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DOC PAINTS GRAFFITI AS PRIMAL

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"If you want to know what hip hop is really about, see a film called Style Wars," says KRS-1, one of hip hop's pioneering MCs.

The quote from KRS-1 fronts a new double-DVD re-release of the 1982 film, documenting hip hop's three outlets: MCing, breakdancing and, most in-depth, graffiti.

For most of the lay, middle-class New Yorkers interviewed in Tony Silver's excellent film, graffiti was an eyesore, indicative of the decay of polite and civilized society.

But to its enthusiasts, graffiti was far more complex than most people ever gave it credit for.

At its roots, thanks to the original "bomber," Taki 183, graffiti was primal. It was a means of marking one's territory, one that extended the lengths of New York's vast subway system. Taki 183's signature was everywhere and he became king, one that would inspire legions of flattering imitators - and graffiti was born.

Seeing where those early graffiti bombers and artists ended up is half the fun of watching Style Wars, with the second DVD catching up with legends like Seen and Skeme in a 2002 recap.

It's Skeme's story that provides some of the best moments. In the original flick, Skeme is profiled along with his mother, a stern woman who can't fathom her son's hobby or his willingness to break the law and generally endanger himself.

It's ironic that Skeme's wild youth and wild styles would see him becoming a high-ranking U.S. marine and family man 20 years later.

But the artistry of Skeme's pieces, and other artists featured, is undeniable - even then-New York mayor Ed Koch just barely sidesteps an admission of their quality at one point. However, he spearheaded several initiatives to wipe out graffiti in the city.

Among the more absurd of which was a campaign with pop stars and athletes of the day imploring kids to "Make your mark in society, not on society." Koch reddens somewhat when a reporter asks if the campaign posters are spray-paint proof.

The graffiti artists weren't just at war with New York's finest (including a subway cop who's a dead ringer for Robert De Niro - appropriately the whole film has a grainy Martin Scorsese Mean Streets vibe to it) and the Metropolitan Transit Authority, either. Indeed, the artists were at war with one another, both in terms of friendly one-upmanship and even outright anger.

Artists who spent weekends in rail yards working on masterpieces would often only have a few days before Cap, an unrepentant bomber, would write overtop of them.

While various graffiti crews were bound and determined to stop Cap, if not do him some serious harm, in his way he was more hip hop than anyone. While the artists subverted society, Cap subverted them. It's layers of complexity like that which lend Style Wars such credence and have allowed this fine documentary to age so gracefully.

In addition to the 70-minute documentary on Disc 1, there are 23 minutes of outtakes, a director's commentary and interview, and a hip-hop soundtrack featuring artists like Grandmaster Flash, the Fearless Four and K-Rob.

Disc 2 catches up with many of the artists later in life and includes galleries by the likes of Iz the Wiz, Ken Swift, Sach, Mare139, and tributes to hall-of-famers like Dondi and Shy 147.

There are also guest interviews with Fab 5 Freddy, Guru, DJ Red Alert and drum and bass star and sometime actor Goldie, who got his start bombing London - pun intended.

Musically, Def Jux recording artists EI-P, RJD2 and Aesop Rock provide a modern counterpoint to the classic Sugarhill Gang-style hip-hop sound featured on Disc 1. A great companion to films like Wild Style and Beat Street, Style Wars is an absolutely indispensable addition to every hip-hop historian's collection.

Illustration:

2 photos

1. MARE139 in the Sutphin Avenue layup in Queens, New York, back in 1981.
2. A Tony Silver tribute on a train.

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