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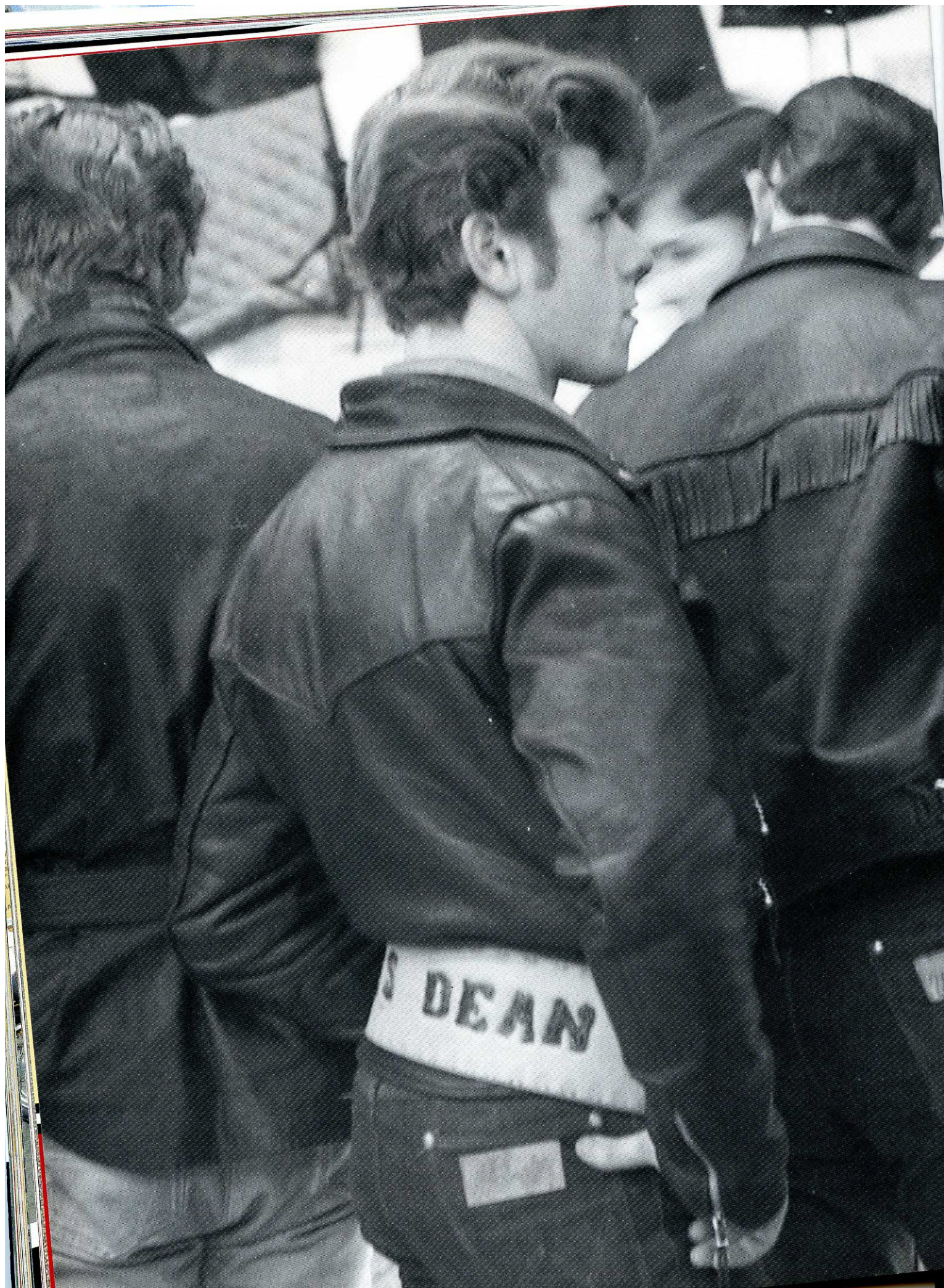


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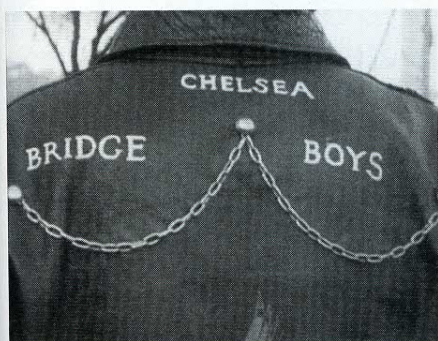
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Chelsea Bridge Boys *Legacy*

With the launch of Café Racer TV in 2009, it's easy to forget that recorded film history of the ton-up era has been largely nonexistent. Rockers from the old days will tell you that few punters owned still cameras, let alone movie rigs, in austere post WWII Britain so glimpses of the fabled nighttime burn-ups are rare, indeed. However, a few months back we learned of the re-release of a seminal bit of café racer history as documentarian Peter Davis, of Canada's Villon Films, clued us in to his remarkable 1965 study of rocker culture. Starkly honest, beautifully filmed and brilliant for prying away the hype about speed-crazed motorcycling teens, **Chelsea Bridge Boys** tells a story of the motorcyclists many have wondered about and emulated, but few have actually seen. From long, slow nights inside the Busy Bee to candid interviews about riding, rebellion and, yes, even death, the film revealed much about a still-misunderstood subculture. Recently, CRM's resident Anglophile, Willie Mac, managed to track down Davis and co-producer Staffan Lamm for a chat. — ED



Behind the Scenes of the World's First Rocker Documentary

Story: WILLIE MAC

Photos: PETER DAVIS & STAFFAN LAMM

Great things happened in 1965: President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed his Great Society; a doughboy became a mascot for Pillsbury; the first skateboard championship was held, and Mohammad Ali knocked out Sonny Liston, proving himself to be the "greatest." A little band called The Grateful Dead was formed and, on Swedish television, a short documentary film, little known to the rest of the world, was aired.

Peter Davis (a Cockney Brit) and Staffan Lamm (a Swede) teamed to produce the documentary film, *Chelsea Bridge Boys*. Both were working more or less freelance in Swedish television and secured a contract to produce a series of films, portrayals of contemporary British lifestyles, to run under the name *British Sketches*. The pair was free to choose their subjects, and for one installment they chose to film the Rockers that hung around Chelsea Bridge.

Says Peter of the film, "We did it for the love of the thing." With a budget described as "absolutely scornful" the two filmmakers were forced to live at Peter's parent's home in London during the filming, driving around in a ratty VW.

Neither was into motorbikes. Staffan said, "I think it was mainly our own curiosity. We knew very little about them and we wanted to get into that group. We wanted to get into that group that everybody was so afraid of. As a group they were a name much hyped, over hyped I'm sure, by the press. The Bridge Boys seemed pretty typical of what was around. The boys liked us. We were outsiders, like them. They supported us, but they looked on us as kind of helpless people that didn't know what we were doing. They were a bit worried about us. They thought we were dreamers, thinking that we were making a documentary."

Making initial contact with the Bridge Boys was not difficult. "We drove around London. We probably drove past the boys a few times, and then one day stopped and chatted with them," said Peter. Acceptance was never a problem. "I think they thought it was a laugh. We came across as very non-professional filmmakers. It was pretty much our style, I suppose."

The pair had ten weeks total to shoot, with the Rockers portion accounting for about two weeks of that time. The subjects of other documentaries of the

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series, filmed concurrently, were: the Royal Hospital, immigrants, and public schools. (A segment on a strip club was done, but not shown on Swedish Television because it was too revealing. Go figure.)

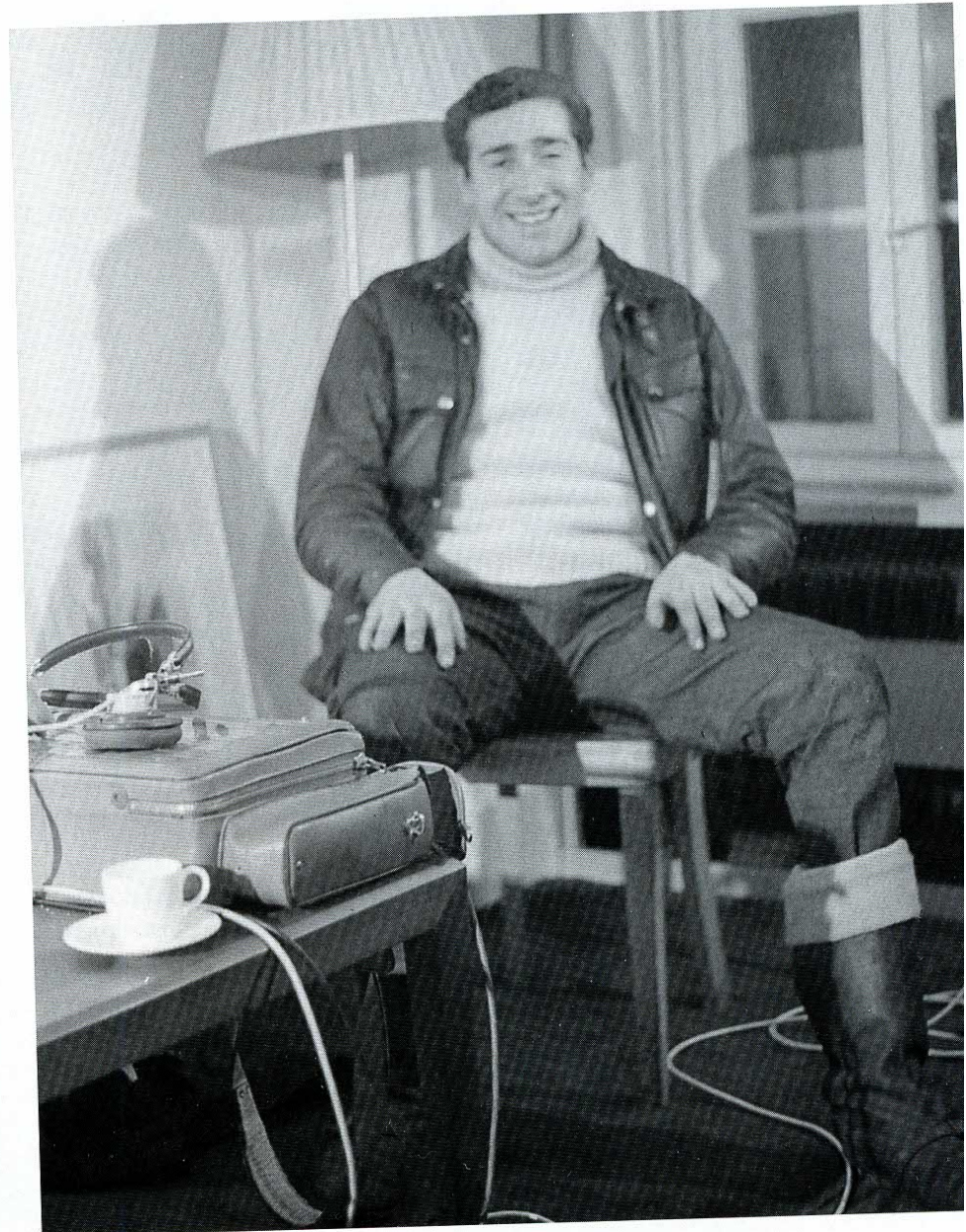
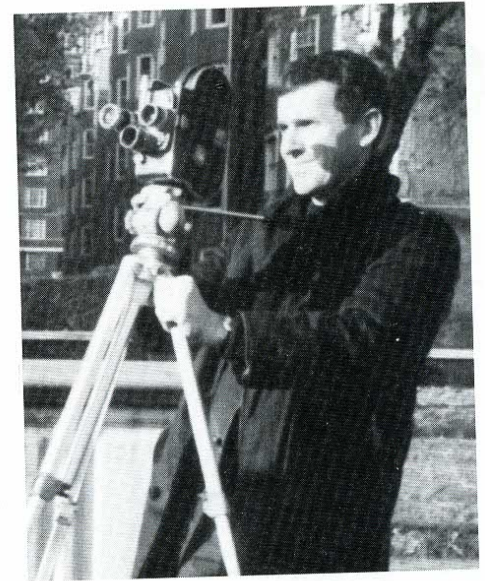
Equipment was primitive. "We used a 16mm Bolex, which is a Swiss made camera with wonderful lenses. It was a hand-held camera, but not a sound camera. We had to record sound separately," said Peter. Staffan added, "You could only film 30 seconds with it. Then you had to wind it up again. No batteries. It somewhat limited us as to what we could do."

Describing their process, Staffan says, "It was called free cinema at the time. That was the way we worked. Find a group and become one of them. No speech or anything, just fieldwork. No esthetics of any kind. It was edited in a very crude form. It was a way that nobody had really heard of before. Presence was the key word, to create a kind of presence."

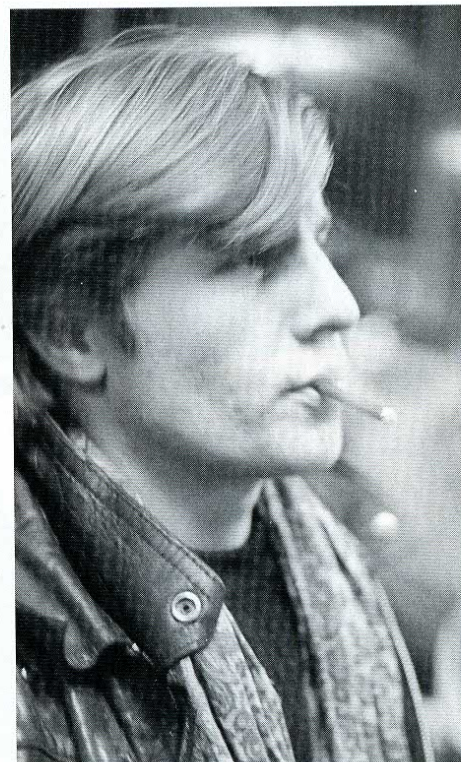
Free of narration, *Chelsea Bridge Boys* let the Rockers tell their own story. While common today, it was very unusual at the time. Lighting with film cameras in those days was not that easy. Natural light and bike head lamps were mostly used, except when in the studio. For the time, the documentary raised eyebrows for its rough style. Shots into the sun, poor focus and exposures brought critical comments

from other film producers. "At the time those were the most terrible mistakes you could make," Staffan said.

But, the pair was not without their own critical comments. "I'll tell you a sad story," said Peter. "We did it for Swedish television. So, we worked there. They developed the film and we would edit it. Swedish TV had an archive, but they never kept the outtakes. I walked into the archives one day and there was a chopping block with an ax in it. I asked the archivist its purpose. They used the block to chop up all the outtakes. It kills



Filmmakers Steffan Lamm (bottom right) and Peter Davis (top right) during the making of "Chelsea Bridge Boys".



me to think of that now." Not that there were a lot of outtakes with *Chelsea Bridge Boys*. With their limited budget Peter and Staffan didn't shoot much more than is seen in the film.

Interviews in the film were shot at the Swedish Television offices in London. A sync sound camera was rented for one night and four boys and two girls showed up for the interviews. Swedish TV might not have rented out the equipment had they known that a group of Rockers were the interview subjects, so the filmmakers didn't tell them. Peter and Staffan did the interviews with minimal preparation after everyone at the studio had gone home for the evening. Staffan said, "The boys and girls were so nice that evening. They were walking around talking and joking. They were very well behaved, I must say," Peter adds.

Back at the bridge the Rockers were in their own element. Bikers had been gathering at the span in London's Battersea area for decades and Friday night burn-ups along the bridge had, by the 1960s, become legend among UK riders. The tiny tea stall, the sound of booming engines being revved—

followed, inevitably by police sirens—and the row upon row of shiny café racers parked along the lanes have since faded from view, which makes Davis' film all the more fascinating to watch. "At the Chelsea Bridge there was the road that started at a roundabout,"

That was their challenge essentially." Amazingly, no injuries, deaths or police pursuits occurred during the filming.

Neither Staffan nor Peter was ever afraid riding around on the Bridge Boys' bikes. "I was young and stupid. I was so stupid



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I didn't even wear a helmet when I was on the back of the bike. It is such a macho thing. I am ashamed to admit it," Peter said. Not wearing helmets seemed the least of the rockers' worries; some of the best dialogue in the film occurs when the riders are interviewed about their generation's obsession with speed and the oftentimes horrible results. Risking their necks on the road, but managing to pull back at the razor's edge, was an obsession with the riders, and, naturally, a large part of their devil-may-care reputation. And, in an

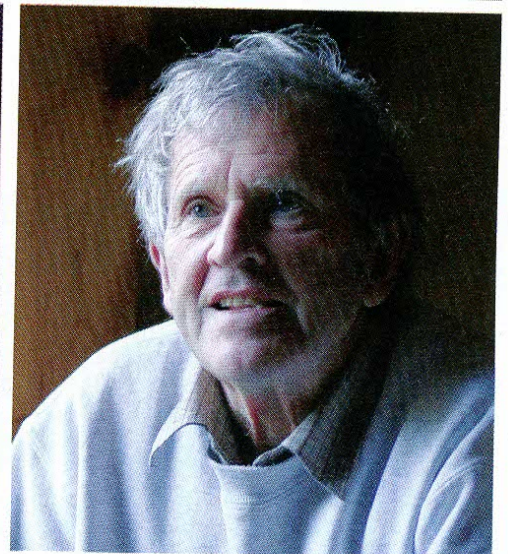
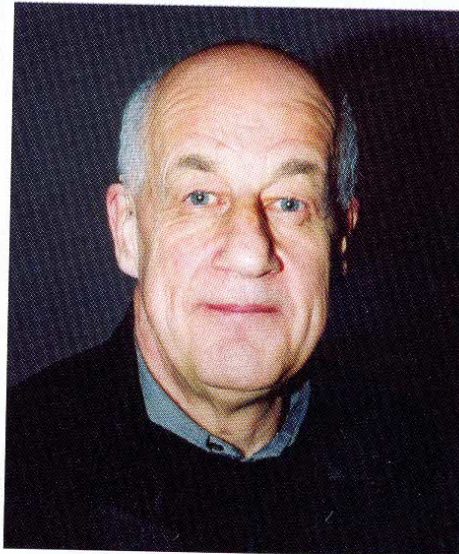
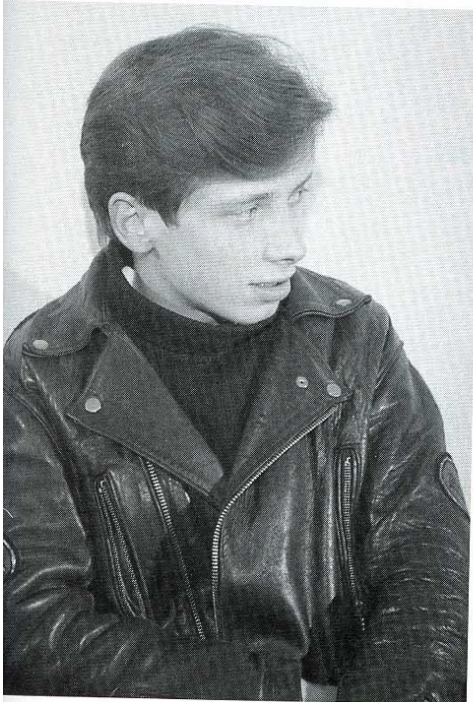
era when fast motorbikes and black leather were hyped as societal menaces in England, little wonder the film virtually disappeared after its completion.

"*Chelsea Bridge Boys* was never shown on television in England," Peter said. "The big thing with distribution in England came about three years ago. A clip from the film played in Trafalgar Square one evening. It was kind of a film tribute to the history of London in the last century. Staffan and I were always socially conscious. It was a slice

of life worth looking at."

Regarding *Chelsea Bridge Boys*, Staffan said, "You have to have a curiosity, or interest in something, then you can deal with it. I think it is a good portrait. I think it has a very strong presence. It tells a lot about them. It is pretty much what they were." **CR**

Note: *Chelsea Bridge Boys* is currently available on the *London in the Raw* DVD from www.amazon.com



Young rockers who helped make "*Chelsea Bridge Boys*" with filmmakers Steffan Lamm (bottom center) and Peter Davis (bottom right) today.