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Speed Freaks

Deborah Stratman's documentary shines a light on the shadowy world of street dragsters.

By Cara Jepsen

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A few years back, Deborah Stratman befriended a group of gearheads in California who spent their weekends drag racing in the desert. When the Naperville native returned to Chicago in 1997, she wanted to make a feature-length film based on the local crop of urban drag racers, whose illegal quarter-mile contests take place at night on city streets. But before she could begin her research, she had to find them.

"It started with little tips here and there," she recalls. "I would go out three or four nights a week, looking for tire marks on the street and for packs of people with hot cars. After a while I'd recognize people's cars and follow them to the staging areas, where they would go before and after the races.

"A lot of people were suspicious of what my motives were, because they didn't want the wrong people to be showing up. I was sort of on the right trail. But even if you know the right place, you're not sure they're going to be there."

Stratman, who drives a Ford pickup and teaches film and video at the School of the Art Institute, eventually decided to focus on a group of African-American racers who drive older, eight-cylinder American cars. She first encountered some of them outside her west-side apartment, near the corner of Fulton and Damen. Soon she learned the owner of a body shop next door, Tim Mullins, was a former racer, and she decided to scrap her original idea in favor of making a video documentary. The result, *The BLVD*, mixes Mullins's recollections and interviews with other drivers and spectators. There's also footage of races.

By attending these competitions, Stratman says, she gradually won the drivers' trust. "Once they figured I wasn't a narc, they were more receptive." She was usually the only white woman on the scene. "I definitely took some ribbing," she says. "I was a real anomaly to them." But her gender also worked to her advantage. "If a guy is shooting the scene, the subject sometimes gets defensive or wants to talk about technical car stuff. With me, it was more like a home movie and didn't pose a threat."

Stratman found she could conduct interviews at a leisurely pace. "There is so much dead time--hanging around and talking and rolling dice and doing nothing and waiting for the guys to actually decide who is going to race and how much the money is going to be," she says. Though most races took place on the west side, high-stakes matches would sometimes move to isolated locales. "There are all sorts of arcane rules, and just to get through it without being busted sometimes takes all night. Other times I would go out and see 25 races in one night."

One of her subjects was Tick, a woman in leather who had raced motorcycles until she was seriously injured in an accident. "I saw a lot of women out there, but I found very few women driving--and none were racing," Stratman says. "Most of the guys out there could remember or knew one or two women who had or were racing, but I never saw any of them."

The women she did see were mostly girlfriends or family members standing along the sidelines. Many of the drivers had relatives who also raced.

Stratman doesn't discount the danger posed to both drivers and spectators, as well as to those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Recently a south-side woman driving home late on a Friday night was killed by a teenager racing along 64th at Pulaski. A broken leg is the worst Stratman has ever witnessed. In a scene from *The BLVD*, a driver plows into a row of spectators and parked cars. "He wasn't really experienced," she says, "and had never driven with nitrous." Nitrous oxide is used by some racers to give their cars an extra boost. "A few people got hurt, and it smashed up a few cars." The sequence ends with an SUV towing away the wreckage.

"People do get into accidents," one driver admits defensively. "People do get hurt. But people are dying all over this city, getting shot by drug dealers. The death toll here is nothing compared to that." Stratman thinks there's some truth in that statement. "In a way, it's constructive," she says. "They're really into working on their cars--for them, it's an art."

The video ends with a police car spinning its wheels before it takes off down the street; the tires even begin to smoke. "We were shocked when they did that," says Stratman. "There have been busts every single time I've ever been out. Usually they come and shoo everyone away." Then everyone will reconvene at another location, so the police often take harsher steps. "Sometimes they impound people's cars," she says, and they turn on fire hydrants to flood the street.

Eventually both drivers and spectators began to follow her example, taking out their own cameras to record the races and the social scene. Stratman will be joined by her crew and some of the racers featured in her documentary when *The BLVD* receives its premiere this Thursday, May 13, at the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute; they'll discuss their experiences after the screening. "I don't want to turn this into a weird ethnographic event--'Look at those racers from the west side,'" says Stratman. "My dream is to have a screening at the Cicero Drive-In, so that everyone could bring their cars."

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photos/Robert Drea.