

**DVD: Rock Fresh (2004)**

**Review Rating:** Very Good

**Label/Studio:** MVD (Music Video Distribution)

**Catalog #:** DRB-1396

**Region:** 1 (NTSC)

**Released:** August 29, 2006

**Genre:** Documentary

**Synopsis:** Visually and aurally rich examination of graffiti artists as they experience the realities of adulthood.

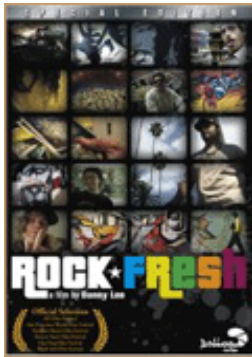
**Directed by:** Danny Lee

**Screenplay by:** Danny Lee

**Music by:** Cloak Okay

**Produced by:** Danny Lee

**Cast:** Kofie, Axis, Tyler, Clae, and Trixter.







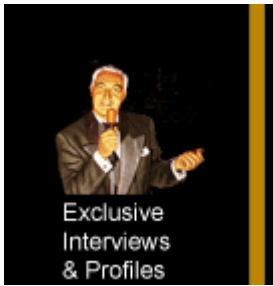
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-  DVD Reviews by Title
-  CD/LP Reviews
- DVD Film Music
- Isolated Scores on DVD and Laserdisc
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**Film Length:** 81 mins

**Process/Ratio:** 1.33:1

**Colour**

**Anamorphic DVD:** No

**Languages:** English Stereo

**Subtitles:**

### Special Features :

17 Deleted Scenes & Trailers: (:41) + (:20) + (:58) + (1:27) + (2:46) + (:56) + (5:59) + (:47) + (4:34) + (1:36) + (1:37) + (:37) + (3:10) + (1:43) + (1:42) + (4:22) + (1:29) / Foldout booklet/mini-poster

### Comments :

Danny Lee's debut as a filmmaker documents the unusual plight of genuinely talented artists who have moved from **tagging** walls - painting graffiti murals and signatures in the Los Angeles environs - to semi-established careers as commercial artists.

It's an oddly unwanted status that some have achieved because they acknowledge the widespread replication and distribution of their stylish ideas infer a total sellout, but the reality is pretty cut and dry: an artist needs a roof over his head, and he needs to eat. Without those basic necessities, he can't possibly survive beyond the rebellious phase that each of the selected artists experienced, mostly in their high school years. Add some kids, families, and the pedestrian bills of adulthood, and the iconic lifestyle of the Artiste erodes and becomes outmoded pretty fast.

There's clearly a special culture being showcased in **Rock Fresh**, with elements from rap music, skateboarding, and the vintage, laidback, hippy lifestyle of the west coast. Lee's approach plays like a blended mix of traditional doc elements that jump through time loops, with the career paths of specific artists more or less followed in a chronological order. Added to the mix are musical montages of murals followed from start to finish, and interviews with the artists and some family members.

The most interesting, and arguably the star of the doc, is Kofie, who was a gifted artist in school, embraced the skateboarding scene, and after years of tagging and competing against rival crews - literally crews of fellow artists who mark their urban territory with logos and murals - found local businesses and corporations were willing to commission murals for money; it still didn't win the approval of his father, but made his mother, a former art-student-turned-nurse, proud that he's living the dream of supporting himself through art.

It's clear Lee spent a lot of time getting to know his subjects, because they're very candid about their fears, their sense of dislocation from their urban roots at conventions and art gallery showings, and the surreal nature of making money from hand-crafted art - for murals, painted sneakers, or logo'd workman hats.

The strongest aspect of Lee's doc is his emphasis on actual graffiti creation: while it's impossible to

capture an idea, one can create a montage that demonstrates the layers with which pencil and pen sketches on crumpled notebook paper become a full-colour mural on a concrete or brick wall, via spray paint within a surprisingly efficient time-frame.

The illegality of painting on government or private property ensured artists had to be accurate, fast, and possessed a sense of inner commercialism to generate a recognizable signature or logo that made it clear who had tagged the wall. The use of groups mandated organizing paint, spray supplies, templates, and their own work-flow routine, so every member was always working on a part that the next one would apply another element. These skills helped artists like Kofie adapt for deadline-oriented commissions, but he does lament the excitement and risk from tagging at night, or in a verboten locale.

Lee does follow him to a secret location to film an illegal painting, but the two also travel to a wooded location where Kofie romantically crafts a portrait in the stillness of the wild. As the artist leaves Nature, he also leaves behind toxic paint stains - an aspect that's also prevalent in the bodies of the artists. Each confesses to having degrees of serious respiratory ailments, and it's a bit of a classic cliché, in which artists are suffering for their art which they're compelled to create because it's an inborn and unbridled desire.

Of course, herein lies the conundrum: is graffiti Art, or ugly colours and incoherent words & images littering clean surfaces of sterile urban landscapes?

There's a recurring interview with a municipal inspector whose job it is to crack down on graffiti artists and get their handywork off the walls because it defiles public and private property, and promotes clashes between rival gangs. Even the artists admit the free walls created by the city have led to occasional violent confrontations, but Lee's doc keeps intercutting montages of brilliantly conceived art that transcends the more vulgar or dysfunctional stains most urbanites have seen, and regard as just plain ugly.

Lee's approach isn't dissimilar from Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1956 Picasso documentary, **The Mystery of Picasso / Le Mystère Picasso**, in which the legendary artist created drawings and layered, ephemeral paintings that filled up the cinema screen. Like Clouzot, Lee uses editing and music to create a rhythm and a time-flow that may not document the precise time needed to create a mural or painting, but it captures the levels an artist must pass to create a finished work; covering up mistakes, changing colours, and adding or removing shading when things don't seem balanced to the artist's eye.

Within the doc, these montages are vital in conveying the skills of each artist - whether on a wall, art show, or T-shirt for the hungry Japanese market - and while there's no solution to the problem of illegal graffiti, Lee shows the unique patterns, free-style fonts, and explosive colours can be captured and reduced to levels acceptable to even mainstream fans of modern art in local and commercial venues and products.

The conundrum is whether an artist has to pass through the tagging phase to refine and define his artistic skills, or whether the risks are unjustified now, as the all-male artists in **Rock Fresh** have made graffiti an acceptable commodity in both commercial and chi-chi venues. The skills, techniques, and tools needed to craft incredible images with paint cans can be passed on to another generation in something as mundane as a high school art class, but it's clear street-level competition reasserts the graffitist's muse.
















MVD's DVD includes trailers, a few alternate edits of scenes, and unused or expanded montages that further showcase individual works, sometimes using more elaborate graphics, split-screens, and optical wipes. The doc is nicely transferred from a crisp master with brilliant colours, and the straight stereo mix features some punchy music cuts, and interview material that sometimes varies in quality due to background location noise.

The DVD's producers also highlight the great music in the film - including original score cuts by Cloak Okay - which are indexed on the foldout booklet/poster for each of the 17 deleted scenes. Both the booklet and the DVD also include a list of artist and music credits, with website URLs so fans and the curious can check out their respective work.

Lee's approach does tilt more towards a kinetic visual style in place of a traditional narrative approach, but **Rock Fresh** is a memorable portrait of graffiti artists, and sets a new standard in classy montage.

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[Top of Page](#) [DVD Index "P to R "](#) [DVD Index "A"](#)