

Broad Street Review

where art and ideas meet

Growing up in the Bronx February 2, 2016

AJ Sabatini

I am looking forward to hearing Arlene Alda on February 3 when she talks about her book, *Just Kids from The Bronx: Telling It The Way It Was*, at the Jewish Museum. If she'd asked for my recollections, here's what I would have told her.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Just Kids from The Bronx: Telling It The Way It Was: An Oral History by Arlene Alda. Henry Holt and Co., 2015. Available at [Amazon](#).

Alda will be appearing at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Wednesday, February 3 at 7pm. Tickets \$15, free for members. 101 South Independence Mall East (5th and Market), Philadelphia. 215-924-3811 or [nmajh.org](#)

Although I've lived in Philadelphia four times longer than I lived in the Bronx, the street scars and bookmarks of my early years have never left me, to the point that a friend calls me a Bronxadelphian. Living within walking distance of Yankee Stadium and close enough to hear the lions roar and elephants bellow in their Bronx Zoo lairs, my memories are as sepia-tinted as photographs of corner luncheonettes or a gaggle of bumpy headed tykes playing with bottle caps on a squared mandala chalked on a side street blacktop between the bulbous-fendered gray Plymouths and over-chromed Chevys. We called the game “skelly.”



The Third Avenue El above the Cross Bronx Expressway. (Photo by Jack Boucher, Historic American Engineering Record, Library of Congress)

My Bronx neighborhood back then, like the one I live in now in South Philly, was Italian and Jewish, or at least those were the ethnic flavors I tasted most before the Latino influx. (For years, my Mother called herself an Italiayenta.) Of course, as a kid on the streets it was Hostess Cupcakes not Tastykakes, heroes not hoagies, and we played stickball with "spaldeens" instead of half-ball with "pimple balls."

Around the time my parents moved us to New Jersey, a destructive highway, the I-95 extension of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, Godzillaed through our neighborhoods, allowing free-flowing traffic from the suburbs to speed past while older and newer residents spiraled into cycles of dysfunction. When I'm on the way to New England, just past the exit for West Farms, where I used to go to catch the el to visit my grandmother, I can still see the looming red brick walls of my junior high school, P.S. 44, whose alumni include Dr. Jonas Salk, Red Buttons, and Lee Harvey Oswald.

I can also see where I played Little League baseball and also hung out on a roof watching some acned, tank-top-wearing dropout, whom I did not want to grow up to be like, command a squadron of creepy pigeons that blotted out the clouds over Bronx Park. Somehow, this provided pleasure for that forlorn teenager, but it left me with a chill that became sheer terror when I saw Hitchcock's *The Birds* some years later.

So much for nostalgia, of which I am not a fan. Then again, one's button candy can be pulled, and I am looking forward to hearing Arlene Alda (yes, she's related to Alan — his wife, in fact) on February 3 when she talks about her book, *Just Kids from The Bronx: Telling It The Way It Was: An Oral History*, at the Jewish History Museum. It has 70 interviews, including ones with Colin Powell, Al Pacino, and Dion DiMucci. Dion lived on Belmont Avenue, and I remember walking to school on that street, past guys wearing sunglasses and sprawling on Cadillacs. Though I didn't know it at the time, they were Dion and the Belmonts.



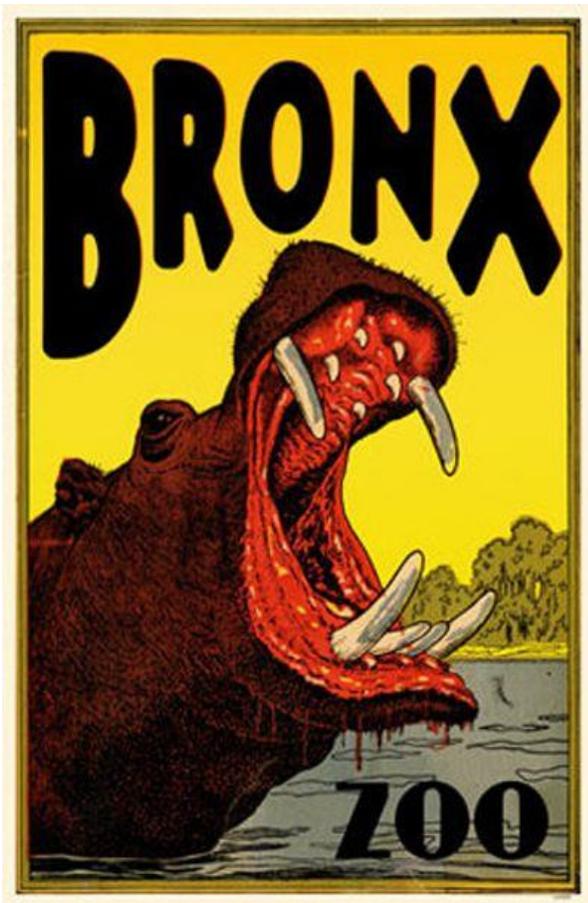
The grand building I lived in on East 180th Street overlooked the narrowest end of the casually beer can- and condom-festooned banks of the Bronx River. After we saw a half-eaten bloated catfish down there one day, we kids just decided to leave it all to the rats.

From the front windows of our apartment, we could see the part of the river that ended in the zoo's southernmost section. A small dock jutted out into the mucky water; at the end of the dock was a rickety, umbrellaed concession stand for renting rowboats. As if copied from the set of a Chaplin two-reeler, the dock and shed tilted to the side. On most days,

especially in the summer, there was also an ice cream vendor in a shabby white coat reaching into his aluminum box, propped up on oversized bicycle wheels, serving visitors Creamsicles and ice cream sandwiches.

The sounds of a Bronx night

We were five floors above the shallowing end of the river, and, on most nights, piercing growls from elephants in the zoo ricocheted through the darkness. Then the lions would answer in a louder, ragged chorus meant to outroar the elephants. Or, maybe the lions started first. It often seemed like it went on for hours, a belligerent conversation of high pitched yowling in irregular rhythms, with unintentional crescendos and, for no reason, stupid solos that trailed off into blurry whimpers.



The bellowing behemoths and offended kings of their domains might have been at each other, for all I knew, to scare off the screeching whine of the brakes and thudding din from the wobbling iron platforms as trains careened into the West Farms El every ten minutes or so. That sound, if you were an animal, had to be menacing, like a swoop of mad cranes or vestigial flying dinosaurs attacking from behind squat apartment buildings, some fronted toward the zoo, with fire escapes angling like the skeletal legs of the giant insects that we kids knew from the Saturday matinee sci-fi movies. The distance from the el station to the zoo's lion dens and elephant plains was not that far, and if the herds and prides were penned in, they had a right to feel under siege. In any case, from any one of our windows you could also see the sunlight dash off the green and gold tiled domes of the reptile and monkey houses, adding a B-movie regal dash to that view of the borough.

As for me, clichéd as it may sound, after staring at the swollen red anuses of agitated tomcat-sized monkeys, cringing at hippopotami having sex, and gagging as pythons the color of truck tires crushed rabbits into furry meatballs before gulping them down leathery jaws opened as wide as a suitcase, I gave up on zoos. Let others tell happy tales, I remember not sleeping without the lights on.

As for Alda's *Just Kids from The Bronx: Telling It The Way It Was: An Oral History*, I'll get to that after I read it and hear what she has to say.

What, you thought this was going to be a book review? You've got to be kidding. I told you where I was coming from at the start; whaddya expect?