

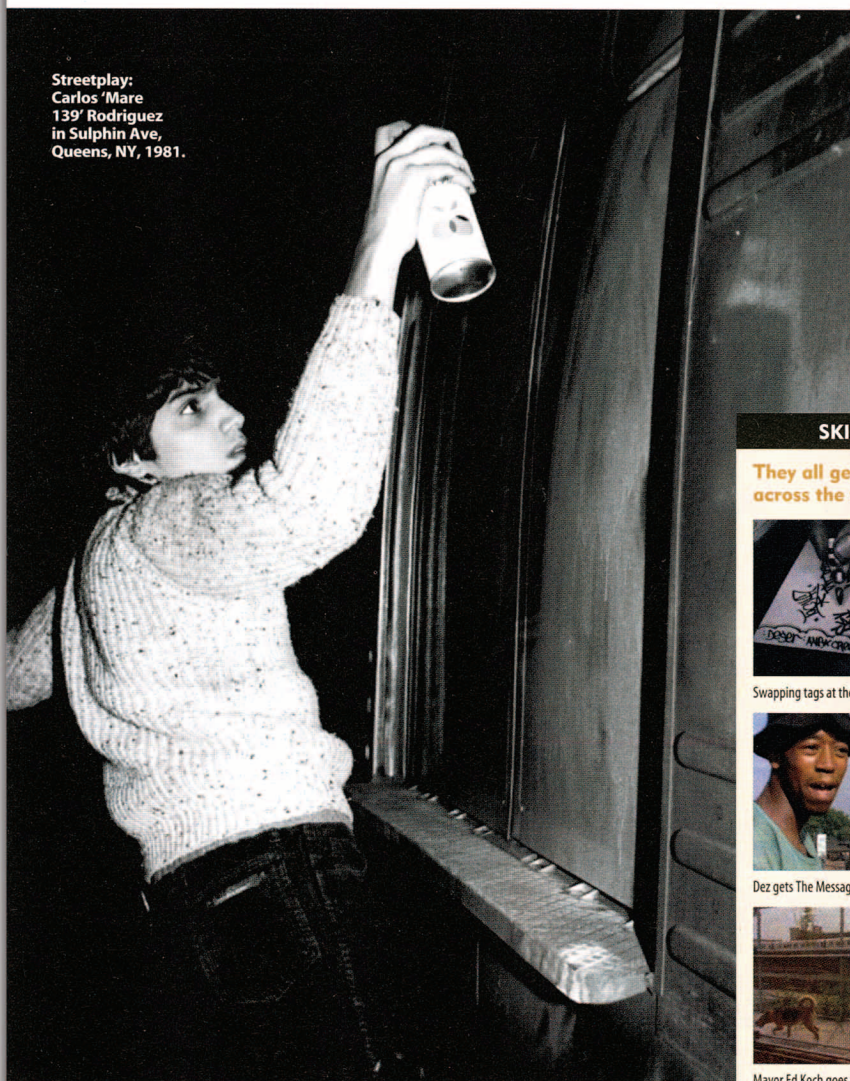
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FILTER DVD

Subway Smart

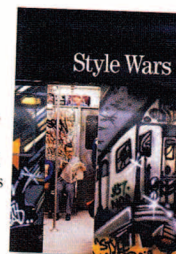
It's like that and that's the way it was. Angus Batey takes a look at the UK DVD debut of a vital portrait of the roots of hip hop.

Streetplay:
Carlos 'Mare
139' Rodriguez
in Sulphin Ave,
Queens, NY, 1981.



sculptor who began photographing the ever-changing public art show that was the New York subway system of the time.

Graffiti was the first of hip hop's four elements to go public. The connections to breakdancing, rapping and DJing, despite extensive footage of the breakdance outfit Rock Steady Crew (later patronised by Malcolm McLaren), are made only in terms of the prizing of stylistic innovation within each discipline. Although the soundtrack is dominated by early rap, it is left to the



SKIP TO...

They all get together across the tracks



Swapping tags at the Writers' Bench.



Dez gets The Message.



Mayor Ed Koch goes to the dogs.



Ridin' right on the subway train.

writers themselves to tie the threads together: in one scene Dez (better known these days as radio and mixtape DJ KaySlay) and fellow writers recite rhymes from The Message.

Style Wars depicts an art form in constant revolution, of powerful internal and external forces keeping the movement in potent turmoil. When they weren't competing with each other to out-do the last, the writers were desperately trying to stay one step ahead of the New York City transit authorities, who were dreaming up ever more ingenious ways to stamp out what they saw as graffiti's scourge. New York's then mayor, Ed Koch, at one point outlines a scheme to guard train yards with wolves: but writers like Cap, who waged war on his fellows by painting over their work, were every bit as destructive. The writers had to work fast, and be prepared for their art to be obliterated within hours.

Despite its vivid depiction of the desolation of New York's outer boroughs, the film captures a time of comparative innocence.

Crack, which turned users into zombies and dealer gangs into guerrilla armies, was still some months from infesting these neighbourhoods, changing the mood, tone and content of hip hop culture forever.

Style Wars



PUBLIC ART FILMS

"GRAFFITI PREPARED me for the army," says artist Skeme during one of many excellent catch-up interviews included on this mammoth double-disc edition of an incredible 1982 documentary, released for the first time in the UK. In the film, the teenage Skeme stands in his New York kitchen, scowling behind his seated mother while she expresses a steadfastly resigned

dismay at his illicit artistic activity. Today, she still cannot fathom why he and his cohorts wanted to risk arrest, injury or much worse just to spray-paint their nicknames onto the side of what one calls the "gigantic, rolling pages" of a subway train.

Style Wars attempts to document, analyse and explain the explosion of graffiti art that consumed New York in the late '70s and early '80s. It was made by outsiders: Tony Silver, a film-maker, and Henry Chalfant, a

Harry Chalfant