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STYLE WARS

A Music Video Distributors release of a Public Art Films production

1983, 16mm, Color/B&W, 70 minutes

Directed by Tony Silver

Reviewed on DVD

Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's classic 1983 PBS documentary **STYLE WARS** captures in enthusiastic detail the graffiti-writing subculture in early Eighties New York, but it also records the incipience of hip-hop culture. With divergences into the world of the B-boys and a soundtrack of early hip-hop from the likes of Grandmaster Flash, The Treacherous Three, and Trouble Funk, **STYLE WARS** preserves a moment in time when burners, breakdancers, DJs, and MCs merged into a cultural force whose impact continues to be felt in the present day.

These are indeed divergences, though, for **STYLE WARS** is primarily about graffiti and the contention over whether or not it is art. Although Silver and Chalfant give time to both viewpoints, filming interviews with then-mayor Ed Koch and representatives of the police force and the New York Transit Authority, there is no doubt as to which side the filmmakers emphasize. Certainly, the charismatic braggadocio of young men breaking into train yards late at night to balance between subway cars, yield dual spray cans, and draw their names in letters six feet tall makes it pretty much impossible to side with authority.

What most strongly casts the NYC cops and bureaucrats as villains is watching them destroy the vibrant and dynamic compositions of lower-class youths with few other options to be heard on a societal level. In many cases, legit and bootleg tapes of **STYLE WARS** represented the only widely available records of long-destroyed works of graffiti art. That has changed with this 2005 DVD re-release, for the second disc boasts photographic galleries of 32 artists and a 30-minute loop of the entire collection of train car images. The bonus features also provide present-day interviews with Silver, Chalfant, editors Sam Pollard and Victor Kanefsky, and many of the graffiti writers featured in the original film.

Catching up with these artists 20 years after the fact makes for the most compelling special feature here, but also adds a tinge of sadness to the otherwise celebratory tone of this issue. Although a few have gone on to success in entertainment, art, or other careers, most of the graffiti artists interviewed seem to tell the same stories of persistent poverty, health, and legal problems. This is at odds with **STYLE WARS** itself, which makes out hip-hop to be invincible even at the point when the spark first caught flame, and there is no argument that it has permeated the global mainstream in the two decades since the documentary's original release. It reminds us that after the revolution was televised, the revolutionaries still had to go home to roach-infested apartments and get by on minimum wage.

– *Damian Duffy*



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