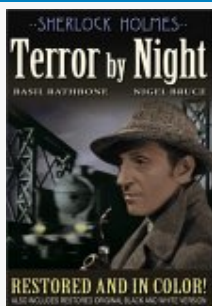


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Style Wars

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Review by [Bill Gibron](#) | posted August 22, 2005 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

Argue over the overall importance of its impact, but there is no denying that the hip-hop revolution that started in the streets of NYC in the late 70s and early 80s is the only cultural shift with any lasting significance within society. The 60s couldn't keep its peace and love pronouncements vital once the decade turned Me, and other seemingly critical changes along the cultural landscape - punk, disco, new wave, grunge - all spent their fad fortunes before becoming interchangeable ideas in the musical mindset. But rap and its sonic footing found a way to endure, to change with the changing times and revamp its message to fit the constantly in flux political climate. The result was relevance meshed with reality, perhaps the best combination for any attempted social coup.

The beginnings were not so earth shattering or shaking. As we learn in the amazing documentary, **Style Wars**, the first foundations of hip-hop came from the streets of New York, a bubbling underground movement that was born out of 50s gang culture, 60s activism, 70s malaise and the ever-popular force of modern music. Taken in with the concept of tagging - the claiming of territorial rights via graffiti - a new voice was formed, one speaking directly to and for the lives of those living on the fringes of metropolitan life. By the 80s, the fractured forces were joining up, combining their talents to literally rewrite the facade of their city. The result was the



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embryo that spawned gansta, the sample heavy sounds of M.C. Hammer et. al., and the current bi-costal bravado of the entire hip-hop genre. **Style Wars** is a must see slice of urban urgency that underlines how far the revolution has come - and how far from the original ideals it has since shifted.

The DVD:

They call it 'bombing'. Their goal is to be all city, or citywide; to have their special style visible from every borough and neighborhood in New York. They risk life and legality to practice their craft, and no one really recognizes the amount of talent and skill their 'art' requires. Indeed, most people consider it vandalism, and they urge the government to take steps to protect their aesthetic environment. Call it tagging, or writing, or graffiti, but for the disenfranchised kids hovering on the fringes of NYC's metropolitan madness, it represents the very essence of their being. It reflects their inner designs and outer agility. It's their calling card. It's their style. And when more than one person feels the need to deface a building wall, or subway car, the inevitable clashes occur. From competing creativity to individuals who just want to ruin what others have done, these **Style Wars** defined early 80s urban life. And they set the foundation for the rise in rap and hip-hop which now dominates the culture some 20 years later.

If you want to see what today's urban swagger looked like 25 years ago, before corporations corrupted it and big time artists started believing their TRL-produced hype, **Style Wars** is the place to start. This grand, gritty look at life along the outskirts of 'normal' society illustrates how music - specifically rap and hip-hop - combined with break dancing and graffiti to form the backdrop of a major social revolution. At the time, it all went under the same uniform title; rockin' (you "rocked" the subway, you "rocked" your body, etc). Unlike other documentaries that pretend to portray the beginnings of major movements, director Tony Silver and producing partner Henry Chalfant actually found themselves at the point where years of underground activity were finally finding their way above ground, touching the lives of thousands of inner city youth. And unlike the stereotypes, there were as many white writers as taggers of color.

This is not an exposé in the traditional sense of the word. Silver and Chalfant are not out to champion one side over another (though their sentiments seem fairly obvious when you weigh out the amount of screen time each side is given) or explain the stance you are to take regarding this subject. Instead, they present the parties, their positions and then let you decide. After nearly three decades of immersion in this culture, it's hard to see the controversy. Aside from complaints of occasional staleness, rap and hip-hop have managed to survive government attacks, FBI probes, censorship attempts, and the changing mood of the country, without nary a



moment outside the limelight. Silver and Chalfant even hint at how this kind of mindset melting pot began. In several face-to-face interviews with their subjects, we hear the same words spoken over and over again. For these kids, bombing is an expression of who they are. It is part of their personality. Something so close, so unforced and natural is destined to live on after the manufactured manipulation of corporate crap ceases making sense.

Silver and Chalfant also prove the link between graffiti, breaking and rap by showing how all three came from a common place in the urban environment. In such a large setting as New York City, it is easy to feel small and insignificant. Even the biggest names in entertainment can get lost in the bustle and hustle of the teeming city streets. Now imagine being poor, a member of a minority class, and without a single prospect for improving your position. Violence is one way to make your name - or at the very least, to get noticed. But **Style Wars** argues that personal expression - artistic (graffiti), physical (dancing) or verbal (rap) - was equally impressive and important.

For many, the exchange of words was preferable to an exchange of gunfire, and the highly competitive world of breaking contests was far more fun and rewarding than old school rumbles for "gang" territory. The G-word is never uttered in **Style Wars**, and even though the bombers run around in semi-organized cliques, it doesn't seem to have a place. This was not about the organized assault on the social order. Hip-hop was about personal technique, something that's hard to show within the so-called thug life of today's bad boy mystique.

Still, we have our rebels, our discontent individuals who see bombing as their own personal weapon of choice. Cap is one such individual, a writer who takes the concept of bombing very much to heart. He believes that anything and everything is ripe for a touch of the spray can - including the intricate artwork of his fellow vandals. Cap doesn't know these people, doesn't pretend to believe in their "hands-off" peace pack ideology (most writers agree not to mess with each others work). Instead, he champions the element of the tag, the acknowledgment of one person over another by their technique and style. In many ways, Cap represents the Establishment view, twisted to take in the surrounding culture that it fights against. Indeed, he's just as anti-graffiti as Mayor Ed Koch (who seems to harbor some minor unspoken positive feelings about the quality of the artwork) or the various citizens interviewed. Many people hate the defacing of public property, and make their vocal opinions known. Others just see it as inconsiderate and wonder why these urchins appear above the law.

One of the great things about **Style Wars** is that we learn the names and faces of those behind the paint cans.

We meet "Seen", a boisterous man with an exceptional gift for three dimensional shading, "Dondi" who visualizes his works in terms of size and total impact, and "Case", who manages a more avant-garde approach even though an accident cost him one of his arms. Indeed, Silver and Chalfant get us inside these boys' lives, finding opportunities to question them about the entire subculture. There is very much an "us vs. them" mentality amongst writers, and it is sometimes hard to see how rap and break dancing fits in. But thanks to the skill of the filmmaking, the juxtaposition between the musical elements of rockin'/hip-hop and graffiti is highlighted, and we soon learn that the differences are minor at best (dancers want to get paid, while taggers have no desire to go "professional"). In the end, we see the exact purpose behind the burgeoning revolution. It is all about recognition and acknowledgment. In a social climate where oppression and prejudice rule, this is a way to rise up and be heard...something that modern hip-hop has basically forgotten.

Then there is the art. Chalfant had been championing graffiti writers for years, collecting their works, befriending the kids and talking pictures of past triumphs. He truly sees the aesthetic behind the atrocity and **Style Wars** emphasizes this point perfectly. While it could have used a little more "how to" or "hands on" examples of the effort required to realize one of these pieces (obviously, the law wouldn't allow it), we can still see the dedication during the design phase. What many politicians failed to see was that, instead of spending time on the streets getting into trouble, most writers were sitting around comparing black books (sketchpads where they kept their works in progress) and trading secrets. Sure, some of the hints centered on how to successfully boost paint (some of the stories are hilarious), but most are teaching basic techniques to allow others to develop and expand the art form. There is a lot of wonderful material on display in **Style Wars**. Too bad that so much of it is now reserved for memory. In the end, **Style Wars** laments the loss of certain urban certainties. As tagging grew in popularity, individuals like Cap made it next to impossible for other writers to have their work appreciated. And without that rush - that need for being seen - many stopped tagging altogether. Others took their work "legit" and were viewed as sell outs in the process. Break dancing became the stuff of music video jokes, and competition gave way to corporate interference. Only rap remained steady, since it allowed for individual personality and perspective to transcend the trappings of the current scene to speak directly to the audience.

Looking back after nearly three decades, it's amazing to see how innocent it was, how idealistic and naive it all seemed. These kids actually thought that, via writing and tagging, they'd somehow change their world. They'd get the adults to see them for what they really were, and manage a level of appreciation that they never even got

from each other. That it didn't work is not the point. That it still exists today - in an arguably far more subtle version - is testament to the movement's real power. Yes, there were **Style Wars** back in the day. But they weren't just battling over graffiti design. The war was over which way the cultural landscape would swing. Looking over the rap-filled face today, the winner is obvious.

The Video:

Public Arts Films does a fine job with the DVD release of this title. Considering its age and rarity, the film itself looks fabulous. Certainly there are age issues, colors can appear faded or washed out, and some of the shots are not as evocative as others. But the 1.33:1 full frame image is wonderful and captures a true feeling of the grit and grime of early 80s New York perfectly.

The Audio:

Presented in Dolby Digital 5.1 Stereo, **Style Wars** sounds fine. The old school rap soars across the speakers as the dialogues and conversations come across loud and clear. The updated mix accentuates the bass and adds a great deal of atmosphere to the film. While there are occasional technical lapses and recording dropout in the film itself, the overall sonic situation here is excellent.

The Extras:

Where Public Art Films DVD presentation of **Style Wars** really shines is in the bonus features department. Spread out over two discs, we get just about everything we could ever imagine needing as part of a **Style Wars** showcase. Disc 1 offers a commentary, a collection of deleted scenes, and some interview material with Silver, Chalfant and their editors. The best material comes in the alternate narrative. Silver and Chalfant discuss how they came to make the film, the pressures they felt from both the government and the writers to "play fair" and the difficulty in capturing the actual art. Chalfant has the most personal information to give (we get updates on several of the boys shown) while Silver supplies the cultural context of NYC in the 70s and 80s. It's a wonderful conversation and adds a great deal to our understanding of the film. So do the deleted scenes. They provide more motivation for Cap, further reflections by Case, and some additional insight into the connection between music and graffiti.

Disc 2 is where this package excels. Doing the smart thing and revisiting the subjects of their film, Silver and Chalfant offer more than a dozen and a half updates on those who were part of the rockin' scene (all 32 artists seen in the film are represented in one way or another). Certainly, a few of the featured players have passed on, and others may not have been willing to talk. Yet it's fun to see Cap still up to his old tricks, or Seen waxing poetic on the past. There are also tributes to the fallen idols who did not make it to the new millennium. Add in a series of

interviews with luminaries like Fab Five Freddy, Goldie and photographer Martha Cooper and an amazing 30 minute loop of over 200 whole car tags and burners and you've got what the DVD format does best. Not only does it provide a fine film, it gives you all the complimentary and supplementary material you need to understand the subject, the context and the participants involved.

Final Thoughts:

All that remains is rap. Break dancing now looks so old and antiquated when compared to, say, something like krunk, and graffiti artists would rather fill canvases than train cars. Indeed, everything about the original hip-hop/rockin' movement has been bought, sold, merchandised, repackaged and reprogrammed to play to white suburban as well as black urban society. The funny thing is, that was the way it was always meant to be. **Style Wars** shows us that tagging was not just a minority mannerism. It crossed across all cultural and social borders to capture the minds of Caucasian as well as those of color. Besides, within every current Top 40 hit, within every bling-bling based boast or pimped out ride is the **Style Wars** message. It's all about recognition and respect, about being seen in a world which would rather not look your way. New York City circa 1980 is a lot like the USA in 2005. There is a battle between the Establishment and the extremists for the heart of the nation. Yet, oddly enough, neither side will end up setting the agenda. It will be some outside force that steps in and rewrites the rulebook. That's what happened with hip-hop. And thanks to **Style Wars**, we can see where it all began.

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