

# Slate

## Violence, Love, and Hope: Growing Up in the Bronx in the 1980s

By *Jordan G. Teicher*



*Two teens wear stocking masks to hide their identities, Bathgate Avenue, 1982.*

When **Stephen Shames** took his first photos of the Bronx in 1977—while on assignment to produce a photo essay for *Look*—the area, one of the poorest in the United States, was a “terrifying” and “often dangerous” place. Heroin soon became easily available in the borough, followed by crack. And yet, Shames said, the Bronx felt like home.

The world of “violence, rejection, love, hope, and redemption” was similar to the one Shames inhabited growing up with an abusive father. For him, these photos serve as more of a personal statement than documentation.

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*A dealer sells crack in front of a building as moms sit with their babies, and children play, 1987 or 1988.*



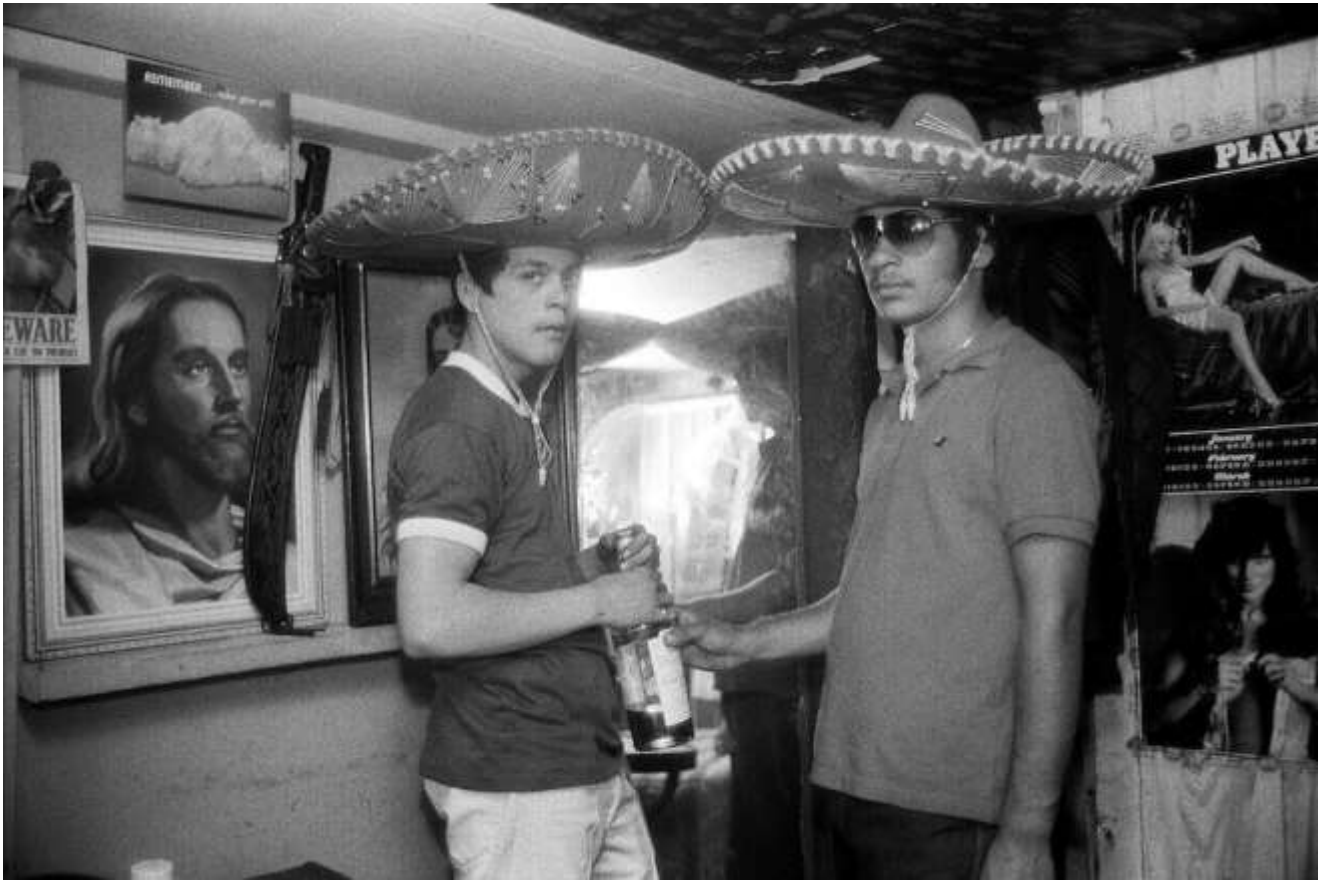
*Martin and his girlfriend, who live together, 1984 or 1985.*

While it was heartbreaking for him to see young men die from violence and drugs, Shames said he was almost instantly “hooked” on the Bronx, driven to return there again and again because his subjects “took me into their hearts and made me family. When you are family, a place can still be dangerous at times but it is home. People protect you.”

Shames’ book, *Bronx Boys*, out next month from University of Texas Press, depicts both the brutality and the tender heart of the Bronx from the 1970s through the turn of the millennium. (All the photos in this post are from the 1980s.) The book focuses on a group of boys coming of age, many of whom organized themselves into crews, or adolescent families.

While “more than half” of the young men in Shames’ book ended up “dead or in jail,” Shames said his book is also about “survival and redemption.” Drug activity in the borough died down somewhat in the 1990s and the teens he was closest to got married, started families, and moved out of the neighborhood. One became an executive at a food company. Another started his own business.

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*Two teenage boys wear Mexican hats as they drink inside a social club, Bathgate Avenue, 1984.*

Ultimately, *Bronx Boys* is not about abuse or disorder. It's a positive statement about the bravery and tenacity of the kids he photographed. "The book shows how the kids banded together to create a family—a crew—to overcome this systematic neglect," he said.

*Bronx Boys* will be on display at New York City's **Steven Kasher Gallery** from Nov. 6–15.