American Graffiti

A HISTORY OF AMERICAN GRAFFITI

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REVS:COST
KRT

INTRODUCTION

Humans write graffiti.

BUSTER
S.C.
PAUEV
ED
BOB
BOB
FRANKIE
RG.
"VIN"
B.
BUTCH

It is part of who we are. As soon as humans figured out how to make marks on things, we did it. Graffiti—in its original definition as a scratched or written public marking—is considered to be the first example of human art.

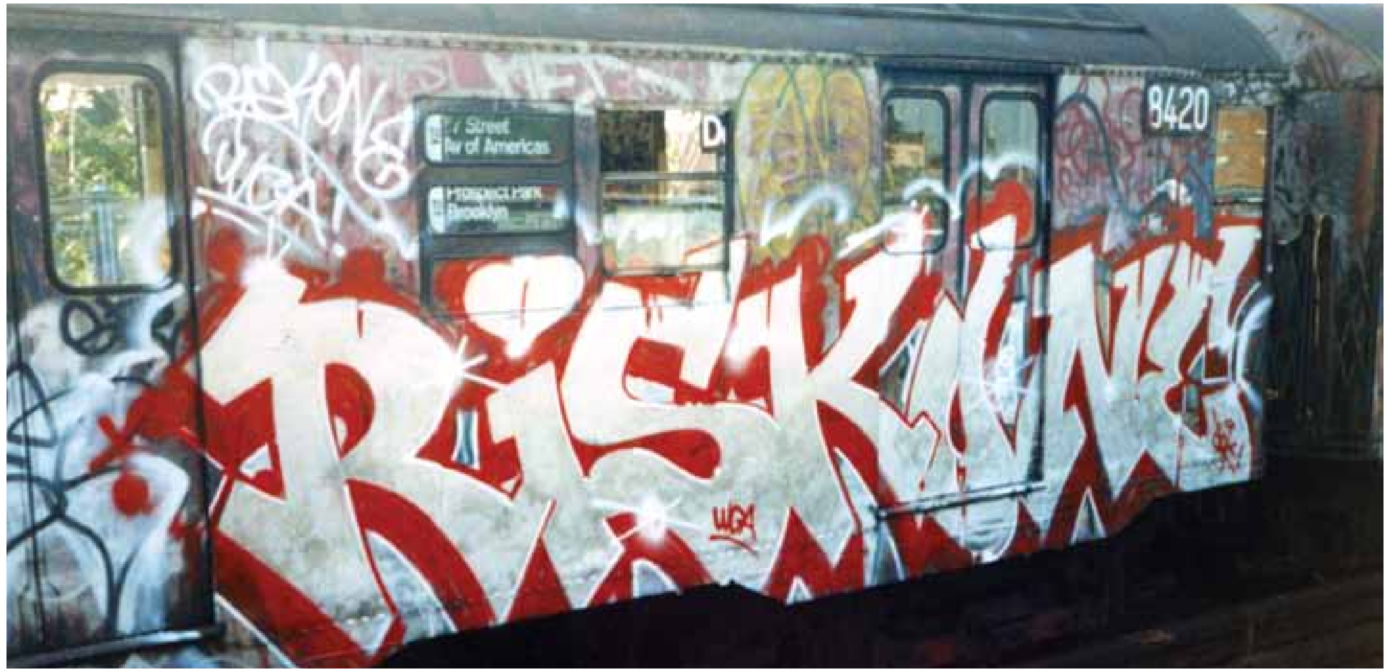
Fast-forward a few dozen millennia to the 20th twentieth century. The GIs of World War II and the Korean War wrote the phrase "'KILROY WAS HERE"; hobos and railroad workers added their grease-penciled monikers to boxcars that rumbled sea to sea; *cholos* and *pachucos* in California and the Southwest and the gangs of Chicago left territorial *placas* and roll calls; the toughs of New Orleans's Ninth Ward wrote their names and favorite weapons. Like school kids everywhere, the Italian boys in Boston's North End wrote their names on street corners and playground walls, while political radicals everywhere proclaimed their causes, lovers their love, prophets their Lord, and mischief makers just made us laugh with one liners or raunchy drawings. A pair of recently developed products—disposable magic markers and aerosol spray paint—began to hit the shelves of stores in neighborhoods around the United States and, like photography or any new technology, in creative hands they turned into an art medium.

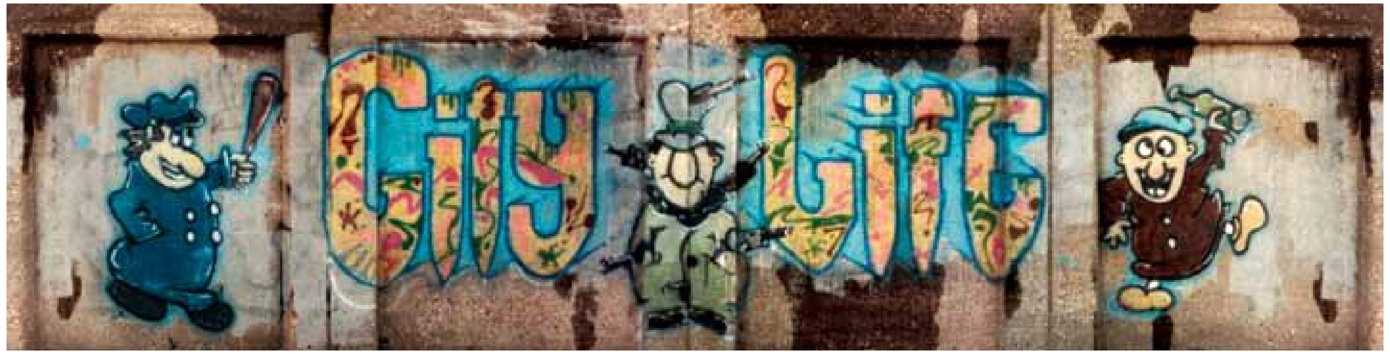
In North and West Philadelphia in the late 1960s, names met fame as kids like CORNBREAD, TITY, and KOOL KLEPTO KIDD spray painted their names all over town. They became urban legends, and by March 2, 1971, the *Tribune* announced on its front page that CORNBREAD was dead. There was only a passing explanation of who he was: If you were from Philly, you already knew how to order a cheesesteak, how to pronounce Schuylkill, and that CORNBREAD had his name on walls all over the city. Like KILROY before them, the wall writers' exploits became urban legends, fish tales of the block.

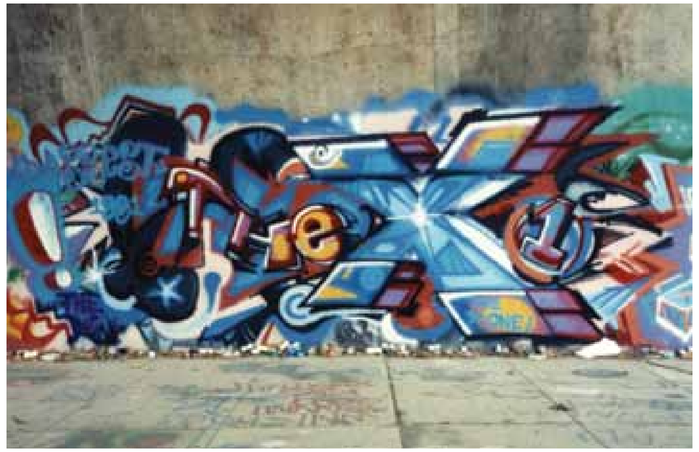
Yet it was in New York City where color lines crossed and line met color. Totally unaware of graffiti elsewhere, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a generation of young New Yorkers began to write their street names—names like TAKI 183, LSD OM, DINO NOD, SUPER KOOL 223, STAY HIGH 149, PHASE 2, PHIL T GREEK, SNAKE, and JUNIOR 161—in ever-increasing volume. America was in turmoil, and New York City was in crisis: suburbanization and white flight had stripped its economic base. It was near bankruptcy. But this generation of young people like Upper West Sider LSD OM realized that they could speak to the entire city by painting the one thing that crossed every boundary of class, borough, race, and neighborhood: the New York City subway system.

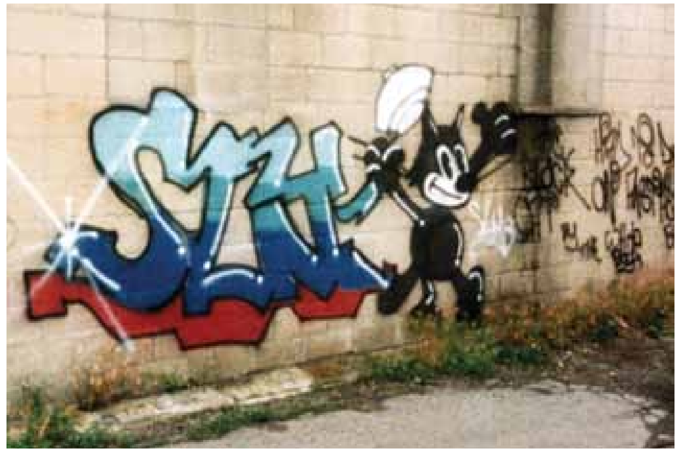
THIS PAGE: NEIGHBORHOOD GRAFFITI, NORTH MARGIN STREET, BOSTON'S NORTH END, C. 1954-1959. (PHOTO BY NISHAN BICHAJIAN, COURTESY OF KEPES/LYNCH COLLECTION, ROTCH VISUAL COLLECTIONS, M.I.T.)
OPPOSITE PAGE: VARIOUS VINTAGE SPRAY PAINT CANS, 1960S-1980S. (COURTESY OF ROGER GASTMAN; PHOTOS BY ADAM WALLACAVAGE)

RED DEVIL
enamel
Instant Spray
KRYLON
Minit Dri
Spray Enamel
RUST-OLEUM
STOPS RUST!
EPOXY
SPRAY ENAMEL
KRYLON
SPRAY PAINT
Spray COLOR PLASTIC
easy way SPRAY ENAMEL
REPUBLIC
spray enamel
DEM-KOTE
Spray
ENAMEL
Sprinkle
JET INK
SPRAY-BOND
RED-DEVIL
enamel
GIANT SIZE









Born into Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the social tumult of the late 1960s, hip-hop's early adopters outside of New York grew up watching the varnish of American society strip itself away. They stumped their parents with questions like, "Mom, why did President Nixon resign?" and "Dad, did America lose the war in Vietnam?" They grew up in cities at varying points in their rise and fall: Atlanta, Phoenix, Miami, and Seattle were booming, while Pittsburgh and Cleveland were crumbling from booms past. They were the first generation born into an era full of newly guaranteed rights, but in American cities like Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Baltimore, they grew up amid the cinders and ruins of racially charged urban riots. Across America, they toddled into school buses that took them not blocks away, but across town in the first mandated integrations of schools, which varied wildly in their success. The youth culture coming out of New York City captured the imaginations of a generation of young Americans who had little more than being of an impressionable age in common. New York-style graffiti appeared in a hurry across America: on schoolyard walls and along train tracks from Boston to Pittsburgh to Chicago to Los Angeles.

But however different the participants and individual cities were, there were three consistent components to how their scenes developed. The first was the tiny glimpses of graffiti through media, most crucially *Subway Art* and *Style Wars*, a book and film that, while not intended to be more than a look inside the culture, formed nothing short of gospel to this generation of writers. Practically every graffiti writer the world over who started writing between 1984 and the late 1990s knows every image in the book and every line in the movie. RAVEN, who began to write in the late 1980s in Miami, had a typical encounter with the two: "Like a lot of scenes, Miami's biggest influence was *Subway Art*, but this was before the time when it was easy to just walk into a bookstore and find one. It was through a friend of a friend of a friend that you might find some dog-eared copy. A kid brought one to school in seventh grade and I had to write down the publisher's info, write them, wait for an order form, then fill that out, mail it, and wait again. Or someone would have a staticky copy of *Style Wars* that had been taped off of late-night TV and dubbed over a zillion generations."

The second component was a youth version of cultural diplomacy: occasionally, a young graffiti writer from New York would relocate to a new city or a young writer from another city would visit New York. Where *Style Wars* and *Subway Art* were constants, this was a variable: the transplant could be a New York legend, or simply another face in the crowd, but each had their own first-hand information to share. Cities like Miami and Chicago had a constant stream of New Yorkers coming and going, while a city like Phoenix or El Paso hardly had any. If they did come through, not everyone got to meet them. But for those that did, having such a firsthand source made an impact, for they tended to have a handle on lettering style—the key to all graffiti—that others were still grasping for. It worked by association, as well. When a writer traveled to New York City on a graffiti pilgrimage, they came back home the coolest kid in school. And if they had painted a New York City subway while there, forget it!

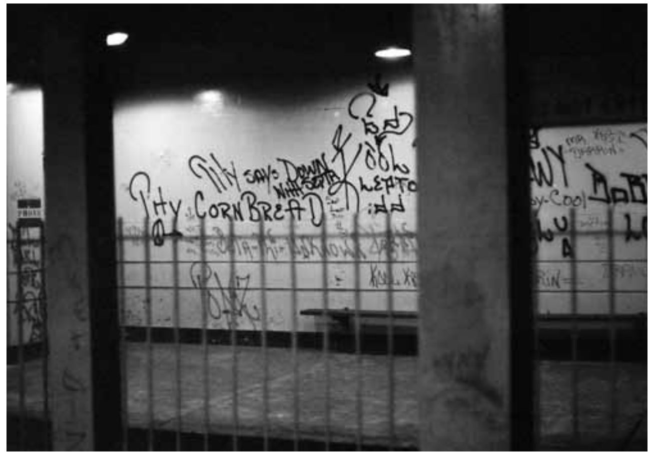
But the third element was the most interesting: the simple mutation and innovation of the art as young participants mapped it onto a new city, improvising techniques and styles as they went. Cities like Chicago and Boston did not require a great leap of imagination: they had elevated subway systems and looked reasonably similar to New York. Cities like Phoenix or Honolulu were different stories, with no public transit except buses and cityscapes that could not be more different.

But in certain cities, writers could take cues in placement and style from endemic local graffiti scenes that predated that of the New York City subways. In Philadelphia, name-based graffiti continued its entirely separate movement in the 1970s, all based on single-color tags in styles unlike any used in New York. Only the occasional NYC-inspired colorful blips—what locals called "New Yorkers"—broke the consistency of Philadelphia graffiti, which was unquestionably its own thing. And in Philly, as in many cities, being called a "New Yorker" is sometimes a backhanded compliment.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: COMPLETING THE PILGRIMAGE! A PIECE BY RISKY FROM LOS ANGELES ON THE NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY, C. 1987. (PHOTO BY RISKY) MIDDLE: "CITY LIFE" BY PRESTO, JESTER, FEAR & VINCE, CHICAGO C. 1985. (PHOTO BY PILOT) BOTTOM LEFT: THE X BY BUDA, PITTSBURGH C. 1991. (PHOTO BY SERG) BOTTOM RIGHT: SLY, BOSTON, C. 1984. (PHOTO BY JOHN SLYMON/SLY) THIS PAGE INSET: INTERIOR OF SEPTA TRAIN, PHILADELPHIA, C. 1978. (PHOTO COURTESY OF TEMPLE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, URBAN ARCHIVES, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA)

Alive with pleasure!
Newport

PHILADELPHIA: CORNBREAD



"The story I'm inclined to believe," muses QUIK, a star of the 1970s and 1980s New York subway movement, "is that the kind of writing that is on our walls—highlighting our names and our egos—began in Philadelphia."

Just as it is often forgotten as the nation's first capital and major city, the historical significance of graffiti in Philadelphia is also often overlooked. New York's subway graffiti scene exploded in full color and became world famous, but the tight, narrow streets of Philadelphia have served as a canvas for writers since the late 1960s.

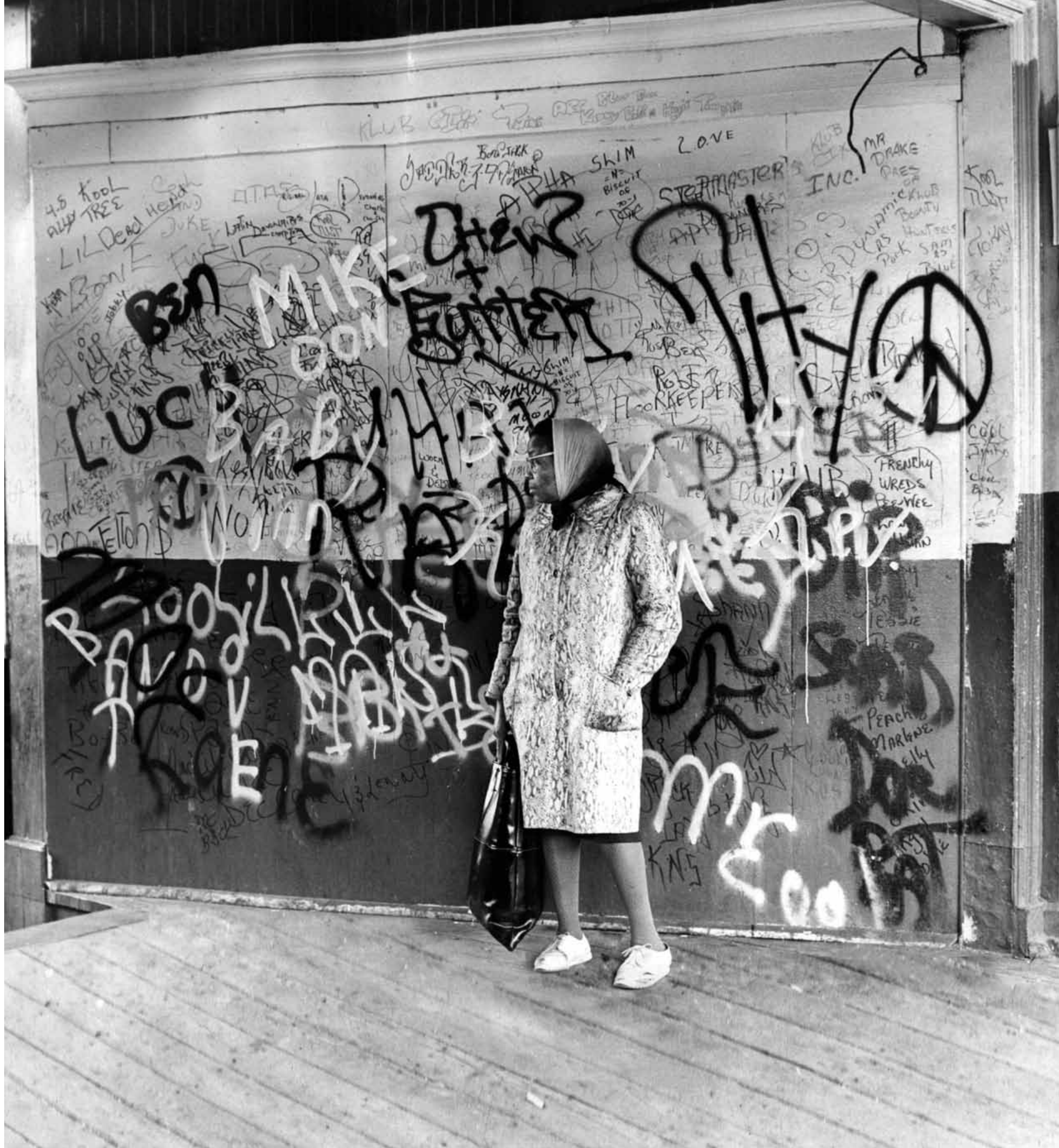
A photo dated 1961 shows the KILROY WAS HERE character spray-painted on a wooden fence on Front Street. Two of Philadelphia's earliest identifiable writers, CORNBREAD and KOOL KLEPTO KIDD, remember seeing KILROY WAS HERE around before either of them began to write. "I used to see that everywhere," says KOOL KLEPTO KIDD. "Matter of fact, I used to think that it was more than one person. It was in different styles." The first locally authored name was BOBBY BECK, which started to appear along Philadelphia highways in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

The progenitor of modern graffiti, CORNBREAD, né Darryl Alexander McCray, started writing in 1965 at a reform school called the Youth Development Center. While there, missing his grandmother's homemade Southern food, he repeatedly asked the cook to make him cornbread. One day, fed up with his pestering, the cook grabbed Darryl by the shirt, took him to the counselor, and said, "Keep this Cornbread out of my kitchen!" Hearing this, some of his peers started teasing him with the name. Darryl co-opted the name, writing it on the back of his shirt. "So everybody called me Cornbread," he says. "It was no longer a tease."

In the Youth Development Center, gangs wrote their names on the school's walls. Gangs in Philadelphia had been using graffiti to mark their territory for many years; there are newspaper accounts of gangs writing their names on walls with chalk or paint as far back as the 1850s. The gangs of the 1960s continued the tradition, writing their names, and members' names, on walls for recognition.

Darryl wanted recognition, too, so he wrote his new nickname, CORNBREAD, on the same wall as the gangs. But he did not stop there: CORNBREAD wrote his name everywhere he could—on the walls of the visiting hall, chow hall, bathroom, and church. And the more people talked about him, the more he wrote. When he was released from the Youth Development Center in September of 1967, CORNBREAD started writing in his North Philly neighborhood, and then throughout the entire city, switching from Magic Markers to spray paint.

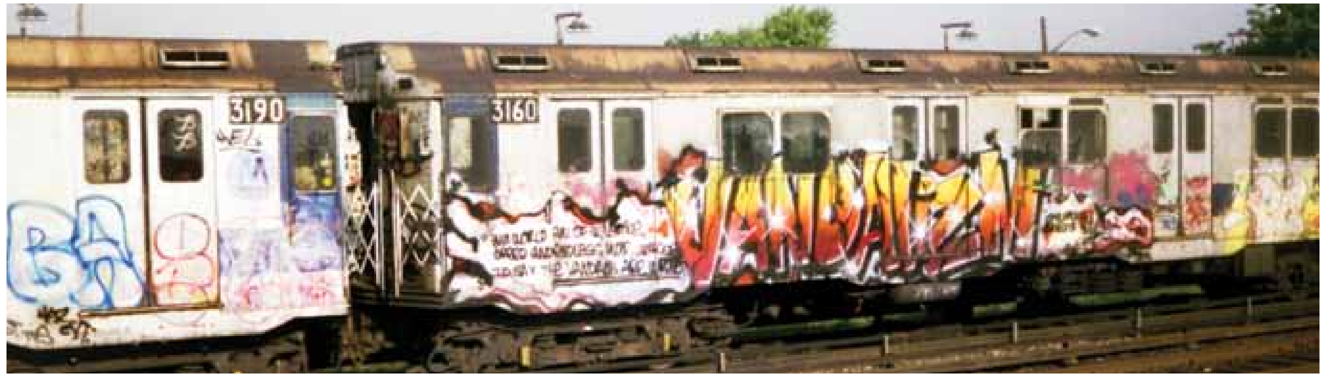
THIS PAGE: TITY SAYS DOWN WITH SEPTA, CORNBREAD, KOOL KLEPTO KIDD, AND OTHERS, C. 1972 (PHOTO BY DR. JULIE REICH AND GUNTHER CARTWRIGHT)
OPPOSITE PAGE: PHILADELPHIA SUBWAY STATION, TAGS BY CHEWY, TITY PEACE, AND MANY OTHERS. 1972. (PHOTO COURTESY OF TEMPLE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, URBAN ARCHIVES, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA)

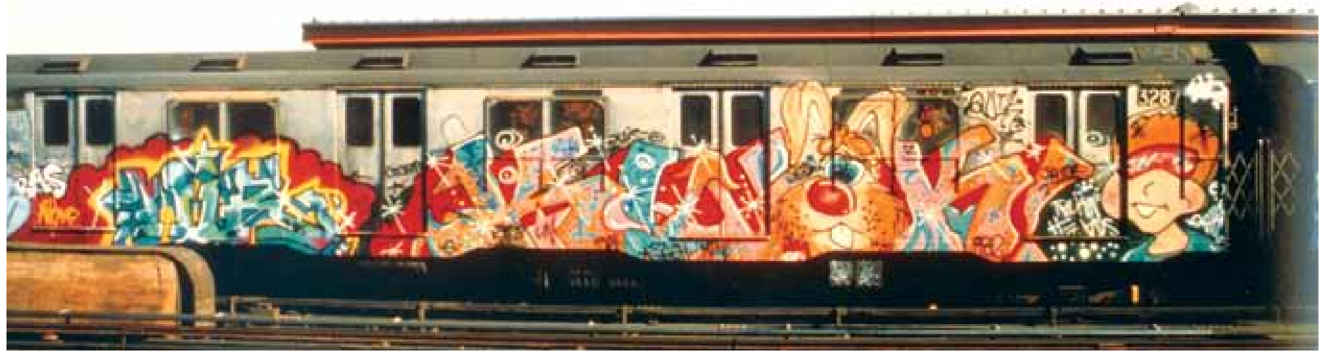


7766
NEW LOTS AV
7TH AV EXP
7917
7555
WOODLAWN
UTICA
LEXINGTON EXPRESS

CHAPTER 3:

NEW YORK CITY'S GOLDEN YEARS



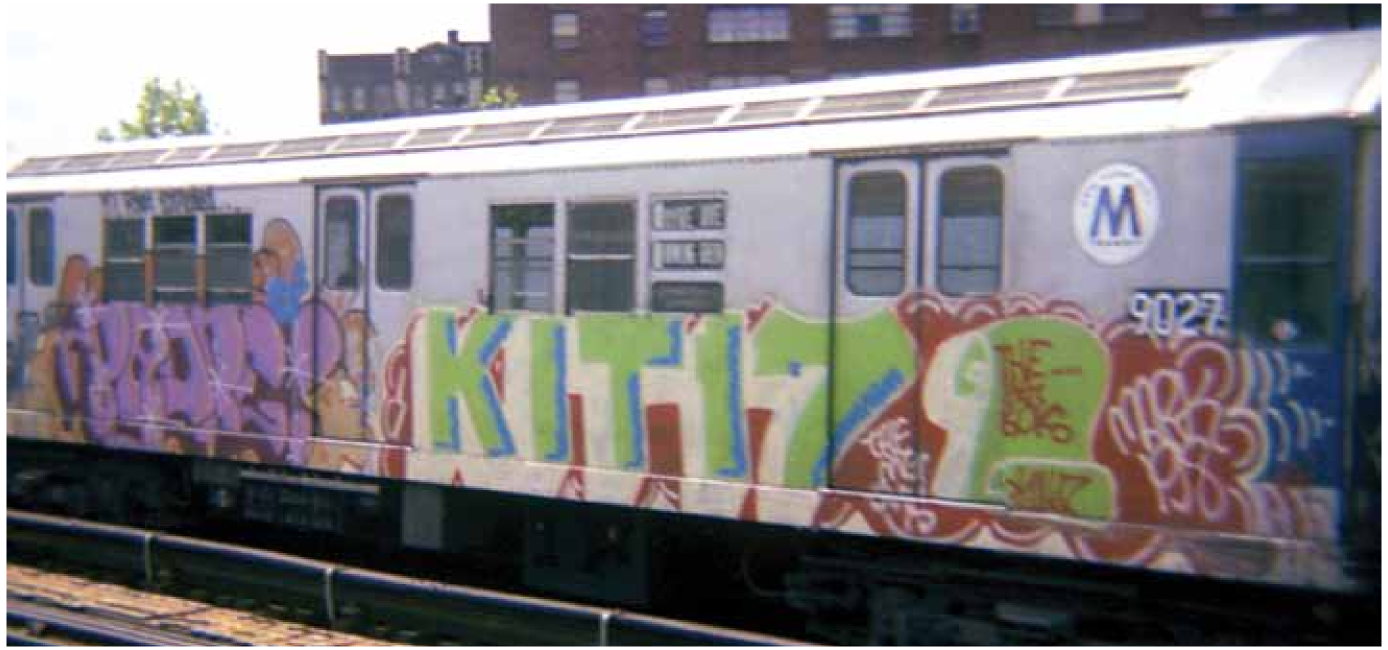


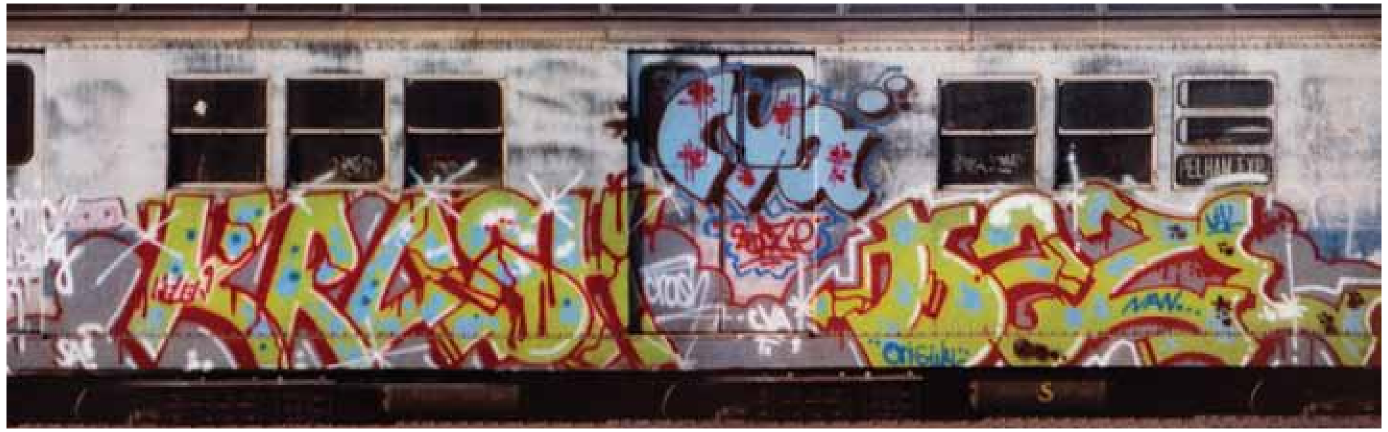
As the decade of the 1970s came to a close, with graffiti raging at an all-time high, the straphanger public had all but given up. The transit authority did not have the money to address graffiti systemically, and for police, catching graffiti vandals was a low priority. Graffiti arrests were declining: 1,674 in 1973; 1,658 in 1974; 1,208 in 1975; 853 in 1976; and 414 in 1977. Transit Chief Sanford Garelik would fan out statistics indicating that the subways were safer than the streets. But a group of public policy thinkers began to wonder if perception might actually determine reality: graffiti was not dangerous in itself, but it made the system look out of control.

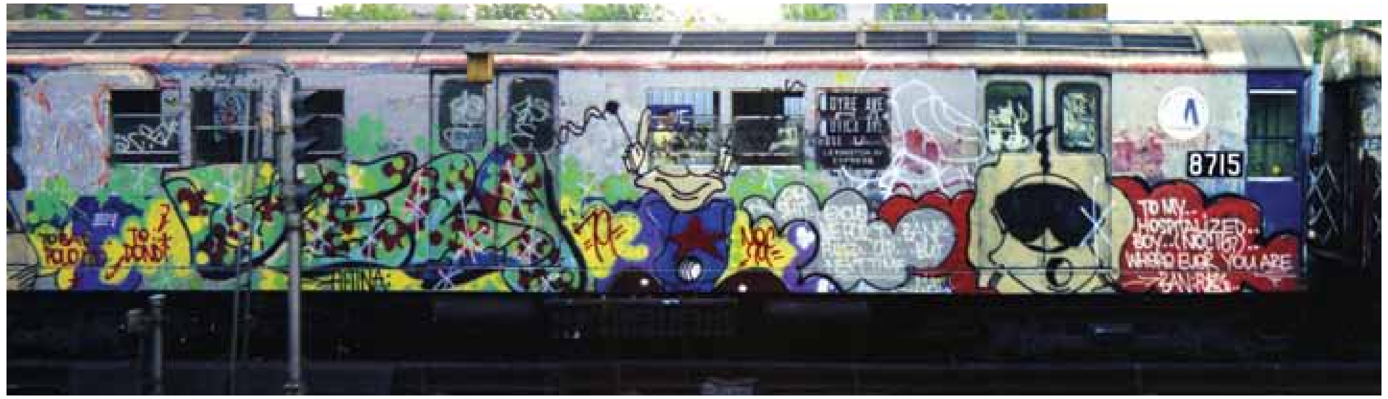
"Here was something that should be manageable, but there was no public approach to managing it that anyone could figure out," says sociologist Nathan Glazer, "As someone in the justice system asked me, 'What do you do with the graffitist when he's being sentenced with a rapist before him and a murderer after him?'" In 1979, Glazer wrote a seminal article discussing graffiti, crime, and perception in *The Public Interest*, a magazine he co-edited. "In people's minds, I felt, even without doing research, they were associating the notion of crime and other notions of the city not being managed well—garbage, etc—with the writing of graffiti." It was an idea that would inspire George Kelling and James Q. Wilson's landmark 1982 Broken Window Theory – stating that the small offences in society (vandalism, fare evasion, public drinking and urination, etc) were indicators of safe ground for the big ones. "That all of them were just symptoms of a society in which the amount of social disorder—dangerous social disorder," says Glazer "was increasing to a level where it really shouldn't be tolerated, but was being tolerated, because people didn't know what to do about it."

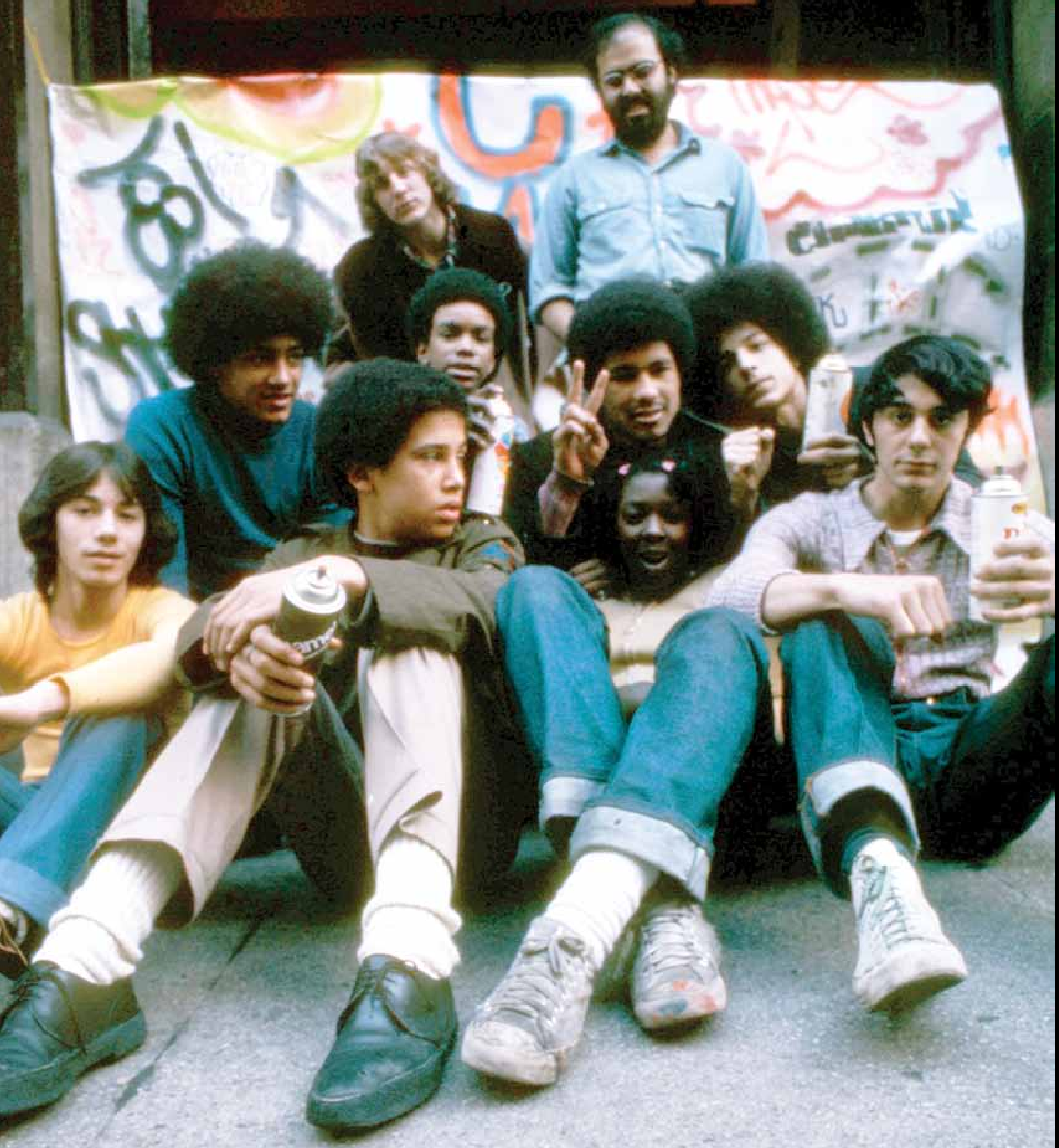
As the decade came to a close, some people knew just what to do. Graffiti was ready to be shown off to the world.

THIS PAGE TOP: VANDALISM, BY CRIME 79, C. 1980. HIS CAPTION READS: "IN A WORLD FULL OF INJUSTICE, GREED, AND ENDLESS WAR, WHO'S TO SAY THAT THE VANDALS ARE WRONG?" BOTTOM: NIK (KN) & QUIK, 1982. (PHOTO BY KN)
OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: PADRE AND KIT 17, C. 1977. (PHOTO BY IZ THE WIZ) MIDDLE: CRASH AND DAZE SHARED PAINT AND COLORS, C. 1980, AND THEY STILL SHARE A STUDIO TODAY (PHOTO BY DAZE). BOTTOM: DELI BY BAN 2 PAINTS A CAR DEDICATED IT TO HIS HOSPITALIZED FRIEND, NOC 167. (PHOTO BY IZ THE WIZ)
NEXT SPREAD: BILROCK STRIKES A POSE IN BROOKLYN'S M YARD AFTER BREAKING NIGHT WITH REVOLT. IT WAS DECEMBER 1979, BUT IN CLASSIC FASHION, THEY DATED IT 1980, JUST TO BE AHEAD OF THEIR TIME. (PHOTO COURTESY OF BILROCK)









* GRAFFITI, MEET MONEY

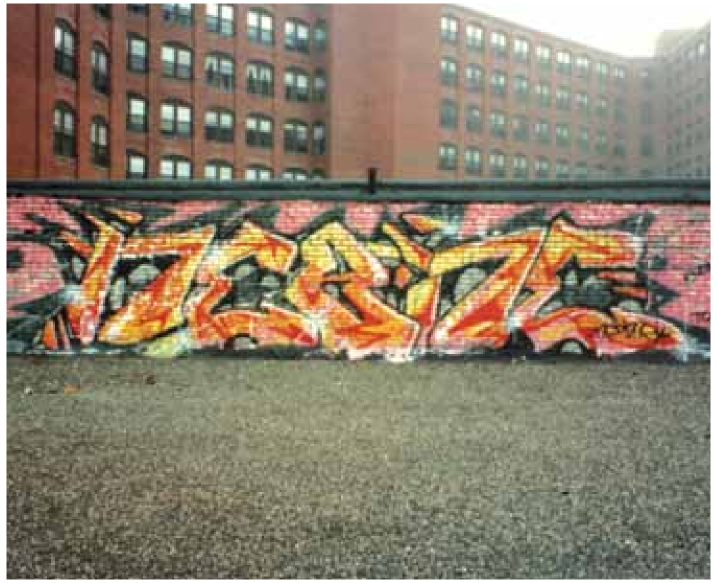
Hugo Martinez, a twenty-two-year-old sociology major at City College, showed up in Washington Heights at Writers' Corner at 188th and Audubon in October of 1972. He quickly connected with HENRY 161, STITCH, SNAKE, SJK 171, COCO 144, and numerous other writers from the area, and explained his vision of assembling twenty of the best writers in the city in an effort to leverage the work they had done on the subways into legitimate careers as artists. He organized formal studio spaces for them to work, held meetings, and on December 7, 1972, launched the first exhibit of United Graffiti Artists, or UGA. For most of the writers, it was the first time they had heard that now-familiar term: "graffiti artist." Bronx writers such as BAMA, PHASE 2, and LEE 163d would join in early 1973, as well as Brooklyn writer WICKED GARY.

UGA and Hugo Martinez immediately became the media representative for subway graffiti. And since the nascent phenomenon was faceless, curiosity abounded: Who was doing the graffiti? UGA lifted the veil, and the media was curious. The March 26, 1973 issue of *New York Magazine* was a bombshell: a cover story, with color photos and interviews. A week later, contemporary dance pioneer Twyla Tharp's Deuce Coupe premiered at the New York City Center, with the UGA team of artists painting a background live on stage as Joffrey Ballet dancers wound their way through the aerosol fumes. On September 4, 1973, a major show of UGA artwork opened at the Razor Gallery in SoHo. In less than a year's time, Martinez's initial vision was a reality. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote a substantial review for the *New York Times*; the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, and most other major media outlets also featured UGA related projects and artists.

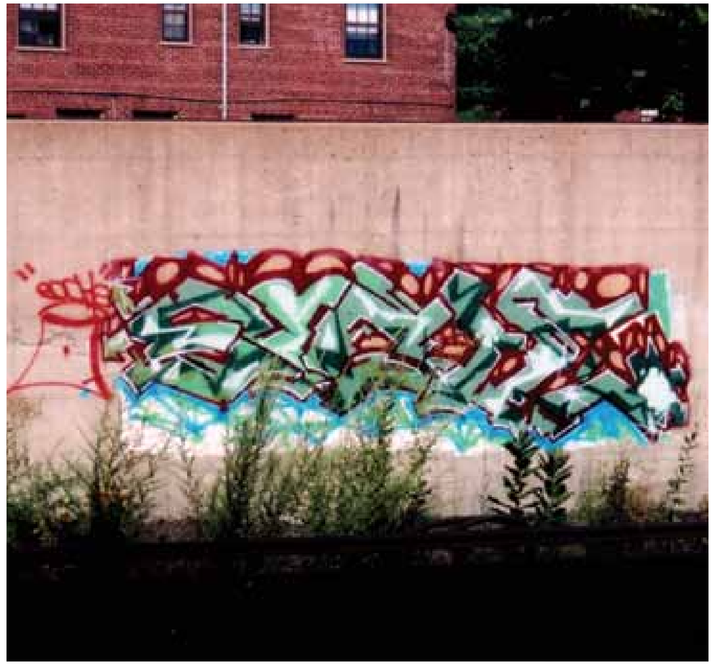
A month later, a sixteen-year-old Columbia University freshman, Marc Edmond, and his friend Lenny McGurr, went to the 145th Street tunnel to paint their names, ALI and FUTURA2000, where a freak accident occurred: ALI's paint made contact with the live third rail and burst into flame, burning him badly. The accident—and ALI's subsequent warning in the *New York Times* for other writers to be cautious—made the UGA writers' gallery work all the more a wholesome direction.

Understandably, the rush of attention on the teenaged UGA artists strained relationships. While some of the UGA artists stayed with Martinez over time and worked with him as he evolved into a gallerist, the experience was a mixed bag for the young artists like WICKED GARY: "I give Hugo a lot of props for his concept of twenty of the top guys as rated by their peers. That was great, and it was nice that it was a cross section of cats, but at the time, Hugo's emphasis was on the Latino input. He wasn't really focused on the Black Americans or anybody else but the Latino thing, but to the guys' credit, guys like STITCH and COCO said, 'No, this is all of us, we all need to be involved, and this is a group that represents us.' I give Hugo credit for the effort to bring us together, to get us media attention and money, but it was an uphill climb for the non-Latino guys." For MIKE 171, it was something even more fundamental: "The graffiti changed once that dollar figure came in, [Twyla Tharpe's production with] the Joffrey Ballet, and the first painting was sold. It took the purity out of the graffiti of us artists, of what we were doing."

OPPOSITE PAGE: HUGO MARTINEZ AND UGA MEMBERS, EARLY 1970S.
(PHOTO BY MICHAEL LAWRENCE)
ABOVE: UGA STUDIO LOFT (PHOTO BY SJK 171)



“When graffiti came around, it was just time to do it. In the projects, it was just part of the culture.” –TEMP



President Ronald Reagan began to cut the federal housing budget as soon as he was elected in 1980, leaving it only a quarter of its pre-Reagan size. For kids like TEMP and HATE in the Lynn, Massachusetts projects that was not all bad: plenty of units near their homes in the West Lynn and East Lynn Projects, respectively, were vacant, boarded up, and unattended. “We’d paint them while people were out getting their groceries,” laughs TEMP. “When graffiti came around, it was just time to do it. In the projects, it was just part of the culture.”

For the first-generation Lynn writers like BANDITO, HATE, TEMP, RIVAL, JUICE2, NEONE, and SEIZE, the information trickled into Lynn slowly. HATE explains that “my exposure was through my older brother, who was in jail in New York: I wrote my brother and did a piece for him that said ‘CHINO.’ My older brother wrote me back, telling me, ‘That ain’t graff!’ and did a piece for me—and so did SMILEY, an old New York writer from the 1970s, who was a cellmate of my older brother.” An actual sketch from an actual old New York writer: in a place like Lynn, this was treasure.

The other treasure from out of town was the occasional visit from the Pittsburgh writer BUDA, who in addition to visiting a relocated teenaged friend in Lynn, made trips to New York, where he had spent time with legends like TRACY 168, T-KID, and DAZE – as well as Henry Chalfant’s voluminous photo collection. The direct New York connection had taken BUDA’s impressive styles to a new level of development. BUDA chuckles, “In my time in Lynn, we ran around mugging people and setting off bombs. It was totally reprehensible, now that I think about it. It was one big blur of a crime spree.” But the handful of pieces he did in Lynn in 1985 and 1986 with local writer NEONE had camera-toting writers coming up from Boston.

Not that the Lynn writers ignored Boston, by any means. TEMP and HATE, among others, would come ride the Orange Line, and they discovered that the Dorchester Youth Center was where Boston writers like CLICK, SOCHE, and SLY hung out. They would spend afternoons there airbrushing T-shirts together and trading styles. Just as the Orange Line writers had graciously welcomed CLICK and his friends to their neighborhood, Boston welcomed in Lynn. With the Orange Line, Mattapan and Lynn writers active and connected, Boston graffiti was on its way.

THIS PAGE TOP: NEONE, LYNN ROOFTOP, C. 1986 (PHOTO BY TEMP)
BOTTOM: SOCHE, BOSTON, C. 1987. (PHOTO BY JOHN SLYMON/SLY)
OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: PITTSBURGH'S BUDA HAND-DELIVERS THE TRACY 168 AND T-KID 170 STYLE TO LYNN, C. 1986. MIDDLE: HATE, RIVAL, AND TEMP ROCK LYNN'S CENTRAL STATION, 1986. BOTTOM: HATE AND TEMP DO GRAFFITI ART FOR THE MASSACHUSETTS MASSES, 1986. (ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN SLYMON/SLY)