

# Shot Through the Heart

## Photographer Martha Cooper captures daily life in Sowebo.

by [Deborah Rudacille](#)

On the eve of the Civil War, a young rabbi named Benjamin Szold landed in southwest Baltimore, settling in the 800 block of West Lombard Street to lead the nearby Oheb Shalom congregation. Now, fastforward a century and a half. Szold's thoroughly secular great-granddaughter, Martha Cooper, is performing her own rituals of devotion, roaming the hardscrabble streets a few blocks west in a Patagonia jacket and faded jeans.

Known to residents as "picture lady," Cooper photographs the vibrant street life of a community that many view as little more than a druginfested ghetto. Although the backdrop to her photos "is a neighborhood rife with drugs and crime, full of boarded-up buildings," she says, "that's not my focus. I'm shooting more in a spirit of historic preservation, trying to capture what street life and culture was like in this neighborhood at this point in time."

That same impulse led Cooper to the work that made her famous thirty years ago, now iconic photos of graffiti-splashed subway trains and street artists and b-boys—also known as breakdancers—practicing their art in the gritty Manhattan of the 1970s. The book she published with fellow photographer Henry Chalfant in 1984, *Subway Art*, was the catalyst for a global street art revolution. Today, in her 60s, Cooper is invited to photograph street art and dance events around the world. But as an artist, she had started to feel restless. After returning to the city of her birth a few years ago to settle her parents' estate—Cooper's Camera Mart, a northeast Baltimore institution—she thought, "How can I use this money to do something I couldn't otherwise do?"

Wanting to "just shoot street stuff"—the kind of aimless artistry that led her to Dondi, Lady Pink, and other NYC graffiti artists back in the day—Cooper thought about Baltimore. "I got a little flutter," she says. Driving through Sowebo with a real estate agent some weeks later, she saw a kid jumping on a mattress. Sold! "I used to see that all the time on the Lower East Side [in New York]," she says. It was only after she had put a deposit down on a tiny rowhouse a few blocks from Hollins Market that she learned she had settled in the same neighborhood as her Baltimore ancestors. "It was complete chance."

Taking the Bolt bus down from New York every other weekend, Cooper shoots within a strictly defined area. "The borders I stick to are Baltimore Street, the railroad tracks, MLK Boulevard, and Monroe Street," she says, and she wanders those sometimes sketchy streets on foot, alone with her camera—although only during the day. "I don't feel safe in Baltimore," Cooper admits. "I feel anxious."

On more than one occasion, she says young men on corners have yelled at her to put the camera away. She always attempts to introduce herself and explain what she's up to. "I try to be really open about what I'm doing," she says.

Fortynine-year-old Dwayne Fantroy, who owns a garage and a variety store just north of Union Square in the poorer, blacker Franklin Square community, says that by persevering, Cooper has built a body of work that "really captures what's going on in the neighborhood—the tragedy and the successes. I label her a 'hood photographer. I think her efforts are genuine." And he says that he finds it "courageous that a white woman would even venture into some of these neighborhoods. Especially with a camera."

But Cooper's photos illustrate the surprisingly diverse racial mix of Southwest Baltimore. Pointing to the potential for voyeuristic exploitation in urban street photography, she says, "I'd actually be uncomfortable doing this work if it were an allblack neighborhood."

Neighborhood residents seem both grateful to and a bit mystified by the nice lady with the big camera. "She takes very good pictures," says Wendell Shore, 66, "and she always comes by and gives you copies." Shore lives on South Stricker Street a couple of blocks south of gentrified Union Square, but on his corner, the view is of boardedup houses and broken windows. Still, he has made creative use of the destruction, creating a flourishing orchard and vegetable garden in the empty lots created when crumbling rowhouses were torn down. Cooper often photographs him in his garden. "One time she got down in the dirt and took a picture looking up at me smoking a cigarette and holdin' six tomatoes in my hand," he marvels.

Eight blocks west, 74year-old "Miss Barb" Morris has crafted another kind of garden, planted not in earth but in plaster. The façade and narrow front yard of her Lombard Street rowhouse is a kind of holiday fairyland, full of elaborate seasonal decorations. Morris says she plans to send her family in Virginia the photos Cooper has taken of her standing in her front yard at Halloween, Easter, and Christmas. Drug dealers may ply their trade in the neighborhood and "run through our yard when the cops are after them," but Miss Barb and her dog, Meanness, just go about their business.

"My point of view is always more about focusing on survival in these neighborhoods," says Cooper, whether in Sowebo today or the New York City of old. "I've seen some terrible things, but I'm looking for people who are doing something creative in their circumstances."

—*Deborah Rudacille is a frequent contributor to Urbanite.*