

ORCHARD BEACH



ORCHARD BEACH: THE BRONX RIVIERA

Wayne Lawrence

Introduction by David Gonzalez

Prestel

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Foreword

WAYNE LAWRENCE

I am Ava's second son, born on sixty-eight square miles of fertile earth surrounded by water, and in our youth the sea meant everything to my brother, David, and me. I remember a time when sprinting barefoot down the hot asphalt of Pitcairn Street to Newtown Bay was one of our favorite rituals. We'd swim and laugh, searching the black sand for sea cockroaches, or pretend that we were strong enough to help the fishermen pull in their skiffs in exchange for our "porter pay," working ourselves into exhaustion. For hours we'd tarry under God's sun, until our spirits called for rest, breathing in the salty air and reveling in the innocence that we shared.

It's simple memories like this that I hold on to now, years later, when so much of life has changed. It's been more than ten years since I received the news that would forever change me and intensify this walk through life. My *bredren* Tau was on the other end of the phone line, and the word he shared was not good. My older brother, David, was dead. Gone for good. Murdered before reaching his thirtieth birthday. There are no words in existence to relate the pain, the loss that I felt. I wept, and in that instant I knew that a part of me had died, too.

For months after David was laid to rest, I tried in earnest to process the pain, the anger, searching within the depths of my soul to find some kind of understanding of why this madness had occurred. I mean, David was no saint, but I believe

that every man is worthy of redemption. Talking to God and reflecting on the past in an effort to identify where things fell apart, I clung to every morsel of memory that I recognized as my brother's purest essence. But there was no going back. Death is final. For a while the tears flowed nonstop like river water, but I had to stand firm, understanding that the stakes were even higher now that I had a young son of my own to raise.

At this point I was two years into my journey as an artist and trying to figure out what I wanted to say with the work. I thought about how so many other brothers and sisters, born as pure souls, become statistics of their environment as David had, unable to transcend the circumstances they were born into. I wanted to build a body of work that my children and yours could ponder long after we're gone. I wanted to find a way to confront issues of race and class using a visual language that would speak to everyday people.

I returned to New York in 2004, after a decade on the West Coast, determined to make a life here for my family. After a year and a half of pounding the pavement, it occurred to me that I still had a lot of healing to do, and I found myself once again at the shore, at Orchard Beach—the only beach in the "Boogie Down Bronx." At first I tried going to Coney Island, since it was closer to where I lived in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, but I

always left there feeling somewhat aggravated. It was just too vast, which made it hard to make connections. Then I heard about Orchard, and I knew that I had to go see why so many considered it to be one of the worst beaches in New York.

From the first day that I visited Orchard, I knew the stigma attached to this place was unjustified. I felt a very strong connection to the environment and the people. I decided I'd stay a while, though I had no idea where the journey would lead. I sensed it was the beginning of a catharsis, and I committed on that day to let the work be a reflection of the love, cultural pride, and generosity of spirit that I witnessed there.

So for six summers I rode the C train uptown from Kingston-Throop, switching at Fulton Street to the number 4 train. This took me to 125th Street, where I'd transfer to the number 6 train, taking it to the end of the line at Pelham Bay Park. A short ride later on a number 12 or 5 bus and I'd be at *la playa*.

I'd spend hours, almost daily, walking alongside the waveless tide or the boardwalk, greeting folks I knew and

introducing myself to those I didn't, letting my newfound friends know I was working on a book that would be a celebration of everyday people. At first I tried a few different ways of telling the story, but I realized what brought me the most satisfaction were the exchanges that resulted in the portraits in this collection. These photographs don't show all of the people I had the privilege of meeting over the years, but instead represent a balanced cross section of the whole community.

I love going to Orchard Beach. The six years I spent photographing the Bronx Riviera allowed me the time and space to meditate on the importance of family and community and also gave me a sense of belonging and purpose. I've had some of the most honest exchanges within this community of working-class families and colorful characters, and I am forever grateful to the countless souls who allowed me the time to tell this story.

No, Papi, It's Not Like That

DAVID GONZALEZ

Though I am the son of island people, I had the misfortune of being born and raised on the mainland. My parents, Pedro and Lillian, left Puerto Rico as teens in the 1930s, met at a church dance in Spanish Harlem, got married, and moved to the Bronx—the Puerto Rican promised land, and the only borough of New York City that is actually part of the mainland United States. Just as the Israelites had to endure the sufferings of the Exodus in the unforgiving desert, we, too, in the 1960s confronted our own era of lamentations in the wasteland, coming of age in a South Bronx that was being consumed by chaos and flames before our very eyes.

It took a man named Moses to lead us back to our roots. In one grand, defiant gesture, he carved an escape route along the water, securing us safe passage on dry land. It was a path that led us back to where we came from. Island people. By the shore.

To Orchard Beach.

This Moses was no prophet but rather a master builder, Robert Moses. A legendary New York City official of unlimited—and at times capricious—power, he carved out a 1.1-mile sliver of beachfront in the northeast corner of the Bronx in the 1930s. Perhaps it was an act of atonement, in advance, for what his other schemes of urban modernity would eventually do to the Bronx. His Cross Bronx Expressway, an

asphalt-paved canyon, sliced the borough into North and South, destroying neighborhoods and setting the stage for the devastation that would descend in the 1960s. Later he helped build Co-Op City, a sprawling collection of high-rise apartments that attracted many white families who were fleeing other Bronx neighborhoods which were becoming home to blacks and Latinos.

The mention of his name still elicits glares and angry tirades from Bronxites old enough to remember how they were forced into exile by Moses's wrecking ball, which tolled as mournfully for them as any funeral bell.

But before he did all that, he built Orchard Beach.

For many of us—the children of Puerto Rican migrants who worked in factories, basements, and kitchens—Orchard was the closest we ever got to *las playas de Borinquen*. I mean, my father sang about Borinquen—Puerto Rico—a lot. But an army accident in World War II made him too scared to fly there, and three kids in Catholic school left him with little extra money, either.

So instead we shared in a ritual repeated in countless apartments in the South Bronx. We would pack for a day at Orchard with great anticipation and precision: white-bread ham-and-cheese sandwiches wrapped in aluminum foil, some sodas, and a homemade sunscreen of iodine and baby

oil. We'd get on the number 6 train—years before Jennifer Lopez made it famous—and head north. The train emerged from underground, rumbling along Westchester Avenue to the last stop. There, we and hundreds of others would troop onto a caravan of number 12 buses, which took us past a municipal dump whose baking heaps of garbage reeked in the summer sun. Once past that final reminder of urban indignity, the buses rolled deeper into Pelham Bay Park, twisting through the woods, going along the edge of a humungous parking lot, and finally letting us off outside the main crescent-shaped pavilion by the shore.

I always felt that last passage to the beach, through a quiet, tree-lined park, was essential to appreciating Orchard. Coney Island—like a lot of Brooklyn—was in your face, with the boardwalk just steps away from the subway. Besides, it was more about commerce, with its rides and restaurants accompanied by the incessant din from trains, traffic, and hustlers working every conceivable con.

But to go to Orchard was to feel like you were actually getting away from it all.

Maybe that is why Wayne Lawrence was attracted to the place. He had first come to the Bronx from Saint Kitts in 1990 to spend a summer with his grandmother on Crotona Avenue—not far from Moses's Cross Bronx Expressway—and fell in love with the sounds and smells of the city. But it would be more than another decade before he discovered Orchard—learning about it when he spied a credit in a magazine fashion spread that read “shot at Orchard Beach.”

He asked a friend. “Yo, that's the hood beach,” his friend warned him.

Fair enough. Orchard—like a lot of the South Bronx—had a fearsome rep. The 1970s had not been kind. The city was

going broke, and little could be done to keep up the appearance of order. People used to rip up wood planks from park benches and set them alight. Dice and card games ruled along one stretch known as Las Vegas Alley. The sand was littered with broken glass, beer-can pull tabs, and soda bottle tops. And you couldn't even think about getting in the water.

But just like the South Bronx, Orchard came to see better days. By the time Wayne first visited, its thirteen sections were always packed with people—a seaside alliance of colors and countries who actually got along (or at least didn't throw down). Puerto Rican, Italian, Cuban, Dominican, Ghanaian, Panamanian, Albanian, Irish, Korean. You name it, Orchard had it.

Of course, for a place known as the Puerto Rican Riviera, Salsa concerts were a huge draw, with top Latin bands playing in a tented stage by the broad pavilion. Fierce games of basketball and paddleball were waged along the courts tucked between the parking lot and the boardwalk. Those seeking quiet—or a chance to tan parts where the sun doesn't shine—would trek off to the northern tip. Caribbean drummers jammed in the shade of trees. Kids played. People talked.

Life was lived.

And that is what Wayne discovered when he made the trek from “Do or Die” Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, to the “Boogie Down Bronx”—life in all of its complicated, Bronxian glory. He found people who grew up like him, with a no-nonsense single mother. Who might have lost a brother. Who longed to reconnect with a deep part of their culture that refused to die in the face of an unforgiving city. And, yes, to chill out, hear some music, and talk with friends, both old and newfound.

“Yo, Ras!” people would shout at him in the summer. “You'd better put me in that book!”

The photographs in this book are a record of the United Nations of the Bronx, home to people from pretty much every corner of the globe. Most are straight-ahead shots, where you have to confront the subjects' faces, poses, and, yes, their tattoos. That last part might throw some readers, since some folks have a lot of tats. Then again, a recent visit to Sesame Place in Pennsylvania made me realize that having skin slathered with inky designs is hardly limited to the Bronx. And who knows what lies beneath the starched white shirts or flowery sundresses worn at garden parties in the Hamptons.

In the Bronx, what you see is what you get—unhidden, unflinching, and unavoidable. Among the crowds at Orchard, some boast gang symbols, true enough, but others attest to loves lost or forever enshrined. Love of God and love of Mom. One of the toughest faces, Ernesto's, challenges you to figure him out as he poses next to Cupy, his fluffy Chihuahua. And then there's Goodie Goodie, a member of the Bronx Classics Bike Club. "If you saw him you'd think that was one mean cat," Wayne recalls. "One day, after I took his picture, I was leaving the beach and this van stopped. All I heard was 'Tio! Tio!' It was this van full of kids who ran out and hugged this man. It was his family."

Skinny girls he photographed in the early years are now curvy young women. Boys have become men. Mothers and daughters have died, some from violence. Others from disease. They live on in Wayne's book.

So, too, does the memory of his own brother, David. He had been murdered in 2002, and his death weighed heavily upon Wayne when he first stepped foot on Orchard.

"I've been scarred by that for a long time," Wayne says. "When I came to New York, I wanted to do a body of work by the water. I like going to the water. I like the calming effects

of the water, especially dealing with my brother. This was the body of work I was going to be known for."

Water cleanses the spirit. And in this case it inspired his, too.

This book, these pictures, are Wayne Lawrence's meditation. To look at them is to see a corner of our world at the dawn of the third millennium. It is to see people baring not just their bodies but their souls to the camera. It challenges us to think not about what we see but whom and how.

"It showed me we are all the same, like family," Wayne said. "These are the children of survivors. They went through that period in the Bronx and somehow made it."

Like Angie and Eddie. He had seen this couple every summer in the thick of Section Eight—the epicenter of the Puerto Rican Riviera. They looked hard and tough. Wayne never felt he could connect with them. So, one day, he asked them why they were so cold.

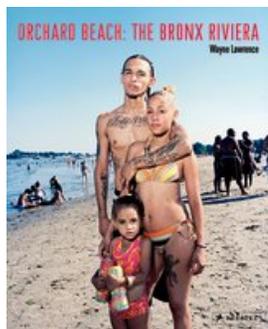
"No, Papi," Angie told him. "It's not like that."

She introduced him to Eddie and ever since then, it's been nothing but love. Like anything in the Bronx, once you get past your own fear or expectation, it's a whole different world. Eddie—the man Wayne once thought was cold—can attest to that.

"Yo, Ras!" Eddie always tells him. "I love you man! Keep doing what you're doing."

Yo, Eddie, Wayne Lawrence did just that.





Orchard Beach

The Bronx Riviera

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This collection of engaging and beautiful portraits by Wayne Lawrence celebrates the diversity and community of one of New York City's most popular beaches.

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