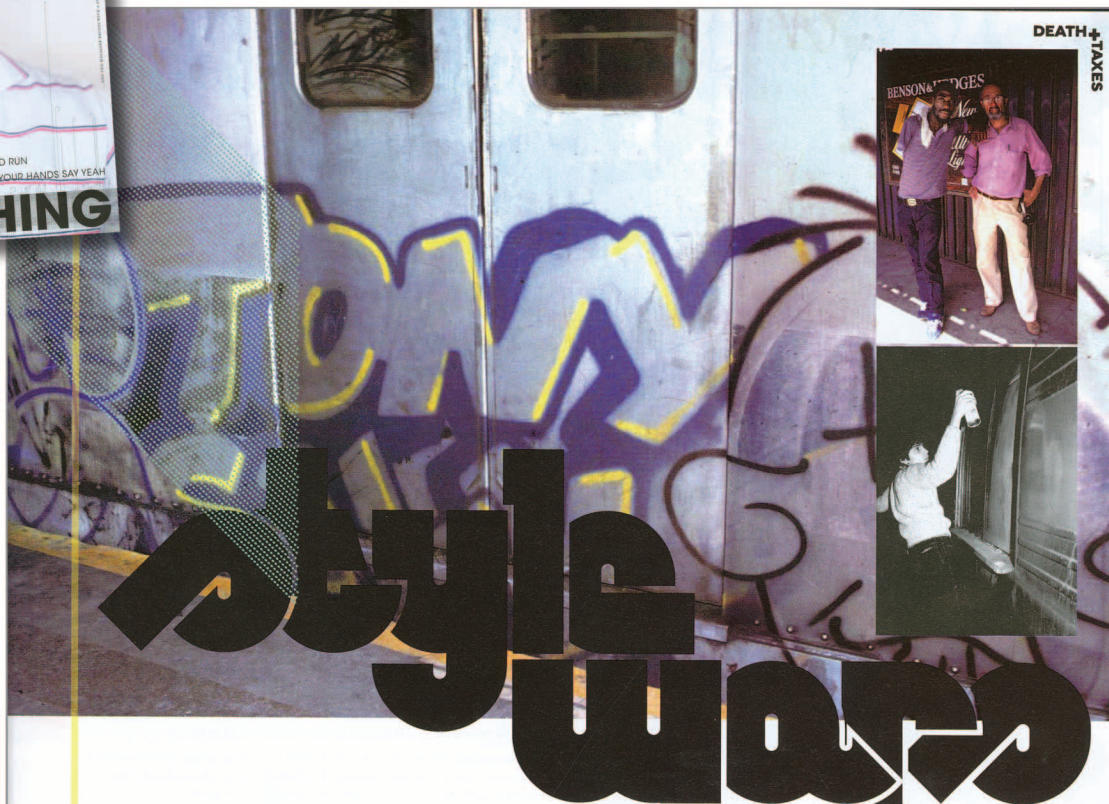


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SAY ANYTHING



## AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY SILVER

By ELIZABETH CURRIE  
Photos by MARTHA COOPER

30 years after the release of *Style Wars*, you've got to ask the question: How much of modern pop culture is owed to this film? Would Mark Ecko have been inspired to create one of today's most ubiquitous clothing lines? Would Jonathan Lethem's bursts of literary genius have gone uninformed had he not uncovered the makings of Mono and Lee? Would Nike keep shoveling version after version of the Dunk and Air Force One down our throats? Without a doubt, today's modern urban thinkers have been unabashedly influenced by this little piece of New York history.

The film, re-released this year for its 20th anniversary, captured the minds and hearts of graffiti writers, hip-hop aficionados and street kids alike, and was critical in delivering hip-hop culture to the mainstream. Tony Silver recently took the time to talk with me about how *Style Wars* came to be and his perspective on the evolution of hip-hop.

WHAT WAS YOUR TAKE ON NEW YORK'S CREATIVE SCENE AT THE TIME?

New York was wide open at the time. Anything was possible. I read an article in the *Village Voice* that clued me in to the existence of cultural forms I didn't know about.

THAT'S HOW YOU GOT INTO GRAFFITI?

It's a little more complicated than that. If you lived in New York at that time, graffiti was already everywhere and it had been for ten years. Intermittently it had been exciting, beautiful and wonderful, and much of the time it was a symbol that we had lost control. The city had lost the ability to service us. There had been serious headlines in the papers about the crisis in New York and how the city was decaying. So this was a sign of hope at the time, from the street.

SO HOW DID YOU COME INTO MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT IT?

When I read the *Village Voice* article I thought, This is a really good film. I want to make a film about this. At the bottom of the story, the name Henry Chalfont was listed—he was going to put on the first-ever public display of breaking.

I called and asked him what he was doing and he said he was taking pictures of graffiti and it was very interesting to him. I said, Let's get together and talk. So we did. Over the next, I dunno, five-six months I pulled together a crew, he had the contacts with what became known as the hip-hop world. And we began to do some filming, first of b-boys from the Rock Steady Crew. You could think of it as bubbles in a field of water or lava—something very fluid. Nobody had ever seen anything like this before outside the neighborhood. Henry showed pictures of graffiti at the same time, and that was essentially it. We began to think, How can we integrate these two things into film? I'm the director, you're the producer. You have the access, I have the film skills. I thought maybe there was something operatic and amazing. And there was, as it turned out.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE COMMODIFICATION OF GRAFFITI AND HIP-HOP ON A GLOBAL SCALE?

There are many types of commodification. Is it a commodity? Is it art? Is it from the streets? What is it? You can't untangle this stuff—you can't escape it. It is a very complex subject. Hip-hop is both a commercial juggernaut but also a chance for kids all over world to invent their own forms. Both things can coexist.