



Entertainment

Watch "The Police Tapes" and Lose All Nostalgia for NYC in the 70s

You have no idea just how nasty, brutish, and short life in the rotten apple was back in the day unless you've seen the groundbreaking cinema vérité documentary "The Police Tapes."

By Greg Eggebeen

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When people talk about classic films that portray the very scary place that was New York City in the 1970s, they predictably mention fiction films like *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The French Connection*, and a myriad others. However, you have no idea just how nasty, brutish, and short life in the rotten apple was back in the day unless you've seen the groundbreaking cinema vérité documentary ***The Police Tapes***.

Shot in 1976 by the legendary husband and wife filmmaking duo Alan and Susan Raymond, *The Police Tapes* follows the officers of the 44th Precinct in the South Bronx—an area that had the highest crime rate in NYC at the time. For three months, they rode alongside cops as they warred with citizens who were frustrated by the relentless pains of urban decay. Between apartment raids and all-night manhunts, the cops tried their damndest to maintain some semblance of sanity in a city that was on the brink of collapse.

You know how people are always fetishizing 70s New York as a golden age? Guess what: It was hell. And the Raymonds got it all on tape. You can see that tape this Sunday as part of the **Bronxploitation** series at the **Spectacle Theater** in Williamsburg, Brooklyn at 8 PM.

In honor of the special screening, I spoke with the Alan and Susan. Even though the filmmakers are behind such legendary cinema as their debut 12-hour PBS classic ***An American Family*** and they've won everything from Oscars to Peabody awards, *The Police Tapes* remain very special to them. This is what they had to say about the film that forced them to hang out on Bronx street corners at 3 AM.

VICE: How did *The Police Tapes* come about?

Alan Raymond: After the success of *An American Family* and the massive vérité training that came with it, we said, "We are never going to work for anybody anymore." We wanted to produce and the only people who gave us a shot were the **TV Lab** on New York's PBS station, Channel 13. They had people like **Nam June Paik**, **Ed Emshwiller**, **DCTV**, **TVT**... all these counterculture people making films.

How was it filmed?

We used these early video recorders that started coming to America from Japan. The earliest was the PortaPak. I believe Nam June Paik brought over the original deck from Japan that we used for the film. It was held together with gaffer tape. When we started testing it, we realized it didn't even work in the daytime. We got this really weird image where the green foliage of the trees turned white. So, we had to figure out something we could do at night. Something like a film noir, nighttime show.

Susan: Alan decided that we would make a police film because it was a genre staple of television, and the only representation of police on television was *Barney Miller*, which was a really stupid sitcom.

How'd you get the cops to agree to do it?

Alan: We went down to One Police Plaza and they immediately turned us down. Since this predates *Cops* and all those shows, there was no reference point for them.

Susan: Also, they had this leftover negative image from the 60s of the whole “off the pigs” thing, and we looked like counter-culture people, so I guess it wasn't surprising.

Alan: But, it turned out that I had a high school friend who became a policeman and he suggested we go talk to this guy named Anthony Bouza, who was the chief of the Bronx.

Susan: Bouza knew what the story was. He knew that the place was burning down. And the press never, *ever*, went to the South Bronx. You could actually see the fires when you drove on the highway. So Bouza was happy that he was gonna get somebody up there, and he knew what we were gonna see. So, he said yes.

During interviews in the film, Bouza really crystallizes the reasons why the Bronx got to be so bad. He was incredibly eloquent for a police chief. You don't hear many cops quoting Aristotle.

Susan: It was good fortune to have met him. But, you find people who are working in a public situation and they know everything is going wrong and they actually want *you* to know that.

If only every cop was that open.

Alan: Yeah, when we got to the precinct with our cameras, we confronted reality situation number two: The Blue Wall of Silence. No one wanted to be in the film. So, we just stood around for two weeks. Even my high school friend didn't want to go on camera.

How'd you break through?

Susan: There was an officer who was trying out a one-man car. It was something nobody in the precinct would do because it was way too dangerous. We knew there would be room for us, so the sergeant asked if he'd take us out and he did. We went out for a whole evening with this officer and nothing happened until the very last minute. He saw a guy stealing a car. He arrested the guy and threw him in the back of the car with us. The guy started getting violent and we got kicked in the head.

Jesus.

Alan: The officer had to knock him out with his flashlight. That was our baptism of fire.

Susan: When the officers found out, we had to fill out a report and naturally we said that the heroic officer saved our lives.

Alan: They also saw that we were filming a highly charged event and didn't mess it up.

So that won you some good grace with the police.

Susan: That's when the floodgates opened. We saw everything—murders, homicides, snipers... The Black Panthers were hiding out and the police wanted us to see the hideout after they caught them! There'd be guys on the

America's Most Wanted List and they'd say, "Come with us, we're going there tonight!"

Alan: They would jump out of the car to respond to something and sometimes say to us, "Come on in the building with us." Or they might say, "I don't think this is safe. There might be a guy with a gun. You should wait in the street." So, there we were standing on the corner under a streetlight in the South Bronx at 3AM. It was kind of scary.

Susan: Once you live through 90 days of that, you can go anywhere.

What impact do you think that kind of experience had on you as a filmmaker?

That was the beginning for me of thinking that we should do films about social issues and we have from that point on. It turned us into sharper-edged journalists because we saw the complexities of the situation. There is not an easy solution to what's going on here. And it's your right and your privilege to show the world that this is a big problem that needs attention.

The entire film, you see tension mount between the police and the people, and then one cop has this abrupt display of force when he yanks a hysterical woman out of a car, pins her down, and screams, "Shut up!" in her face. Was there ever a time when you saw some actions by the police and you thought they took it too far?

Alan: That's a complicated question. The roles of documentary filmmakers are not necessarily to pass judgment on people. It comes down to eye of the beholder. I'm sure that half the people who watch that scene say, "I'm so glad he yanked that woman out of the car, banged her head, and said 'shut up.'" And then the other half will say, "Oh my God! Police brutality."

Who's right?

I think that you have to see the situation as a variety of different elements. But when you go to a screening, as a viewer, you bring your own beliefs, prejudices, whatever... and then the film, which in theory is a mirror of society that's reflecting back to you, triggers a set of reactions.

So you shot the film for 90 days, edited everything, and presented it to the New York PBS affiliate. What happened next?

Alan: It aired on the New York station and the heads at PBS were furious! "You're just letting people go out with cameras who haven't had years of journalistic experience and you're putting this stuff on the air?" You have to understand the way network news used to work. It was a scenario where everybody felt threatened by independent-type producers because there was this whole issue of democratizing the media that was beginning to surface. So, the joke was that we did *The Police Tapes* and it won a duPont, a Peabody, and an Emmy when it aired locally on the New York station, and then PBS said, "We don't want to air it." The phoney-baloney excuse they used was that it was a small-format video and it didn't meet their gold spec standards.

Susan: But it was really just an attempt to stop independent access. The wonderful part of the story is that Pamela Hill at ABC News saw the awards and said, "Well, you've won the triple crown. I want to buy your video and put it on ABC News as one of our *Closeups*. Could you just make it 50 minutes?" You don't get those calls very often. It was their first independent acquisition. And then, as the good fortune kept rolling, they hired us as producers for three years.

It's crazy that there was so much opposition to what you guys were doing back then.

Alan: There was a bit of a controversy about it in the press, too. And we

admittedly shot our mouths off a couple of times saying “Fuck CBS News and their tradition.” The vérité team had invaded the network news organization.

And that subsequent invasion changed television immensely. *The Police Tapes* was a huge influence on *Hill Street Blues* and *Cops* and, along with *An American Family*, it helped shift television into its reality-based era.

Susan: That's something we don't really care about. The fact that we inspired *The Real World* is nothing to be proud of.

Alan: I think over the years it has really eroded audiences' perceptions of what documentary TV is really all about. The current cop shows are awful. They perpetuate the “them versus us” scenario as well as the idea that there’s a criminal class out there that needs to be policed. They’re simplistic in terms of their law and order point of view and I equate them with that awful show *Lockup* on MSNBC, which basically demonizes all people in prison—many of whom are there for reasons far more complex than anything they ever portray. I think it’s an incredibly simplistic view of American crime and punishment.

The *Police Tapes* will be screened this Sunday at 8PM at Brooklyn's ***Spectacle Theater***, located at 124 South 3rd Street, near Bedford Avenue.