

SCHOOL'D BY FUNKMODE

You want to become a Hip Hop expert? Learn the info below and you're on your way, yo!

GRAFFITI

Among Hip Hop historians and experts, it is generally agreed that there are four elements which define the culture. DJs provide the sound of Hip Hop. MCs provide the voice. B-boys, Funk Style dancers and freestylers provide the movement and the visual artists of Hip Hop are the graffiti writers.

Even though graffiti is considered by many to be an essential part of Hip Hop culture, it is the only component which existed before the culture*. In fact, writing on walls is as old as cave paintings and can be observed as a means of artistic expression throughout human history. However, there is a particular art style associated with Hip Hop graffiti and that is what we will be focusing on here. The style started with what we call "tagging". Tagging is writing one's name, or "tag", on something within the public view. Though this happened throughout the 1960s, it gained particular popularity in the early 70s after the New York Times wrote an article on a young man named Demetrius. He was a messenger who wrote his tag "Taki 183" (short for a variation of his name "Demetaki" and 183rd Street being where he lived) everywhere he went ... bathrooms, buildings, subways ... anywhere. Again, though there were others doing the same thing at the same time, the NYT article brought this art form into the public eye in a much larger way than the tagging itself did. After this article, the Hip Hop graffiti style started popping up all around New York and became synonymous with the emerging culture.

As with DJing, MCing and breaking, as graffiti's popularity grew, so too did it become more complex and diverse. Tagging was very simple and easy to do. Creating "throw-ups", "fill-ins" and "pieces" took much more time and effort. Throw-ups/fill-ins use multiple colors, though only a few, to create a design more complicated than simple tags. However, the goal with this type of graffiti is speed. The artist wants or needs to be able to create the art quickly and then get out. A piece takes quite a bit more time to make and is focused on creating a very visually appealing work. Pieces, because they are more complicated, can employ the frequently seen method of using either very angular writing, bubble/circular shaped writing or even squared/block type writing. They use extensive shading while using a large variety of colors. Probably the most commonly known type of graffiti is the "wildstyle" form**, created by Michael Tracy, known better as "Tracy 168". This form is often difficult to read, with overlapping and interlocked letters and many, many colors. Common to wildstyle is the use of winding arrows and 3D graphics. Wildstyle pieces can take up an entire wall in which case they are known as "blockbusters"***. Blockbusters, known in the rest of the art world as murals, can be done (1) to prevent others from tagging a particular wall or (2) to get a larger audience to see an artist's work or (3) as a commissioned work where the artist is hired by a company or city to provide art for a building, park or business. Large pieces like these are also called "burners".

We would be irresponsible if we did not note here that the majority of graffiti is illegal. Done without permission, even if the artwork is beautiful and genius, writing on public places with markers or spray paint results in fines, arrests and prison. Many of the most well-known and successful graffiti artists have criminal records and have served jail time for their art. Throw-ups are done instead of pieces usually because they allow the art to be completed faster, which helps the artists to avoid being caught by the police. FUNKMODE does not condone criminal activity. Many graffiti artists today have found ways to do their art legally. Legal art is what we are about. If you want to try your hand at graffiti, start an artbook or find a warehouse that lets artists create on the walls. If you get good, you can approach businesses or cities who may hire you. Whatever you choose, remember that self-expression is a right and essential to Hip Hop culture ... vandalism is not. Know the difference.

*DJs existed before Hip Hop but not breakbeat DJs who cut, mixed and scratched on albums creating a new sound that defined Hip Hop. Emcees, in the form of poets and DJs who would "toast" at parties, existed but rapping as a musical genre did not exist before Hip Hop. And nothing that we know of ever existed that was anything like b-boying. As for graffiti, because it was around for more than a decade before Kool Herc took the wheels, there are some who say that it should actually not be included as a unique component of Hip Hop culture. We are in the group who believes it should be included.

** "Wildstyle" is also the name of the very first Hip Hop movie. It is about a graffiti artist.

*** Blockbusters do not have to be in the wildstyle form. They can be any graffiti art that takes up an entire wall.

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HIP HOP WORDS OF THE WEEK

Black Book: the sketchbook of a graffiti writer.

EX: "I have some new ideas for designs. Check em out! They're here in my black book."

One-liner: a tag drawn without ever lifting the pen from the writing surface.

EX: "I can do my entire tag and yours together as a one-liner."

Canon: a spray can.

EX: "I got all the way to the site where I was gonna write today are realized I forgot my cannons!"

BONUS: Create a sentence using all words of the week

EXTRA LEARNING

- 1) Do an image search online for "wildstyle graffiti" and familiarize yourself with the style.
- 2) Draw your own tag or piece and share it with a friend or family.
- 3) Name some places where graffiti is legal.