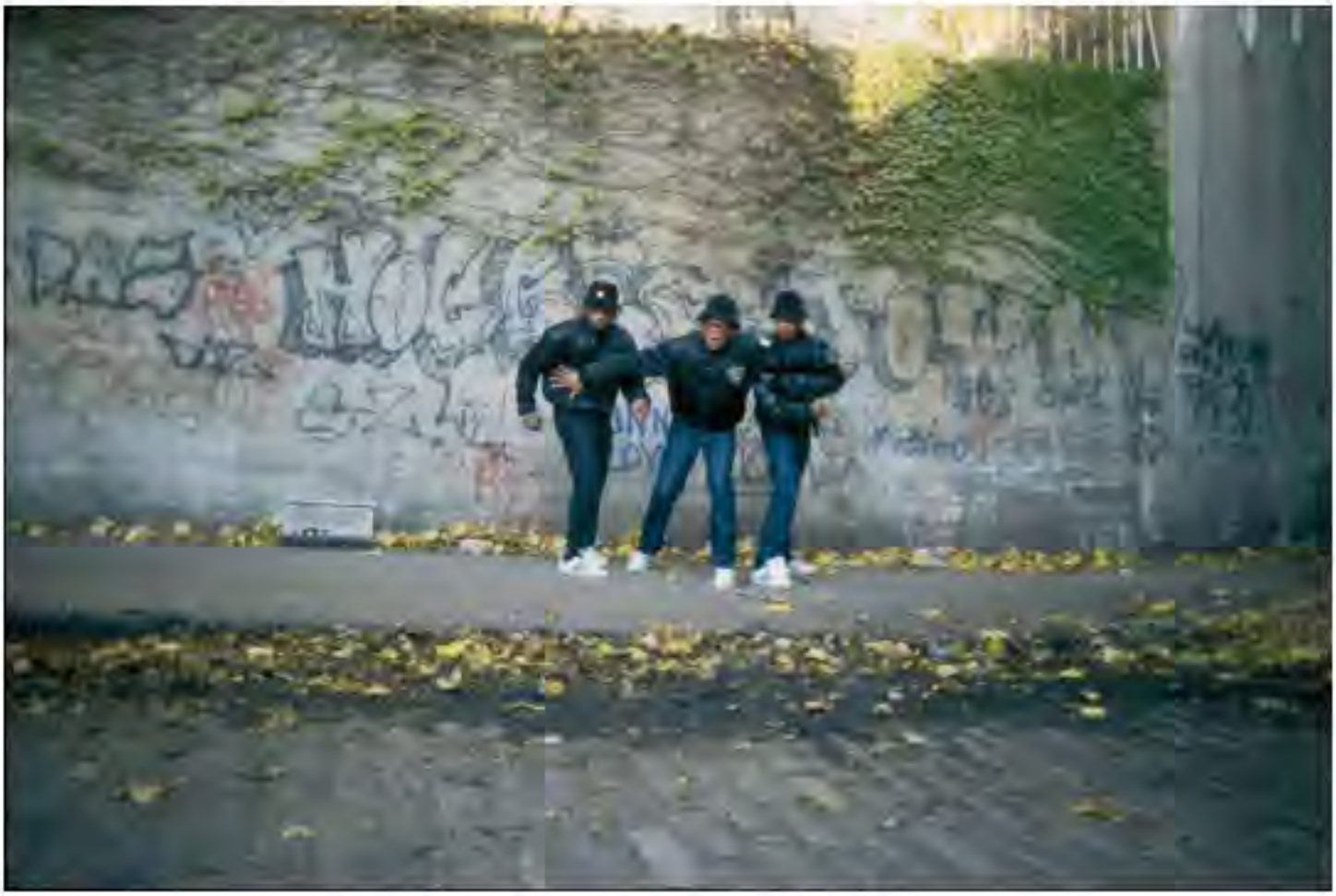
I got in touch with the Beastie Boys, and they were coming to town to open up for Madonna. I lived in L.A. at the time and they had never been, so I showed them all over the place. They were almost booed off stage for the most part but we still had a great time while they were in Los Angeles. They had rented a Lincoln Continental; I was showing all around town and getting them on radio shows and stuff. And along the way just taking lots of goofy and fun pictures of them with rock stars backstage at Madonna's show and just cool shots of them around Los Angeles. I had known them when they were a punk rock band, that's how we hooked up in L.A. because they really didn't know anyone else at the time. Anyways, we had taken all these great pictures and when they went back to New York I sent copies of photos back with them for their manager and record label at the time that was basically Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons. Once they saw all those photos it was like they were all blown away, everyone loved them. So whenever hip-hop groups would come to the west coast I would take pictures of them, I basically became the west coast representative for Def Jam. I would show them around town, take photos, and help them with press and all that stuff. That worked out for a while and was helping promote this thing and all of a sudden it just started blowing up. It became more accepted around the country and the world as a new form of rebellious music. That's pretty much how it went.

L.F. - From the Z-Boys, Black Flag, and Fugazi, to Public Enemy, Run-D.M.C., and the Beastie Boys. People could say these are completely different worlds. Do you feel like these different movements all had similarities?

Glen - Absolutely, that's why I created the book "Fuck You Heroes." When I went to publishers before I ended up doing it myself. I was asked several times, "Will you separate these three main subject matters? Maybe we'll publish it then." I was like, "No I won't, this is how it's being done. Don't you understand?" These are three rebellious youth cultures that all share roots in youth angst and rebellion. A lot of kids now are into all three of those things. A lot of skaters like punk rock and hip-hop. It's almost considered the same thing by some people. Its just music now. They have similar roots in more ways that I could explain in just one interview. To me they were all "fuck you" heroes. People that were heroes for saying fuck you to cultures, governments, teachers, and society that were trying to control them and tell them what they can and cannot do.

L.F. - What has been the most difficult issue that you have had to deal with over the years?

Glen - I've learned that sometimes people are not ready for what you know and what is obvious to you. Even though it might be good for them, or might be interesting to them, they may just not be ready. You can only present it so many times and so many different ways in a way that is true to the subject matter. You can only hope that people will have the intelligence or the understanding to get it. I think that is probably the most frustrating thing I have had to deal with over all the years. They just don't understand what you're doing. They're not broad minded enough. They don't have an understanding. They might not be as progressive as you. Eventually they will get it, and they'll come



around. They may appreciate it, they may not, and I never expect everyone to appreciate everything. It just won't happen. That's something that in the early days would get me upset or get me depressed that I'm doing something that is so progressive and exciting, and just really good, and people just don't get it. Even to this day people think that they get it and they don't! You might be interviewing me right now, and I might think that you get it, but you might not. Someone might own all of my books and they might like all the pretty pictures, which is great, but they might still not get it! Ian Svenonius wrote a really interesting essay in the back of Recognize, my last art book, and I think that kind explains it pretty well. Everyone comes to things in their own time, if at all, and sometimes they may never.

It rarely ceases to amaze me, but I am no longer surprised as I once was of the ignorance, the uncaring, the lack of intelligence, the lack of insight in people who call themselves artists or think that they are artists, publishers, or people that are in high places that have some sort of credibility or power that in no way shape or form should they be in those positions but they are. You keep going, you stay true to your own heart, you know what you have to do, and you don't let those people influence you negatively. If you believe in what you're doing, no one is going to stop you. I believe in what I'm doing, and I keep doing it. I'm not just talking about photography. I have opinions and I like to publicize them sometimes and I think all that stuff is important because I'm in to making the world a better place for more human beings. Not for a particular group of human beings. I want everything to be better for everyone. That's why I'm so in to promoting rebellion in youth culture. A thinking rebellion, not just rebels with out a cause, I'm in to rebels with a cause. Making this place better, that's what this, is really about. And if you're doing it for alternative motives, then you will give up. You will forget about it, and you will no longer do it. And that's fine because that must mean your heart was never really in it to begin with. My heart is in it and I'm here for the long hall.

L.F. - **I can relate that.**

Glen - I think most people could who have the work ethic. Nothing was ever handed to me on a silver platter. Except for maybe my education by my parents, but even that is what you make of it. I grew up in a nice

neighborhood in the west side of Los Angeles. We definitely had a somewhat privileged existence relative to most people on this planet that's for sure. But that doesn't mean that even with in that existence, that you didn't have to fight for what you got. I know plenty of kids that had everything that ended up with nothing, and kids that had nothing that ended up with everything. It just depends on the individual. You got to fight for what you want. You have to work hard for what you want. Very rarely, it happens on occasion, but very rarely do people get something for nothing. You just got to keep doing it because you believe in it, and if you don't than go fucking find something you believe in! If you can't believe in yourself and you can't believe in what you're doing than you better do fucking something else.

L.F. - **If you were given a chance to say one thing to all the people that have had the chance to or will see your work to give, them a better perspective of your vision and some what influence their perception of your work, what would you say?**

Glen - The thing is that no one has to do what I say. But the thing that I would like people to understand is I'm not just doing it to do it, I really believe in what I'm doing. I really care about what I'm shooting and about what I'm portraying. I actually have something emotionally involved in each of the images. Working hard or hardly working, but just using my own eye to compose an image that is pleasing to me or perfect to me in some way. You want the picture to really express something that is not normally expressed in a normal snapshot.

A good photograph should be composed properly, photographically correct in focus and with lighting to express the mood of the situation. A lot of things are taken for granted now. People just see and image and they turn the page very quickly. Look at the picture for sixty seconds not ten seconds. Look at it for ten minutes, look at it for an hour. Don't just turn the page after seeing it with your peripheral vision. If you do that you're not going to get anything I do. You're going to get what you want out of it, and that's fine. But if you don't look at it for at least a couple minutes your not going to get out of it what I put in to it, that's for sure.

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