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Style Wars 30th Anniversary Screening Outlines a New Context

By [Chaz Kangas](#) Thu., Mar. 21 2013 at 3:15 AM

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From the Vault



Listening Outdoor Concerts On Road

Last night, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center hosted a special 30th Anniversary screening of the immortal hip-hop documentary *Style Wars* as part of the Rhapsodic City: Music of New York series. Presented in partnership with the Tribeca Film Institute and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the screening was followed by a panel discussion with filmmaker Henry Chalfant, editor Victor Kanefsky, sculptor/painter and active graffiti writer at the time of the film Carlos "Mare139" Rodriguez and moderated by painter/DJ Iona Rozeal Brown.

Considered by many to be the first hip-hop documentary, *Style Wars* catapulted the graffiti conflict of 1982's New York into homes worldwide when it aired on PBS affiliates and went on to win the Grand Prize for Documentaries at the 1983 Sundance Film Festival. While the film holds up as an invaluable time capsule of both hip-hop's infancy and the art scene of early '80s New York City, Wednesday's screening resurrected the energy of the time with some revelations and surprise guests that placed the film in an entirely new context.

As the screen lit up with the faces *Style Wars* made iconic (artists Seen, Skeme, Cap as well as graffiti's most outspoken opponent Mayor Ed Koch), the very front row began a series of sporadic loud outbursts, prompting some irritated audience members to yell "Shut the fuck up!" much louder than one would expect to overhear in a New York library. Once the lights came up, the boisterous voices heard during the screening were revealed to be some of the iconic painters seen in the film, as well as artists of the unsung, "most brilliant" generation before them.

Discussion of this lost generation led to one of the most interesting revelations of the panel. While *Style Wars* has, for years, been hailed as the definitive testament of the graffiti/hip-hop explosion, it really only captures the second wave of painters who were active at the time. As Rodriguez pointed out, while prior to the film "the majority of the culture had no interest in media," there was an important period of NYC Graffiti before *Style Wars*. "[in the film] It may look kind of harsh with the city going out of control with graffiti, it was actually a lot worse in the post-Vietnam era when you had all this gang violence, criminality and social upheaval while the city was bankrupt. This was a symptom of that, but before we came on the scene, there were writers who laid down this foundation for us." Chalfant went on to point out that while Mayor Koch wondered aloud in the film why the parents didn't put their children in school specializing in art, most of the schools accessible to the artists seen in the film had their art programs cut at the time, leaving graffiti as their most available artistic outlet.

Chalfant went on to give credit to Koch for being so accessible at that time to appear in his documentary. Chalking his interactions with him, as well as the graffiti artists and city officials, up to just how New York was in those days, he went on to point out how Koch, despite his "narrow-mindedness" about graffiti, was still open enough and curious enough to want to appear in the film. The panel concluded with a discussion on a possible HD edition of *Style Wars* that the film-makers successfully launched a Kickstarter for, namely resurrecting never-before-seen outtakes from the unused additional 28 hours of film. The screening and discussion once again affirmed the importance of *Style Wars* as a cultural document, as well as, judging by the wide range of ages attending the screening, a rite of passage for anyone with even a passing interest in hip-hop.

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