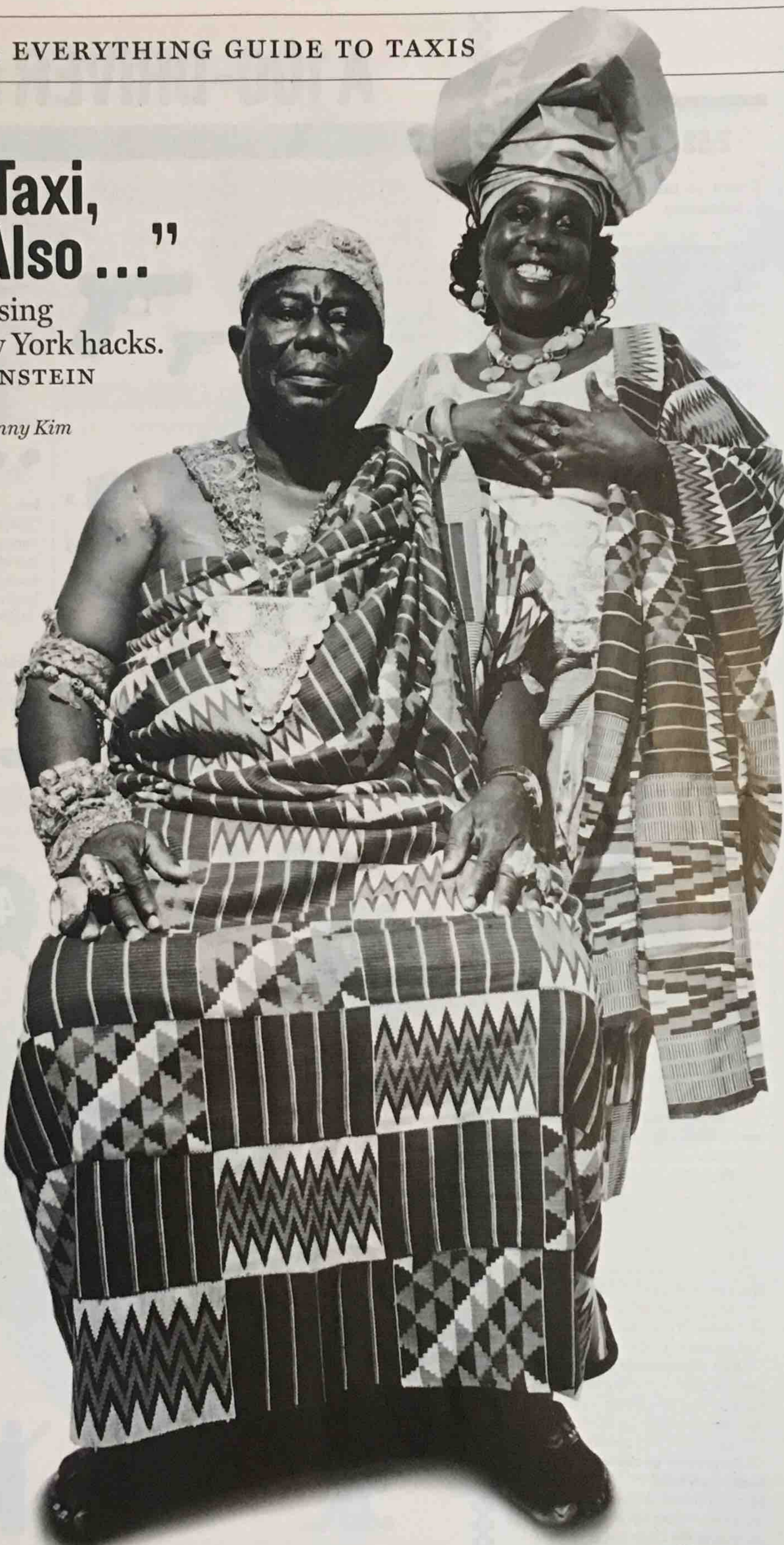


“I Drive a Taxi, But I’m Also ...”

The surprising
double lives of New York hacks.

BY KATE LOWENSTEIN

Photographs by Danny Kim



... Ghanaian Nobility

Isaac and Elizabeth Osei

- Q You both became cabdrivers here. How does one become a chief and chieftess in Ghana?** ISAAC: My mom was in the royal family. I inherited the position from my big brother when he passed.
- Q What exactly do you do when you're in Ghana, Isaac?** ELIZABETH: Oh my God. If you called him Isaac in Ghana, you would be in jail.
- Q What should I call him?** ELIZABETH: Barima. ISAAC: That's the title for chief.
- Q Elizabeth, do you call him Barima?** ELIZABETH: Oh, yes. There are people here who know who he is, so I have to be nice. [Laughs.] No, really, I love him, I respect him with all my heart. It's just that here in New York, I'm the boss.
- Q But Barima, you're the boss in Ghana?** ISAAC: Yes. If people have problems, they come to the palace and make a complaint to me. I help them. ELIZABETH: It's too much work. We have no life.
- Q People usually think of royalty as kicking back and living the good life.** ISAAC: No, no, no. We don't relax because we are from a Third World country, and my people are poor. ELIZABETH: Yes, I have over fifteen women's groups that I run. I go from town to town to educate them.
- Q Which is tougher, being royalty in Africa or taxi drivers here?** ISAAC: Both are very hard, but I'd say Ghana. ELIZABETH: Yes, the work there is 24/7.
- Q Ever wear your crowns in the taxi?** ELIZABETH: No way. You think anyone would hail us like that?

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... A
Professional
Accordionist

Hugo Andre

Q Do you ever serenade passengers?

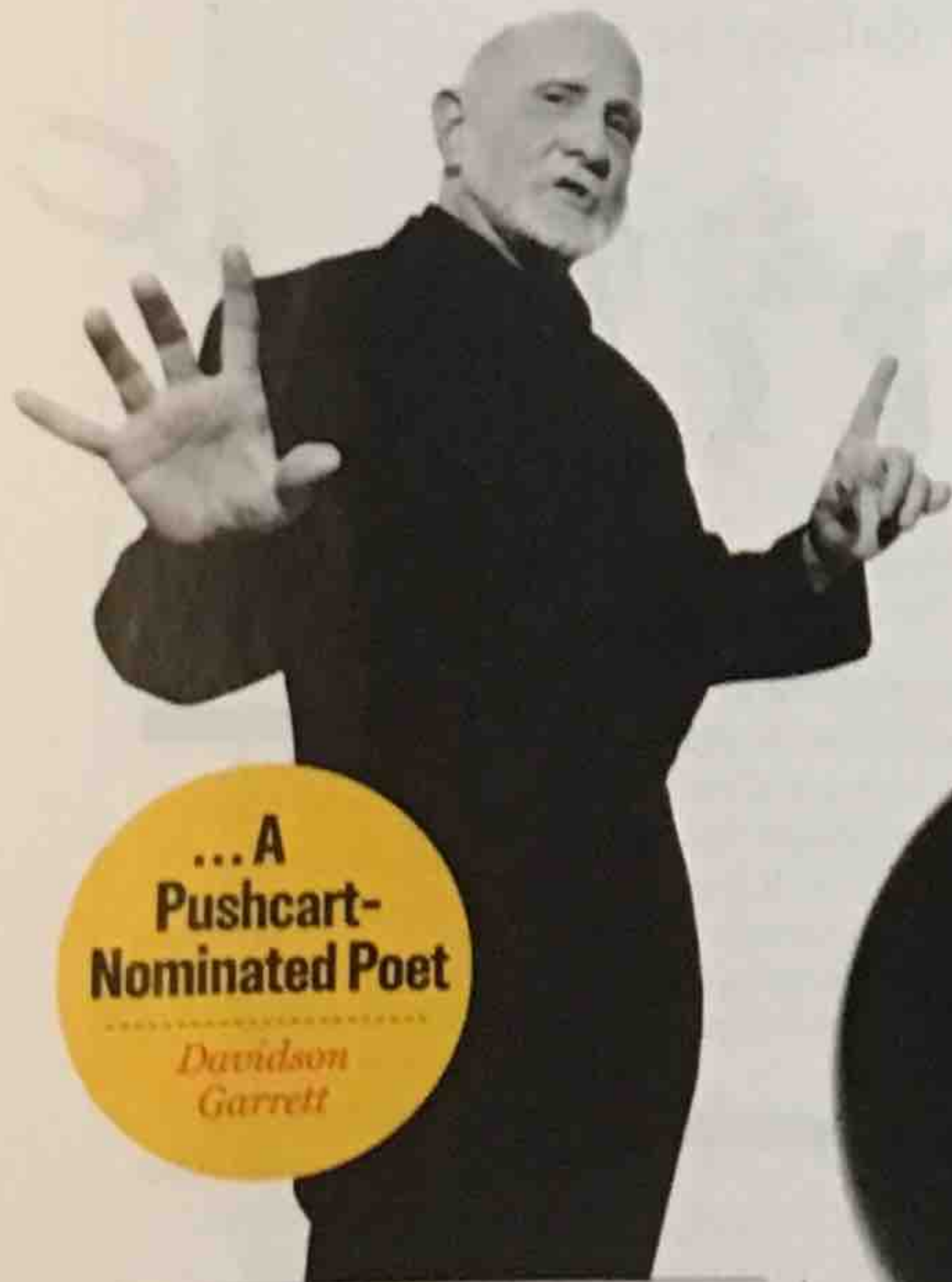
Only when there is heavy traffic; I have to put the car in park in order to play.

Q What kind of music do you do? Oh, everything. Classical, pop, gospel ... I've made eighteen albums in three different languages: French, Spanish, and English.

Q You sing, too? Of course! I even get other drivers to join me [over the radio].

Q You could have a whole TLC band.

Exactly. Everyone is always happy to listen or sing along.



... A
Pushcart-
Nominated Poet

Davidson
Garrett

Q Tell me about your book, *King Lear of the Taxi*. It's a self-portrait, really, I've got a poem in there about driving Lauren Bacall and another about an encounter with Mother Teresa in the South Bronx. Taxi-driving subsidizes my art.

Q Sounds like it inspires it, too. It does. The Pushcart nom was for a poem I wrote about a passenger: a fish-food salesman.

Q Is that code for drug dealer? No, actually. He really sold fish food. You meet the world behind your head in here.



... A
Champion
Bowler

Cary
Fishman

Q How long have you been driving? Thirty-nine years. I started when I was 24.

Q Does driving keep you young? Not exactly; I think bowling does. I just won the finals in the AMF tournament.

Q So you're good. I have my good days; even a blind rat finds a piece of cheese every now and then. Bowling is about rhythm and timing.

Q Sort of like driving? I guess so, yeah. They used to call me the Midnight Cowboy, because I drove all night in the seventies. I was single then, and the city was different.

Q How so? Well, 90 percent of cabdrivers were home with their families by 7 p.m.

Q That must have given you an edge. Sure. I used to hit the Blue Angel on 54th Street—one of the hottest clubs at the time. They had eight chorus girls, looked just like Rockettes, except two of them were drag queens. They'd wait for me to drive them home. It was a carpool party!

