# Table of Contents

**Authors’ Note** ................................................................. 15  
**Introduction** .............................................................. 18-29  

**Precursors**  
Monikers ................................................................. 37-35  
Kilroy Was Here .................................................. 36-39  
Gangs & Graffiti .................................................... 40-43  

**From a Name to a Masterpiece**  
Philadelphia: Cornbread ........................................... 46-51  
New York City: Tak1 183 ......................................... 51-55  
New York City the Early Years ................................ 56-73  
☆ Writers’ Corner BB .................................................. 58  
☆ A Word on the Names ........................................... 65  
☆ Graffiti, Meet Money ............................................ 70-71  
Philadelphia ............................................................. 74-79  

**New York City’s Golden Years**  
New York City 1974-1979 ......................................... 82-105  
☆ The Lines ................................................................. 85  
☆ Characters ............................................................... 87  
☆ BLADE & The Crazy Five ..................................... 90-93  
☆ Blackbooks ............................................................. 95  
☆ Lee ........................................................................... 98  
☆ Throwups ............................................................... 101  
☆ IZ the Wiz ............................................................... 102-103  

**NY Brings Graffiti to the World**  
☆ Bode Characters ...................................................... 115  
☆ Out of Control & Fed Up ........................................ 120  
☆ Wild Style, Style Wars & Subway Art ..................... 122-123  

**American Graffiti**  
Philadelphia ............................................................. 130-135  
☆ MB .............................................................. 133  
New Jersey ............................................................... 136-137  
Baltimore ................................................................. 138-143  
Boston ....................................................................... 144-151  
Washington, D.C. .................................................... 152-159  
☆ Cool “Disco” Dan .................................................. 154  
Miami ....................................................................... 160-165  
Pittsburgh ................................................................. 166-167  
Cleveland ................................................................. 168-169  
Chicago ................................................................. 170-185  
☆ Train Bombing & Motion Tagging ......................... 175  
☆ WARP ................................................................. 184  
East Chicago ............................................................ 186-187  
The Bay Area ............................................................ 188-199  
☆ Bus Hoppers .......................................................... 191  
Los Angeles ............................................................. 200-211  
☆ Risk ................................................................. 206-207  
San Diego ............................................................... 212-213  
Hawaii ...................................................................... 214-215  
☆ The European Movement .................................... 216-219
INTRODUCTION

Humans write graffiti.

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 century. The GIs of World War II and the Korean War wrote the phrase “KILROY WAS HERE”; hobos and railroad workers added their grease-pencil monikers to boxcars that rumbled sea to sea; chulos and pachucos in California and the Southwest and the gangs of Chicago left territorial placards and roll calls; the thugs 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, folk 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 213, 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 Side 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. Photos by Nishan Bichaijian, Courtesy of Kepes/Lynch Collection, Rotch Visual Collections, MIT.

Opposite page: Various vintage spray paint cans, 1960s-1980s. (Courtesy of Roger Gastman; Photos by Adam Wallace)
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New York-style graffiti appeared
in a hurry across America: on schoolyard
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to Pittsburgh to Chicago to Los Angeles.

But however different the partici-
pants and individual cities were, there
were three consistent components to how
their scenes developed. The first was the
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The second component was a youth version of cultural di-
plomacy: 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
constant, 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 go-
ing, 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
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New York City on a graffiti pilgrimage, they came back home the coolest kid in
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But in certain cities, writers could
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City subways. In Philadelphia, name-based graffiti continued
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Subway Art and Style Wars
made subway systems and looked reasonably
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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, sister, fear & vince,
Chicago c. 1985. ( Photo by pilon) bottom left: the x by buda,
 Pittsburg C. 1993. ( Photo by bong bottom right: ox, boston,
 c. 1984. ( Photo by John Symons) this page inset: interior of
septa transit Philadelphia, c. 1979. ( Photo courtesy of

Born into Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and the social tu-
mult 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 Amer-
ica 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 Wash-
ington, D.C., Detroit, and Baltimore, they grew up amid the cin-
ders and ruins of racially charged urban riots. Across America,
they toddled into school buses that took
them not blocks away, but across town in
thefirst 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
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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.

“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.”
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 systematically, and for police, catching graffiti vandals was a low priority. Graffiti arrests were declining: 1,674 in 1973; 1,658 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.
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 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 Tharp’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.”

*GRAFFITI, MEET MONEY*
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, JUICE?, NOONE, 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 graffiti!’ and did a piece for me—and so did SMILEY, an old New York writer from the 1970s, who was a confidante 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 NOONE 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.

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