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Few films deserve to be deemed as essential viewing for lovers a certain culture. For hip-hop aficionados, some of these films include "Wild Styles", "Krush Groove", and "Beat Street". In the medium of moving pictures, documentaries offer an accurate representation of the subject. "Style Wars", known only to true lovers of the golden era, is the requisite documentary about the birth of hip-hop and graffiti culture. The exciting 1982 film documents an innovative time. "Style Wars" captures the energy, bonds, ideologies, risks, and talent of urban artists. The 2 disc DVD set overflows with recently filmed interviews, still photographs, a commentary track, and music. While a majority of the film focuses on graffiti, the film acknowledges the art form as a piece within the puzzle of hip-hop. With a myriad of races mixed together, the late 70's / early 80's graf movement evolved with a youthful, creative energy. "Style Wars" is the definitive graffiti film that authentically encapsulates a budding cultural movement in a time period of forgotten innocence.

"Style Wars" succeeds in capturing an underground renaissance of urban artistic expression. Starting in the darkness of an underground subway tunnel, the film bursts into a bountiful ocean of spray-painted colors as the trains move like deep sea iron serpents. The actual film is interesting on the initial viewing, but repeated plays prove to be severely addictive.

Audiences will be enthralled by the dynamic drama with the myriad of conflicts. First, the authorities wage war against the underground artists. Mayor Koch, the police, and the transit authority are not painted as evil enemies. Simply, they have a job to do. The conflicting opinions fuel both sides. The passion of the youth transforms into an unstoppable artistic revolution with spray paint. While some believe graffiti hurts the quality of our life and defaces public property, others believe graf gives the city an indelible. New York City attempts to cease the movement but fails. Guard dogs, laws, and barbed wire fences cannot stop the determination of the youth. Decades later, this movement has endured. Second, the tensions between the writers perpetuate the mythology of danger surrounding the culture. Apathetic to how others view him, Cap is a bomber who sprays grey throw-ups over other people's intricate pieces. The other writers have such a hate towards him, they did not want his name mentioned in the documentary. The existing violence between the artists is only verbalized. Viewers realize that the blood did spill off camera. Finally, the conflict between a mother and son is poignantly universal. With a brutal honesty, every viewer can relate to a war inside a home. In the film, Skeme and his mother fight a perpetual argument that adds a poignantly emotional element to the film. Just as Skeme cannot be convinced to stop, his mother can not be convinced to accept his art. Without resolutions, these conflicts add to the contemporary relevance of "Style Wars".

Music makes the artwork come alive. Tony Silver uses music to seamlessly glue together moving pictures and still photographs. With old school hip-hop songs, "Style Wars" gracefully moves the story with style. "The Message", by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five is a perfect theme for Case, the one-armed maestro who wins the viewer's hearts. "Beat Bop" (by Rammellzee Vs. K-Rob) is the magnificent theme for the film. Rammellzee's old school flow perfectly encapsulates the movement's energy. Rammellzee also raps about The Son of Sam as Rock Steady Crew break dance against Dynamic Rockers. The inclusion of older, non-hop-hop music adds the film's panache while displaying how the culture's substance runs deeper than what people think is stereotypical hip-hop. Seen's theme song, "The Wanderer" proves how hip-hop transcends rap music. In the opening scene, the director uses the classical score from "Excalibur" for the painted train's dramatic entrance. The connection between classical music and hip-hop music give the film a timeless quality.

The objective news report style informs the viewer while adding a stylish authenticity. The sound of the stereotypical white narrator is (unintentionally) humorous, but direct as he teaches the viewers. If "Style Wars" was made today, an emcee would probably be the narrator. Instead, the film plays like a 70's news report with a humorless narrator elucidating slang like a confused observer of a distant tribe. The informative film excites the viewer on all aspects of the culture. With a respectful authenticity, the film documents the first tag to go "all-city" (Taki 183), the evolution of bubble letters, throw ups vs. pieces, wild styles, and much more. The artists philosophize about the difference between bombing trains versus walls. Obviously, the true bomber loves the train yard. Dondi comments about his love for the odor of the train yard. Silver also insightfully comments about the exploitation of graf. Wealthy gallery owners attempt to incorporate graffiti to the suburbanites, who are hungry to profit off of underground urban culture. Reduced to retailers, the gallery owners yearn to legally capture the illegal energy of a train yard on a piece of canvas. Since the lawbreaking excitement and dangerous environment become their creative fuel, the true graf artists always return to the train yard. This mysterious danger surrounding the yard ultimately enhances the film's potency.

The heart of "Style Wars" lies within the myriad of fascinatingly real people. The artists are bonded by their secret language, which includes a camouflaged writing style. "Bombing", "toy", and "throw ups" are a few of the words writers still use today. As they speak in their own lingo, the culture forms around them. The writers know each other and inspire each other's creativity. As the one-armed artist, Case walks into the projects rapping about Slick Rick, the audience gains respect and admiration for the artist as a person. Case's involving life story makes graffiti universal. He tells stories about getting out of jail, just starting his work, losing his arm, and becoming an innovator. The film depicts Case as one of the most talented and revered artists in the film. Case's "computer rock" lettering was one of his innovative contributions to graffiti. With only one arm, Case's scenes give hope to the underprivileged since he proves anything can be accomplished. The bond between Dez and Trap is also touching. Dez (now known as DJ Kay Slay) is a father figure to the younger, Trap. The 3 artists (Case, Dez, and Trap) perfectly represent how graffiti is passed from generation to generation. A young, white kid from a prep school, Zephyr breaks the stereotype that graf writers are minorities. Seen and Iz The Wiz are also Caucasian writers, who earned respect with their cool personalities and their magnificent talent. Dondi was a revered soul who is sorely missed. Rammellzee is a living work of art as he walks the thin line between insanity and genius. His deep philosophy on "arming" letters to destroy symbols is creatively bizarre, but boldly imaginative. While gang members were getting killed for wearing the wrong colors, bombers (of all races) moved throughout the city with stylish respect. Bonded by the culture, the artists are all portrayed as talented individuals who transcend the stereotypical definition of art.

Bonus features on "Style Wars" DVD will please the obsessive hip-hop historian. The 2-disc "Style Wars" DVD overflows with interesting interviews, out-takes, and artwork. Pieces can be appreciated in an organized menu. "Destroy All Lines" is a 30 minute loop displaying 200 painted trains. The music by EL-P, RJD2, and Aesop Rock is welcome, but the absence of "Beat Bop" is the DVD's only flaw. The director's commentary is extremely informative and massively entertaining. Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant talk about finding the artists, earning their respect, and fighting for their cause. The additional anecdotes are hidden treasures within the bonus features. Disc 2 also includes recently filmed interviews with a majority of the film's participants. Insanely creative, Rammellzee is recognizable under self-made mask. Intuitive interviews by Guru, Fat Joe, DJ Red Alert, and Fab 5 Freddy validate graffiti's importance to hip-hop culture. The captivating interviews with the directors and the editors give the film a new dimension. The poignant tributes to Dondi and Shy 147 create a nostalgic reverence. Some writers have become respected members of society. Some have traveled the world on their talent. Some lost their

mind and wear toy guns as a part of a costume. Some lost themselves to drugs. Some have become successful, some fell on hard times, some passed on, and some cannot be found. Not one has any regrets. From the commentary to the interviews, the various participants share technical and personal stories. The interviews, out-takes, artwork, and other bonus material will enthrall the viewer for weeks (or even months). Decades later, their love of hip-hop and graffiti remains fervent. After multiple viewings, all of them eventually become the viewer's friends.

"Style Wars" is a certified classic that kept viewers intrigued for more than 20 years. The documentary is beautifully honest, exceptionally gritty, intensely fair, and wonderfully lively. While many hip-hop films will be forgotten, "Style Wars" remains the essential document for graffiti and hip-hop. True lovers of hip-hop must respect these artists who paved the way. This film educates us of a time and place when hip-hop inspired creativity, created peace within a dangerous atmosphere, connected races, and established the birth of a youthful urban culture. The movement's futility is a fascinating aspect. An artist's work could last forever on a canvas, but they choose to paint trains that may be washed or painted over within days. With little or no profit, the graffiti movement remains a vital aspect of hip-hop. If you don't believe me, ask Krs-One. There is something inside these revolutionary artists that transcends all cultural and societal limits. What makes these artists risk their lives (third rail, beef) or their freedom (police) to paint on a train that will be washed or painted over? Regardless of how futile their effort may be, their need to express themselves is the main element which empowers the culture. "Style Wars" is the classic definitive film that poignantly captures the birth of hip-hop. Ignore the toys! This Sunday evening, put on your gloves and your hoody, bring a couple of cans of Krylon, and go bombing for the fame!

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