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UNDER COVER

Style Wars

Dir: Tony Silver
(Public Art Films)

The influence of this film on the worldwide graffiti scene can hardly be understated. The don dadda of all hiphop documentaries, Style Wars is an indisputable classic. New York, 1982: the impoverished housing projects have engendered and continue to foster a beautiful subcultural monster. Since the '70s, the transit system has been remorselessly bombed by the youth of the inner city, as they develop the most innovative inner city artform ever known, one that arouses either passionate love and virulent hatred from the citizens of the metropolis. This devastatingly authoritative two disc package presents the phenomenon through the eyes and with the words of the writers themselves, offering a colourful introductory insight into a generation of kings: an entire dynasty, if you will. Footage abounds of such legends as SEEN, IZ THE WIZ, DONDI, CASE, and DEZ, who you may now recognize as the prolific DJ Kay Slay. There are scenes here that will send any writer into fits of excitement, as SKEME debates with his mum in their kitchen, CASE breaks down his "super duty tough work", DONDI enthuses over the smell of trains, and SEEN plays the role of Michelangelo with a group of assistants. There's also sick breaking from Crazy Legs and the Rock Steady Crew as they battle the Dynamic Rockers. Timeless old school joints from The Treacherous Three, Trouble Funk, The Fearless Four and others are perfectly placed between interviews, though the most powerful moments are those accompanied by the strains of Wagner, instilling an appropriate sense of grandeur and emotion as the trains thread through the city. As well as conveying the charisma and vibrancy of the youths involved, Style Wars witnesses the first intimations of the decline of the art of subway bombing. Former NYC mayor Koch smugly describes his steps to destroy the culture, and the shots of whitewashed trains, razor-wire fences, and dogs are truly heartbreaking. The commerce versus culture debate also rages even at this stage, as we visit an early graf exhibition downtown. "If you get in at the bottom of anything, it's gotta be a good investment, and this is definitely going someplace," says a middle class white woman in her 30s. If only she, or anyone else, could have known. And all this is not even to mention the bonus outtake footage, or the bounteously inclusive archives of artwork and interviews with legends such as space professor RAMMELLZEE, DURO, MIN, MARE, QUIK, DOZE, REVOLT, ZEPHYR, LEE, and a glowing tribute to the genius of DONDI and SHY 147. More than 20 years later, toys are still trying to emulate this shit.

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