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Style Wars + Style Wars Revisited (Public Art Films)

Picture: C Sound: C+
Extras: B Film: B-



NOTE: *This is the third time this title has been issued, but the first two were sets (one originally issued by Plexifilm, the second by Public Arts Films, who are issuing this volume) but is the same exact main material. IT IS NOT A REPLACEMENT FOR THE ORIGINAL SETS. We therefore repeat the original review and note that the original sets were double DVDs, while this is the same main feature with new extras, though they are less.*

*New extras include the **Revisited** piece at 34 minutes, a half-hour graffiti loop, a new Music Video, a half-hour loop of trains with graffiti art and four new interviews running 25 minutes. Fans will want both versions to have all the extras. Now for the review of that original set:*

When a documentary is done correctly, it can appreciate in value, especially when it deals with the arts. **Style Wars** (1983) is a great example, as it documents the rise of Hip Hop and the conclusion of the graffiti mania that plastered New York subway cars over and over again. Director Tony Silver had one of the earliest victories at The Sundance Film Festival with this 70 minutes-long look at New York and the many diverse lives living in it.

Though many site the fictional film **Wild Style** (1982) as a document of how the rising Hip Hop scene was at the time, that picture has its limits. In contrast, **Style Wars** found its way onto PBS stations nationally and is a painstakingly constructed work that touches on every single figure in what turned out to be a major movement in the making beyond the highest expectations of any of its participants.

This was the first explicit look at the budding culture to be, at a time when the 1970s was about to be supplanted by the Reagan era. It shows how

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so many extremely talented artists land up in conflict with both authority (parents to police and politicians), as well as each other. These same artists have an irrepressible need to create, along with the extraordinary energy that goes with it. This is also manifest in the harder-core version of the Disco-era party music that is on the rise, Rap. It can be seen in breakdancing and the competitions that turned up turning out international competition!

We also see a time of innocence and of the last gasps of hope in the working class communities before the collapse of the industrial age, and the rise of the communications era, forever transforming the position of the working class and poor in the United States. It is an era before AIDS, SARS, and especially with the shots of New York that just never cease to amaze, terrorism at home. That the worst possible problems we see in this film can be truly seen as “the good old days” has a darkly ironic overtone impossible for those who could not even see Hip Hop coming, let alone the events of 9-11!

The thing that makes Silver’s film (co-produced with Henry Chalfant) hold up the most is insight and the focus on people. Hearing what they have to honestly say, and seeing how they feel, is priceless. It is the moral center of the work. It is a triumph to see these people so open, with no ego (even those who have some are not so totally egotistical as to be unreadable), no pretension, the reality that “reality TV” and over-mediation of the media has murdered.

It helps additionally that the work was shot on film. The 16mm stocks have held up extraordinarily well. The grain shows the productions age, but the clarity and color quality in the mostly full-color film are great. That is especially good news for those artists who offered color-rich graffiti. The full-screen image on the DVD is impressive, though there is some shimmering towards the end that indicate that the tape source was slightly distorted in the transfer process. Otherwise, it is just another argument for how great documentaries can look, as well as how very far High Definition digital video has to before reaching this quality.

The sound may even be more extraordinary. The original monophonic sound has been remarkably remixed for Dolby Digital AC-3 5.1 sound, easily outdoing the same thing on the **Wild Style** DVD, which had shrillness and muddy bass problems. Here, it seems like the filmmakers and Plexifilm got their hands on high-quality (maybe even master tapes) of the various music featured in the original film and came up with a remix that will make one think more of the incredible 5.1 on the recent **Scratch** set. The spoken dialogue is not too stuck in the center speaker either, which is a big plus, since this tends to be a major problem and mistake in such remixes.

The disc set is also loaded with extras that simply turn the film into an encyclopedia of early Hip Hop and New York graffiti. Disc One has a commentary track by Silver and Chalfant, plus an on-camera interview by them, about 24 minutes of interesting outtakes from the film, and an interview with Victor Kanefsky and Sam Pollard, the film’s clever editors.

Disc Two had tributes to those who have passed on already, guest interviews, interviews with every artist in the film twenty years later, and an intensely extensive gallery of just about every train that was ever “tagged”. This second disc is the epitome of how to expand extras around a main program and is extremely archival.

With all this, the **Style Wars** set is a must-have for fans and a perfect match for the **Scratch** set Palm Pictures recently issued. Any music



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library serious about this music must contain both, not to mention the art and art of documentary filmmaking this set is all about.

- Nicholas Sheffo

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