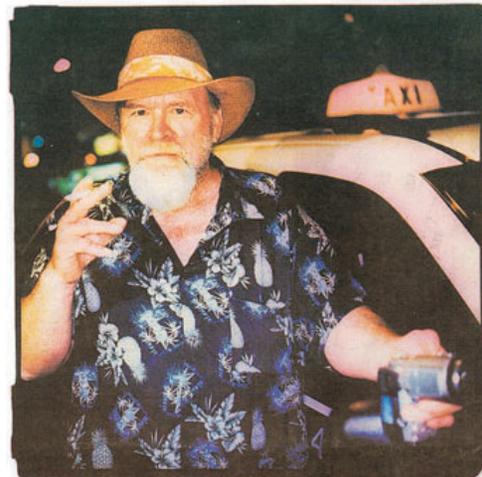
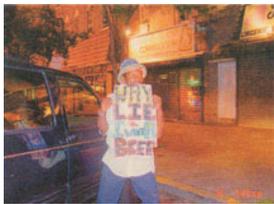


The Drive-By Shooter

CABBIE KEN PIASKOWSKI SEES MORE OF THE CITY THAN YOU EVER WILL. FORTUNATELY, HE'S TAKING THOUSANDS OF PICTURES WHILE HE'S OUT THERE.

By Wendy Ward



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VIEW FINDER: SINCE OCTOBER 2002, **KEN PIASKOWSKI** HAS SHOT 20,000 DIGITAL PHOTOS FROM HIS CAB, SHAPING A VIEW OF THE CITY THAT FEW GET TO SEE.

RIDING IN A BALTIMORE CITY CAB IS USUALLY an exercise in frustration. Between the smells, language barriers, and extra fees, a taxi ride is rarely fun. Until you meet Ken Piaskowski, you'd never think that a ride could be more than, well, just a ride.

It's a hot, wet summer evening when I hail a new white and purple Jeep cab for a ride to Lulu's off Broadway in Fells Point.

The driver looks like Santa Claus with a grown-out Vandyke beard, introduces himself as Ken, and says straight off that he takes a lot of pictures.

"I do a lot of drive-by shootings, so to speak," he says, and offers to show me. Not one to normally take anything from a stranger's hand unless I've paid for it, I don't expect much when he hands me a zippered book full of 8 1/2-by-11-inch photos he has shot from his cab. But I turn page after page of shiny, happy drunks mugging for the camera, homeless folk sleeping on discarded couches, lovers kissing on the street, neon restaurant and bar signs, children up past their bedtime. Most of the images are at night, when the city is most alive, and into the early morning, when it feels almost deserted. The scenes are familiar, but viewed one after another they begin to tell their own story of the city one not many take the time to notice.

Piaskowski, 54, bought a killer digital camera in 2001 for a trip to China and has been taking pictures from his cab, since starting at Baltimore Taxi Cab Association in October 2002. He takes full advantage of the convenience and economy that the digital technology provides. "The digital thing has opened up the door, because you can just shoot and shoot and shoot," he says. "You can take a lot of chances."

Early photos mostly feature his passengers chilling out in the backseat of the big Crown Victoria he drove a

couple of years ago. The car's bright dome light illuminates faces flushed from drinking, guys bumping heads to get in the shot, and hottie girls looking like they're about to give up a flash for Mardi Gras beads. Everybody looks happy and drunk, and not as bad as you do in some of those party shots you've been in.

After that first trip, I spend a Friday night riding around with Piaskowski after he picks up his wife, Lorie, in Washington, where she works as a lawyer. He begins talking about when he started at the Baltimore Taxi Cab Association. His first cab there had a meter that ticked twice as fast as it should have. Lorie laughs, warns me it's a topic that works him up, and wishes me luck. We drop her off at their house in Washington Hill.

"I promise not to get run over by anything or hit anything tonight," he calls to her. Tonight, Piaskowski is dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and straw Panama hat. Above the low jazz coming from the radio, he tells me we're going to get some regulars. We pick up George, his nephew Alex, and his mother, Maria, all from the Dominican Republic, at the Progresso grocery store on Broadway. Piaskowski introduces me as "a fly on the wall" and shoves me in the back.

Maria sits up front and they talk about the work the city is doing on the sidewalk in front of the grocery, which they say is hurting business. Then we pick up another regular, Thomas, and a couple of his friends. Soon it's a packed Jeep, with conversations going in every direction. George tells me they've been calling Piaskowski for rides for a while now because of his dependability; meanwhile, little Alex goes from crying about his bike at home to falling asleep, a sucker stuck to his trousers. We say good bye to the family at their house in Soweto.

Piaskowski knows every regular's story, and he should. More than 50 percent of his customers are regulars, especially during the work week, and a whole bunch

of them are captured in his photographs. I found a photo of Thomas and a beautiful girl out on the town before she went back home to their native India. Tonight, Thomas and his friends are heading to a party in Southwest Baltimore; they get out at the Red Door club, but only after Piaskowski takes a shot of the them from his moonroof, and Thomas takes a shot of the two of us with his own camera. When I explain to Thomas that I'm hanging out with Piaskowski for the night, he says, "I know. I mean, it's the best thing you can do."

Piaskowski says his photos are all about the moment, which sometimes means just finding a moment to take them: "Sometimes if I'm going down the street I'll take a series if I'm at a traffic light, but mostly [I shoot] when I'm in the cab by myself, 'cause it's boring." This perhaps explains why the shot of Thomas and his friends is the first and only I see him take during the hours I'm with him.

Piaskowski shoots an average of 50 photos a night, he says, and he edits each of them. "I download them all, because when I first started doing this I'd look at them in the morning and I'm tired," he says. "I took last summer off and looked at the ones I had previously taken and found a lot more that I didn't like the first time."

He does discriminate when it comes to printing them, though: Of the 20,000 or so photos he's shot from his cab so far, he's printed only about 2,000 and now has seven zippered albums full of them. Two always sit on his front seat, ready for anyone wanting to look.

Piaskowski says he has always been creative, but that writing was his first calling. In 1976, he says he started writing songs and little ditties that, along with "42 days of solitude, with breaks," in a friend's hunting shack, turned into the 2001 book *Dust, Rainbows and Dirty Sox*, a stream-of-consciousness narrative à la Jack Kerouac. He self-published *Dust* with a print-on-demand company, orders 50 copies at a time, and sells them out of his cab. "My market research on the sales of the book is that most of them sell at 1:30 in the morning or later," he laughs.

Piaskowski says he has also penned five screenplays, some of which he has shopped around Los Angeles: *Trapezoid*, about a woman and her three lovers; *Darkstar*, in which Christ comes back as a black woman; an adaptation of *Dust, Rainbows and Dirty Sox*; *Wasted*, based on his rough days in the early '70s when he co-

owned a bar in Fells Point; and *Immune*, dealing with the origin of AIDS. About his large body of work, Piaskowski says, "Actually, you know, some of this stuff ain't bad."

More recently, he has written 300 pages of autobiographical fiction that he's planning to rework, but not while he's working every night in his cab and that's where the photos come into play. "I can't write anything right now," he says. "I have a really nice digital video camera, but I can't do anything with that right now. The photography actually works with the cab. And it's my people hit."

All sorts of people. He has photos of punksters dressed like Japanese street kids in outrageously high platform shoes; a homeless guy eating a meal on top of a garbage can; extras from a funeral scene in the film *Ladder 49*, shot around the corner from where he lives; a few people out during last winter's snowstorm; and what he calls a "series of pictures of people looking at pictures looking at pictures."

Piaskowski doesn't like to use a flash, he says, because it directs attention to himself. He points out a photo of man walking a pit bull with a milk crate in its teeth. "If I took a picture of that guy walking down the street with a pit bull with a flash, he would take the milk crate out of the pit bull's mouth and have him chase me," Piaskowski says. He has had a few people protest at having their pictures taken, especially arabbers, but says he feels strongly about his freedom to shoot: "Legally, to the best of my understanding, if you're in a public place, you have no reasonable expectation of privacy."

And he freely admits that capturing everyday life on street isn't easy. "You spend 80 hours a week doing this, and the number of shots you miss is amazing," he says. "If I don't have the camera turned on, it takes a few seconds to turn on, and then [the shot] is gone." Piaskowski says that taking photos is ultimately about "keeping in touch with my creativity." After two more passengers, he gets a call from the partiers he had driven to Washington five hours earlier. He invites me to go with him to pick them up, but it's late. When he drops me off, he tells me why he really does what he does.

"I like the pictures of the people," he says. "Baltimore has some very interesting characters."