

A Full History of Graffiti – 1965-2002

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This paper outlines the history of contemporary graffiti; from its beginnings in both New York and Philadelphia to the present. It explores why there is confusion surrounding where modern graffiti began, and tries to answer the age-old question with a collective of older and contemporary resources. Throughout the paper there is an outline of the major time periods of graffiti; and within each block of time- information and specifics about the who, what, when, where, how, and why that details graffiti's existence. It concludes with today's graffiti culture, and the measures taken in attempts to stopping it, by those opposed to it.

To blame the emergence of graffiti on a certain city or a certain people would be purely an injustice, if not an undisputed fallacy. Truth is, graffiti has been a staple of mankind since man first exercised his creative genius. Ever since the first caveman flexed the right half of his brain, some form of graffiti, on some form of a public outlet, has come to be a part of society. Whether it is shapes and hardly identifiable images scrawled on a wall inside of a cave, or a message in the form of public outcry on the side of a moving object; history has proven that graffiti, if nothing else, must exist. Even time could not change man's insistence on public expression. It is only recently, within the last 30 years, that we have seen such a movement against this form of public expression. However, it is only recently, within the last 30 years, that we have seen the contemporary, the New York City style of graffiti, so rebelliously displayed throughout our cities. This form of graffiti has a history all its own, despite being highly disputed. No one is quite sure who, when, why, or how graffiti started; but certainly there is no argument that it is alive and thriving today, despite whole cities and governments against it.

Philadelphia or New York?

The story is unclear, but a lot of people are certain they know where graffiti, as we know it, started. Those from Philadelphia swear Philadelphia was graffiti's birthplace, while writers and fans in New York are certain graffiti was born in the streets of the five boroughs. Despite much evidence otherwise, some authors and writers still believe the graffiti art movement was inspired by the infamous Taki 183, of New York City; therefore lending the credit to NYC as graffiti's birthplace (Rose 42). What is even more surprising is the full credit given to Taki 183 for starting graffiti writing in the late 60's, as well as being the first ever writer by certain authors in the face of heavy evidence otherwise (Castleman 53). Despite conclusive evidence, careful research can uncover the most feasible birthplace of graffiti. Graffiti, although most widely known for being a product of New York, actually began in the streets of Philadelphia. Sure, there has been writing on walls for centuries, but the writing movement we know as graffiti began in the mid to late 60's and is credited to Cornbread and Cool Earl (@149st.com). These two

writers engaged in the first bombing efforts ever. Their names could be seen all over different facades in the City of Brotherly Love. Top Cat, a student of Cornbread, learned everything he knew from his teacher, and later on in his career moved to New York City. It is difficult to say whether the newly relocated Top Cat inspired the movement in NYC, or if the movement had already begun simultaneously before Top Cat arrived (Jenkins 36-37). But either way, both Philadelphia and NYC found themselves in the midst of a new revolution.

Graffiti in the spotlight – 1971

Prior to the New York Times article on Taki 183, writers were engaged in tagging all over the city. A vast array of names and writing styles could be seen all over. But it was not until the summer of 1971 that anyone bothered to report on the growing phenomenon. On July 21, 1971, The New York Times ran an article, on the 37th page, called “Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals.” Taki 183 was the pen name of Greek teenager Demetrius from Manhattan. In the article it says he began writing his name on ice cream trucks in the summer of 1970. He states in the article that he took his writing form from Julio 204, but Julio stopped writing because “he got busted.” The 17-year-old Demetrius got his tag name through his nickname, Taki, and the street on which he lived, 183rd. Because of Taki and the fame that comes with getting your name up, lots of other kids began writing. Some names include, Barbara 62, Eel 159, Yank 135, and Leo 136. Taki states to close out the article that no matter what happens to him, he just has to write (NY Times, 1971).

Graffiti’s Boom Era: 1971-1974

From the time period of 1971 to 1974, graffiti flourished beyond any writer’s wildest dreams. This period marked the greatest creative surge graffiti has ever seen. With New York City knee deep in a plethora of writers, graffiti took a turn for quality over quantity. Before this era, writers would compete solely on a quantitative level. Where the king was declared on numerical merit, rather than style. However, with a new creative revolution rearing to go, writers had to distinguish their tag from the millions of others out there. A pioneer in the new movement of writing was Super Kool. At the point where graffiti was in 1972, mere style and creativity was not enough to distinguish the kings from the toys. Super Kool honed in on the bigger is better concept with a new invention: the fat cap. The fat cap’s job was to create a wider stream of paint for the writer to work with. This was designated for fill-ins. In 1972, Super Kool unlocked the secret of the fat cap by switching the normal thin cap that comes on a can with the wider, fatter cap that comes on a foam or spray starch can (Castleman 55). With new invention in hand, Super Kool created the first piece in the 221st train yard. The piece, short for masterpiece, is a more elaborate and bigger work of art. Super Kool created his first piece with a normal can of yellow and a newly altered can of pink. The first piece was not the most beautiful piece ever, but it set a standard to be expanded upon in the future (56).

At about this point in time, style wars began to emerge. Previously writers were considered “masters” solely on the sheer amount of tags or pieces they had done (why Taki 183 was considered a king by some). Now writers were competing on skill. Stan 153 recalls the biggest style war he can remember in the summer of 1973. He recalls, “Everyone was competing. From one end of the trains to the other there would be beautiful clouds, beautiful colors, beautiful names.” He goes on to tell of the war coming down to him and another writer named Riff. The prize: recognition as style master. The two battled for weeks, until finally they met one night at the number 3 yard and called a truce. They decided to stop working against each other, and instead work together to create a beautiful piece(Castleman 57). This anecdote from 1973 proves the competitive, but fun spirit that surrounded graffiti writing in the early 1970’s.

Another important development in 1973 was the first whole car painted by Flint 707. As Stan 153 remembers, “Flint 707 came along and outdid the world. He did a three-dimensional piece that took up a whole side of a car, top to bottom and front to back” (Castleman 60). Creating pieces on train cars, a vital form of graffiti expression, is much more dangerous than what most people think. The act of even getting into the lay-up (train yard where cars are kept) requires knowledge of train schedules, security rounds, where to gain access to the yard, and plenty of pre-planning in order to get in and get out effectively and efficiently (Rose 42). The idea was to get into the lay-up where the out of service cars are located, bomb it with a piece you have already sketched out, and get out as quickly as possible. Police, security, fences, other crews, and later on dogs, prevented a difficulty to writers who were on a mission to bomb a lay-up. However, getting caught by the police, or getting beat up by rival writers were not the only obstacles writers faced. Writing in a lay-up itself, even after infiltrated, presented dangers that could prove deadly. Passing right by the out of service trains, in-service trains frequented lay-ups. And if a writer did not take the necessary precautions, or was just not paying attention to their surroundings, they could easily be hit (43). The obvious dangerous nature of painting cars begs the question why paint cars if it is so dangerous to do so. Tricia Rose explains, “An especially difficult and creative concept, coloration, and style are all the more appreciated when they are executed under duress. Well executed train work is a sign of mastering the expression” (43).

Around this time of graffiti’s boom era, Hugo Martinez, a sociology major at City College, realized the legitimacy that these street artists could achieve. Hugo later founded the UGA, the United Graffiti Artists, which was the first effort to get graffiti into art galleries. Hugo represented some of NYC’s greatest graffiti artists; names like Phase 2, Flint 707, and Snake found their way into legit art galleries. Another big development for graffiti in this creative era was the mural whole car concept first conceptualized in 1974. This work of art contained scenery, illustrations, and cartoon characters in and around the piece (@149st.com).

Graffiti’s Apex: 1975-1977

By 1975 innovation had hit its peak. The city was financially bankrupt, and poor funds led to poorly maintained lay-ups. Bombing found itself bigger and more illustrious than ever. Whole cars were a standard, rather than an isolated event. In fact, some writers found one whole car too limiting, therefore “worms” (a piece on two whole cars)

found their way into the graffiti vernacular (@149st.com) This peak also brought back an old graffiti staple, the throw-up. A throw-up consists of a two to three letter name, usually formed into one unit, often times in bubble letter style of graffiti. The throw-up is quicker to get up and easier than a piece. Artists would do a throw up when they were running low on paint, or did not have enough time to do a whole piece.(Castleman 29).

The years from 1975-1977 would in fact be the heyday for throw-ups. In the summer of 1975, IN was determined to bring back the competitive spirit of graffiti based on sheer numbers. IN went on a bombing spree like no other. Everywhere, in and around NYC, IN's throw-ups could be seen. They were not by that day's standards that pretty, but no one could deny IN was getting up more than anyone else in the city. Within a short period of time, IN celebrated his 5,000th throw-up with a whole car piece dedicated to his magnificent accomplishment. Later IN would celebrate his 10,000th throw-up by doing a celebration 3-D whole car piece. After painting his celebration piece, IN retired. "He got what he wanted, he was king of it all. Ten thousand pieces! They were not beautiful, they were not pretty, but he got up" (Castleman 63-64)!

Graffiti's Fights to Survive: 1978-1981

During the late 70's and into the 80's, graffiti was fighting to survive in the streets, but was making a strong showing in the art galleries. During this period, the MTA was cracking down on graffiti writing more than it ever had before. They were cleaning cars as fast as they could, which discouraged a lot of the cities best writers (Castleman 64). It seems at this point, that the city was trying to get graffiti off the streets and into legitimate galleries. In 1979, Lee Quinones and Fab 5 Freddie had an opening all the way out in Rome, Italy for their artwork. And in the following year, writers scrambled to Esses Studio to try and get their work overseas. The openings in Europe were well received, and writing quickly gained a European following (@149st.com)

Graffiti in a Violent Recession: 1982-1985

During the early 1980's, the writing culture took a turn for the worse. Being a writer became tougher. Artists had more obstacles in their way during this time period, than in any other period before or after. Heroin and crack cocaine dealers and users ran the streets, increasing violence tremendously. Laws were tougher and much more consistent with the city's increasing budget. "Racking" (stealing) paint cans became almost impossible due to the law that stated all paint be stored in a locked cage, and under no circumstances be sold to any minors. More sophisticated security denied access to once accessible cherished lay-ups. Huge barbed fences, attack dogs, and guards made sure access to yards be as unreachable as possible. During this time, lots of writers quit due to the climate that now surrounded writing. At this point only the true diehards remained. Crews got tighter and tougher due to the pressure from the streets. Writers no longer had the run of the mill; they had to fight for every piece they did. At this point, writers took weapons as well as their paint to lay-ups. Even under such circumstances, writers and writing survived (@149st.com).

They Were Rockstars: 1985-1989

By the mid-80's, the number of writers still writing on a consistent basis was at an all time low. Most had quit because of the new found violent climate that surrounded graffiti. Others found themselves in search of legitimate jobs and lifestyles. Still others found themselves caught up in the violent lifestyle and in jail (Jenkins 39). The writers that were left and holding it down became sort of a public enigma. Writing was more in the spotlight than it had ever been before. There were movies, documentaries, books, and magazines solely about graffiti. In the mid 80's documentaries and movies like *Style Wars*, *Wild Style*, and *Beat Street* came out; enlightening the general public about the lives of graffiti writers and writing as a legitimate art form. Writers found themselves traveling around the world, displaying their talent in places otherwise untouched by graffiti. However, some artists decided writing was not the best outlet for fame and fortune and went the emcee route instead. Names like KRS-One, Kaves of the Lordz, Masta Ace, Havoc of Mobb Deep, and Fat Joe all let go of their pens for a microphone (Jenkins 40). But while some artists enjoyed success, the MTA was as grueling and stringent as ever before. Cars were being cleaned as soon as they were written on. More and more writers found frustration in the art rather than fun. By mid 1986, most of the lines were completely free of graffiti. The MTA found itself in a war it was now winning. And on May 12, 1989, the city declared graffiti dead. The MTA refused to run any cars that had graffiti on it. With this clean car only policy, they felt they had completely abolished graffiti forever (@149st.com).

Graffiti: The 90's and Beyond

The 1990's saw graffiti in a sort of ambiguous circumstance. Graffiti was spreading all across the globe, not to mention into most suburbs; yet it lacked the strength it once had in the cities. Although it was still perceived as an epidemic in cities, the era that brought writing as a full fledged culture was gone. As graffiti expanded into less urban environments, the age and types of kids graffiti reached diversified immensely. All of the sudden, 14 year old white suburban kids were being arrested for graffiti (Ferris). Towns *and* cities now had the graffiti problem. Police departments, especially those in small suburban towns, were now facing the dilemmas of inner city police departments. How do you get rid of graffiti? Of course this question arises because of the masses communicating an immense hatred of it. Graffiti, to most people, just looks ugly. If that is difficult to understand, just imagine the suburban culture trying to embrace the graffiti culture. It just will not happen. Perhaps the most outspoken opponent of graffiti is small business. Small business fears its customers do not enter stores with graffiti, and the cost of getting rid of graffiti as often as it appears is very expensive (Black). With pressure from the community and small business, law enforcement is forced to take action against graffiti. There are a few general measures that all law enforcement practice to fight graffiti these days. These consist of: educational efforts, telephone hotlines, tougher enforcement in courts, restitution by convicted offenders, and strict policy and enforcement of paint purchasing. There are even more desperate measures that cities can adopt if they feel the need to do so. Chicago has banned spray paint sales in the city. Phoenix treats graffiti vandalism in progress as a 911 priority as well has in place a

reward program for information leading to the arrest and conviction of a graffiti vandal. New York has gone so far as employ junior high students to act as undercover investigators in order to find out which stores are not adhering to strict no sale of spray paint to minors law (Black).

Many cities have tried to implement their own version of “the buff.” It is common practice to have work crews whose major responsibility is to travel the city and blast off all the graffiti it can with high-pressure hot water tanks. Some use “soda blasters,” which is a baking soda and water solvent that is more effective than hot water alone (Black). Others use a solution that is called “Scram-It” which is applied by brushing it on then blasting it off with hot water (Ferris).

With all the hotlines that community members can call, and all the different versions of the buff being applied to both city and suburban environments, graffiti policy is still not strong enough to combat graffiti completely. The policy most effective is the 24 hours policy. This policy states that any and all graffiti must be removed within 24 hours of being reported. This undeniably stands as the most effective policy against graffiti, and is instilled in most cities (Ferris). However, each and everyday new methods of graffiti are established. For instance, in Staten Island lampposts are being plastered with name stickers, the kind that usually say, “Hello, My Name Is,” that are themselves tagged. That’s right, kids now are pre-tagging stickers and then sticking the stickers places. And in East Village kids are tagging windows with an acid-based cream found in art supply shops that etches itself into glass (Lee). Kids, in order to get around the ban on spray paint to minors, order their paint online and have them mail-ordered to their houses. Shoe polish has even been known to be used in tagging.

There will never be enough policy to completely get rid of graffiti. As cities come up with newer and better ways to combat graffiti, writers are finding ways of getting around it. After all, graffiti, in some form, has been around since the beginning of time. There is no kind of chemical that could “buff” a history that deep.

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