

# Graffiti

## GROUND WORK 1966-71

Graffiti was used primarily by political activists to make statements and street gangs to mark territory. It wasn't till the late 1960s that writing's current identity started to form.

The history of the underground art movement known by many names, most commonly termed graffiti begins in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the mid to late '60s and is rooted in bombing. The writers who are credited with the first conscious bombing effort are CORNBREAD and COOL EARL. They wrote their names all over the city gaining attention from the community and local press. It is unclear whether this concept made its way to New York City via deliberate efforts or if was a spontaneous occurrence.

## PIONEERING 1971-74

Shortly after CORNBREAD, the Washington Heights section of Manhattan was giving birth to writers. In 1971 *The New York Times* published an article on one of these writers. TAKI 183 was the alias of a kid from Washington Heights. TAKI was the nick name for his given name Demetrius and 183 was the number of the street where he lived. He was employed as a foot messenger, so he was on the subway frequently and took advantage of it, doing motion tags. The appearance of this unusual name and numeral sparked public curiosity prompting the Times article. He was by no means the first writer or even the first king. He was however the first to be recognized outside the newly formed subculture. Most widely credited as being one of the first writers of significance is JULIO 204. FRANK 207 and JOE 136 were also early writers.

On the streets of Brooklyn a movement was growing as well. Scores of writers were active. FRIENDLY FREDDIE was an early Brooklyn writer to gain fame. The subway system proved to be a line of communication and a unifying element for all these separate movements. People in all the five boroughs became aware of each others efforts. This established the foundation of interborough competition.

Writing started moving from the streets to the subways and quickly became competitive. At this point writing consisted of mostly tags and the goal was to have as many as possible. Writers would ride the trains hitting as many subway cars as possible. It wasn't long before writers discovered that in a train yard or lay up they could hit many more subway cars in much less time and with less chance of getting caught. The concept and method of bombing had been established.

## Tag Style

After a while there were so many people writing so much that writers needed a new way to gain fame. The first way was to make your tag unique. Many script and calligraphic styles were developed. Writers enhanced their tags with flourishes, stars and other designs. Some designs were strictly for visual appeal while others had meaning. For instance, crowns were used by writers who proclaimed themselves king. Probably the most famous tag in the culture's history was STAY HIGH 149. He used a smoking joint as the cross bar for his "H" and a stick figure from the television series *The Saint*.

## Tag Scale

The next development was scale. Writers started to render their tags in larger scale. The standard nozzle width of a spray paint can is narrow so these larger tags while drawing more attention than a standard tag, did not have much visual weight. Writers began to increase the thickness of the letters and would also outline them with an additional color. Writers discovered that caps from other aerosol products could provide a larger width of spray. This led to the development of the masterpiece. It is difficult to say who did the first masterpiece, but it is commonly credited to SUPER KOOL 223 of the Bronx and WAP of Brooklyn. The thicker letters provided the opportunity to further enhance the name. Writers decorated the interior of the letters with what are termed "designs." First with simple polka dots, later with crosshatches, stars, checkerboards. Designs were limited only by an artist's imagination.

Writers eventually started to render these masterpieces the entire height of the subway car (A first also credited to SUPER KOOL 223.). These masterpieces were termed top-to bottoms. The additions of color design and scale were dramatic advancements, but these works still strongly resembled the tags on which

they were based. Some of the more accomplished writers of this time were HONDO 1, JAPAN 1, MOSES 147, SNAKE 131, LEE 163d, STAR 3, PHASE 2, PRO-SOUL, TRACY 168, LIL HAWK, BARBARA 62, EVA 62, CAY 161, JUNIOR 161 and STAY HIGH 149.

The competitive atmosphere led to the development of actual styles which would depart from the tag styled pieces. Broadway style was introduced by Philadelphia's TOPCAT 126. These letters would evolve in to block letters, leaning letters, and block busters. PHASE 2 later developed Softie letters, more commonly referred to as Bubble letters. Bubble letters and Broadway style were the earliest forms of actual pieces and therefore the foundation of many styles. Soon arrows, curls, connections and twists adorned letters. These additions became increasingly complex and would become the basis for Mechanical or Wild style lettering.

The combination of PHASE's work and competition from other style masters like RIFF 140 and PEL furthered the development. RIFF is noted as being an early catalyst in what is termed style wars. RIFF would take ideas from other writers and improve upon them and take them to another level. Writers like FLINT 707 and PISTOL made major contributions in development of three dimensional lettering adding depth to the masterpiece, which became standards for generations to come.

This early period of creativity did not go unrecognized. Hugo Martinez a sociology major at City College took notice of the legitimate artistic potential of this generation. Martinez went on to found United Graffiti Artists. UGA selected top subway artists from all around the city and presented their work in the formal context of an art gallery. UGA provided opportunities once inaccessible to these artists. The Razor Gallery was a successful effort of Mr. Martinez and the artists he represented. PHASE 2, MICO, COCO 144, PISTOL, FLINT 707, BAMA, SNAKE, and STICH have been represented by Martinez. A 1973 article in *New York* magazine by Richard Goldstein entitled "The Graffiti Hit Parade" was also early public recognition of the artistic potential of subway artists.

Around 1974 writers like TRACY 168, CLIFF 159, BLADE ONE created works with scenery, illustrations and cartoon characters surrounding the masterpieces. This formed the basis for the mural whole car. Earlier ground breaking whole cars were produced by writers like AJ 161 and SILVER TIPS.

#### THE PEAK 75-77

For the most part innovation in writing hit a plateau after 1974. All the standards had been set and a new school was about to reap the benefits of artistic foundations established by prior generations and a city in the midst of a fiscal crisis. New York City was broke and therefore the transit system was poorly maintained. This led to the heaviest bombing in history.

At this time bombing and style began to further distinguish themselves. Whole cars became a standard practice rather than an event, and the definitive form of bombing became the throw up. The throw up is a piecing style derived from the bubble letter. The throw up is hastily rendered piece consisting of a simple outline and is barely filled in. Mostly two letter throw up names began appearing all over the system particularly on the INDs and BMTs. Crews like POG, 3yb, BYB TC, TOP, made major contributions. Throw up kings included TEE, IZ, DY 167, PI, IN, LE, TO, OI, FI aka VINNY, TI 149, CY, PEO. Writers became very competitive. Races broke out to see who could do the most throw ups. Throw ups peaked from '75 thru '77 as did whole cars. Writers like BUTCH, CASE, KINDO, BLADE, COMET, ALE 1, DOO2, JOHN 150, LEE, MONO, SLAVE, SLUG, DOC 109 CAINE ONE plastered the IRTs with magnificent whole cars, following in the foot steps of giants like TRACY and CLIFF.

#### STYLE REVIVAL 1978-1981

A new wave of creativity bloomed in late 1977 with crews like TDS, TMT, UA, MAFIA, TS5, CIA, RTW, TMB, TFP, TC5 and TF5. Style wars were once again peaking. It was also the last wave of bombing before the Transit Authority made the elimination of writing a priority. On Broadway, CHAIN 3, KOOL 131, PADRE, NOC 167 and PART 1 were expanding upon styles established by writers like PHASE 2, RIFF 140 and PEL. CHAIN later went to the 2 and 5 lines with the TMT crew. In style war tradition TMT's works were countered by CIA. DONDI came out with POSE against CHAIN's DOSE.

CASE 2, KEL 139, MARE, COMET, REPEL, COS 207, DURO, MIN, SHY 147, KADE 198, FED 2, REVOLT, RASTA, ZEPHYR, BOOTS 119, KIT 17, CRASH and DAZE were also active writers of the time. LEE, CAZ 2, IZ, SLAVE, REE, DONDI, BLADE and COMET became very competitive in the whole car arena. SEEN, MAD, PJ and DUST dominated the 6 line with elaborate whole cars. MITCH 77, BAN 2, BOO 2, PBODY, MAX 183, and KID 56 ruled the 4 line. FUZZ ONE was a major presence on all 7 IRTs. CIA, TB and TKA ensured that the BMTs

were not deprived of style.

In 1980 The real buff started up again pieces ran for shorter periods. Train yard fence repair was becoming more consistent. Writers slowly started to quit and consider other creative options. Many writers became distracted with thoughts about careers beyond painting subway cars. The established art world was once again becoming receptive to writing. There hadn't been much positive attention since the Razor Gallery in the early '70s. In 1979 LEE QUINONES and FAB 5 FREDDIE had an opening in Rome with the art dealer Claudio Bruni. Then in 1980 numerous writers flocked to places like ESSES studio, Stephan Eins' Fashion Moda and Patti Astor's Fun Gallery to expand their horizons. These and subsequent galleries would prove to be an important factors in expanding writing overseas. European art dealers became aware of the movement and were very receptive to the new art form. Shows featuring paintings by DONDI, LEE, ZEPHYR, LADY PINK, DAZE, FUTURA 2000 and others exposed the world to the once secret world of New York's youth.

#### SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST 1982-1985

During the early to mid 1980s the writing culture deteriorated dramatically due to several factors. Some related directly to the graffiti culture itself and others to the greater society in general. The crack cocaine epidemic was taking its toll on the inner city. Due to the drug trade powerful firearms were readily available. The climate on the street became increasingly tense. Laws restricting the sale of paint to minors and requiring merchants to place spray paint in locked cages made shoplifting more difficult. Legislation was in the works to make penalties for graffiti more severe.

The major change was the increase in the Metropolitan Transit Authority's anti-graffiti budget. Yards and layups were more closely guarded. Many favored painting areas became almost inaccessible. New more sophisticated fences were erected and were quickly repaired when damaged. Graffiti removal was stronger and more consistent than ever, making the life span of many paintings months if not days. This frustrated many writers causing them to quit.

Many others were not so easily discouraged, yet they were still affected. They perceived the new circumstances as a challenge, determined not to be defeated by the MTA. Due to the lack of resources they became extremely territorial and aggressive, claiming ownership to yards and layups. Claiming territory was nothing new in writing, but the difference at this time was that threats were enforced. If a writer went to layup unarmed he could almost be guaranteed to be beaten and robbed of his painting supplies.

At this point physical strength and unity as in street gangs became a major part of the writing experience. The One Tunnel and the Ghost yard were the back drops many for legendary conflicts. In addition to the pressure from the MTA, cross out wars among writers broke out. The most famous war being CAP MPC vs the world. High profile writers during these years were: SKEME, DEZ, TRAP, DELTA, SHARP, SEEN TC5, SHY 147, BOE, WEST, KAZE, SPADE 127, SAK, VULCAN, SHAME, BIO, MIN, DURO, KEL, T KID, MACK, NICER, BRIM, BG 183, KENN, CEM, FLIGHT, AIRBORN, RIZE, JON 156, KYLE 156.

#### THE DIE HARDS 1985-1989

On certain subway lines graffiti removal significantly decreased because the cars servicing those lines were headed for the scrap yards. This provided a last shot for writers.

The last big surge on the 2 and 5 lines came from writers like WANE, WEN, DERO, WIPS, TKID, SENTO, CAVS, CLARK and M KAY who hit the white 5s with burners. These burners many times were blemished by marker tags that soaked through the paint. A trend had developed that was a definite step back for writing. Due to a lack of paint and courage to stay in a lay up for prolonged periods of time, many writers were tagging with markers on the outside of subway cars. These tags were generally poor artistic efforts. The days when writers took pride in their hand style (signature) were long gone. If it wasn't for the aforementioned writers and a few others, the artform in New York City could have officially been deemed dead.

By mid '86 the MTA was gaining the upper hand. Many writers quit and the violence subsided. Most lines were completely free of writing. The Ds, Bs, Ls, Js, Ms were among the last of the lines with running pieces. MAGOO, DOC TC5, DONDI, TRAK, DOME and DC were all highly visible writers.

Security was high and the Transit Police's new vandal squad was in full force. What was left was a handful of diehards. GHOST, SENTO, CAVS, KET, JA, VEN, REAS, SANE, SMITH were prominent figures and would keep transit writing alive.

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