

GRAFFITI: KINGS ON A MISSION – R4 version – v3

R4 PRES INTRO

Forty years ago this year, an American magazine published a major essay by Norman Mailer, about graffiti – declaring it to be “The Great Art of the 70s”. Now on BBC Radio 4, we meet some of the pioneers of the New York movement, in: “GRAFFITI: KINGS ON A MISSION”.

0'00" CONFESSION

[JAY]

In a few years' time I'll be sixty, and, man, I'd like to do a train, I would love to get back and put my name on a train, and be the oldest guy ever to do it... although maybe some 61 year old will try to out do me, but I think if I can live long enough a lot of these guys won't be there at the finish line, and maybe if I wait til 70 I'll have even less of a field of competitors.

0'30" MONTAGE

MUSIC: Tommy Tee - Aerosoul

[NICER]

It started with someone just writing their name – someone saw that, and added on to it.

[COCO]

This was my way, of making a statement to the world.

[FLINT]

It's art...

[GREG]

...it's vandalism – artistic vandalism has a nice ring to it.

[RIFF]

Letters going in front of letters, coming back through a letter, behind a letter, going across a letter

[FLINT]

It's a means of expression...

[GREG]

Graffiti writers write so that they will achieve fame!

[RIFF]

The subways became our playground.

[SALLY v/o]

GRAFFITI: KINGS ON A MISSION

[RIFF]

It's amazing what you can do with paint!

1'14" MAILER

[SALLY v/o]

Norman Mailer. Esquire Magazine. May, 1974.

Perhaps the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort it arouses, the unheard music of its proclamation, is the herald of some oncoming apocalypse, less and less far away.

2'00" JESTER AT THE YARD

[JESTER]

My name is Cornell Perry, aka Jester 1, aka Dye 167, from Harlem New York. And I'm a graffiti writer. We are right now, standing at Union Turnpike station on the E and F Line, in Queens. We're about to go, take a journey to the F Yard.

[JAY]

Jester... I started seeing his name in like 72-73... he had a beautiful handwriting... this elongated J, extended R... it was just state of the art.

[JESTER]

(WALKING FX) When I was writing, if it was a weeknight, I usually go at 1 or 2 in the morning, to write on the trains.

[JAY]

Jester was a guy who went by himself a lot, at 2 in the morning, and destroyed shit.

[JESTER]

...we're looking at a fence ... There's a lock on the fence, and there's a little sign that says "DO NOT ENTER" - but of course... does that look like graffiti to you, or like an old sign?! Looks like graffiti is all over the DO NOT ENTER sign! So as we (LAUGHS), as we watch, we can see the yard, the trains pulling into the yard right now...and the yard looks huge.

[JESTER]

On a weeknight, there could be anywhere from like, 50 to 100 trains in the yard...

[JESTER]

I remember one time I did go to this yard, I went in through the tunnel, like I walked through the tunnel, and I walked straight down, and I went to where the trains was, and I started writing.

MUSIC: Joe Bataan - Subway Joe

4'05" RIFF TIGER STRIPE

[RIFF]

I'm Riff 170, born and raised in the Bronx...

In the early 70s, I was 11 years old when I first started writing.

My first piece was the tiger stripe – came from the cereal box, Tony the Tiger – I did the tiger stripes in my name. And this businessman was getting on the train at 149th street and Marx Avenue... he was getting on with his briefcase... and somehow he stepped back off... and his briefcase and his leg got caught in the door, but he was still looking at the piece until the door opened and he stepped off to get a full glimpse of it – and that's when I said, yeah, I'm doing something special. And that's what edged me on to keep doing, and to keep being creative.

5'00" SUBWAY ADRENALIN

They had written masterpieces in letters six feet high on the side of walls and subway cars... There was panic in the act, a species of writing with an eye over one's shoulder for the oncoming of the authority...

[ERIC]

The most important work was being done on the subway. The most, the coolest stuff was done ON the subway, or IN the subways.

[FLINT]

When you're on a mission, your adrenaline is flowing, and you can hear trains coming. You can sense it in the tracks, you know? You're very aware, your sensation is heightened.

They work with speed, they work with cool. They are elegant in their movements. They are used to ... high pressure.

[JESTER]

Just stay away from the Third Rail, that's all, just don't hit the Third Rail. ... you know the story if you hit the Third Rail, you'd get electrocuted man! ... I mean, I stepped on the Third Rail many times, but I guess as I had rubber soles on, I never got electrocuted.

Pain and humiliation were the implacable dues, and not all graffiti artists showed equal grace under such pressure.

[JAY]

There were crews that were after me, and, y'know, I would cross their names out, and then just bank on the fact that they wouldn't catch me... One guy from a crew that really wanted to get me wrote a death threat on a station – “you're dead Jayson” – within two months of writing that he made headlines for murdering two people in a drug deal gone bad. Did seventeen years.

[BIO]

...back then it was different, like the Wild West, the laws of the street applied, or actually the laws of the jungle – the strong survive, the weak don't make it. If you go into a subway tunnel, or a subway yard in another part of the city, and you're there with one or two guys and ten guys roll in – if you don't know somebody, or they don't know you, guess who's leaving the tunnel without paint, sneakers and money?

[RIFF]

You know, you was getting chased, you was getting away, you had all the danger, you had to run, you had to climb, you had to jump, you had to hide, it was just so fun and so exciting, cos you know if you got caught it was over – it was over because, if the cops would a caught me, then my mum's would a killed me, then my dad would a killed me, I would definitely have been on punishment for a minute. But that was the fun part, the risk of it.

MUSIC: The Clash – Escapades of Futura 2000

8'00" WHY DO IT?

Graffiti is the expression of a ghetto which is near to the plague, for civilisation is now inimical to the ghetto.

[COCO]

There's a lot of folks under the impression that these are all kids from the ghettos – no. This was a movement created by working class kids.

MUSIC: The Clash – “...Coco 144 and the UGA” + FADES

[COCO]

I'm Coco 144 ... I wrote from 1970-72, on the number 1 line, the Broadway line.

[FLINT]

I'm Flint – and back in the day, I was one of the artists who started this all – and 45 years later I'm still writing my name on walls. I'm only semi-retired!

MUSIC: Crosby Stills Nash & Young – Woodstock

[COCO]

I was a kid of the 60s. I grew up around the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, NYC in decay, economic decay....

[FLINT]

..if you read the papers, you read about the hippies, about the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the rebellion in different countries. So, you wanna be part of the 60s, part of what's happening, Woodstock, music, the Rolling Stones, all this great stuff... And the way I became part of it was by writing on walls.

MUSIC: Crosby Stills – Woodstock (“...I'm a cog in something turning...” @ 1'15”)

[COCO]

These are all the ingredients – social and political – that made an impression on us, as kids of the 60s and early 70s, that we felt we needed to make a statement – and making that statement was going out and writing our names.

MUSIC: Crosby Stills – Woodstock (“we are stardust, we are golden...”)

[ERIC]

This is Eric Orr, artist-designer from the Bronx, born and raised... I started writing around '72, '73.

[ERIC]

It was a movement that came out of nothing because a community was being deprived. So, it's like being on an island. If you don't have resources, you create resources, and that's what we did. They was taking the money from the schools, there was a lot of corruption here, in this community, and so they took the after school programmes away, and there was no outlets for this. So the outlet became our city. And for the artist guys, those type of creative guys, it became the paint, the aerosol and the marker.

[RIFF]

You know, they took the after-school study programs from us, and some of our brothers was in Vietnam and family members, so where else can we play? So, the subways became our playground.

11'20" KIDS FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS

The kids work together. The cave painting is now collective. One rushes in to prevent the drip of another.

MUSIC: Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street

[FLINT]

Graffiti is like a brotherhood, doesn't matter you're black, Chinese, Greek, Italian... we got something in common, *and we're sorta anti-establishment, trying to take down the system or whatever we're trying to do, and we all have a solidarity with that.*

[COCO]

There were writers that were African American, Latino - Puerto Rico, Dominican, Cuban - Jewish, Asian, and it became one unit - one family.

[JAY]

it was something that unified the races, and at its best you could be painting next to somebody, like a white dude, a black dude, white Italian guy, so that model - with the civil rights and Vietnam and all the stuff that was going on - was very powerful, and that was something I consciously sought.

MUSIC: Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street

[JAY]

My name is Jay J.SON Edlin, I was a graffiti writer from 1973, I consider myself retired from active duty 1984... I wrote under the names Tarantula 235, then Terror 161, and then J.SON.

MUSIC: Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street

The name is the faith of graffiti.

12'30" EXPLAINING NUMBERS + KINGS

[JAY]

The numbers denoted in a perfect world the street the writer lived on... like 149th Street and Grand Concourse, you would be Stay High 149...

[FLINT]

Stay High 149

[JAY]

...you lived on 161st, you were Junior 161...

[COCO]

Taki 183

[FLINT]

Tracy 168

[COCO]

Joe 182

[JAY]

However, myself included, there were just numbers, like in sports, that you wanted on your jersey because they were cooler than the real number that you came from. In my case, I lived in a neighborhood no-one ever heard of, but when I saw Junior and K 161, I wrote that next to my name because I wanted to be like them and sound cool, there was more street cred than like 235th Street, who the hell heard of that?!

MUSIC: Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street

[COCO]

The 144 is the street I lived on. At that time you would write either your street or your building number, there was Reekin 619 - 619 was his building number - so there was that kind of energy going on.

MUSIC: Bobby Womack - Across 110th Street (STOPS)

[COCO]

I didn't put a crown over my name until I felt that I made my mark.

[COCO]

A king was a person that "got up", that had his name a significant amount of times, and recognised by other writers that were significant in the movement... then, certain writers felt they could put crowns on their names.

[JESTER]

How we came to that determination was ... we would race. We set a limit, we said ok, we gonna watch 20 trains - whoever has the most pieces at the end of these 20 trains is definitely the king of the line.

Names had grown all over walls – a jungle of ego creepers and tendrils has flowered through a series of psychic rainstorms which passed like unwritten history over New York.

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame STARTS

[FLINT]

It was like an explosion. The graffiti explosion. All of a sudden it took over the whole city. I don't know what happened, but overnight in the early 70s it was from no graffiti to ALL graffiti.

[COCO]

It happened so fast, the entire movement happened so fast. It seemed like a week's time, or a couple of weeks, you would have writers coming out of everywhere.

There was a period [in the middle] when it looked as if graffiti would take over the world...

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame

[TATS]

Hey what's up everybody, this is Tats Cru...

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame (“...Mack and Bio”)

[BIO]

What's up, this is Bio..

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame (“...BG183”)

[BEEGEE]

BG183...

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame (“...what up Nicer?”)

[NICER]

This is Nicer...

[TATS]

...and you're listening to BBC Radio 4.

(...and you're listening to BBC World Service)

MUSIC: KRS One – Out For Fame

15'34" PARENTS' REACTION

[NICER]

As kids we were told “don't do that” - so we stuck out the middle finger to the masses and said, you know what, we believe in this, we're gonna do this. It's our way of showing people that we're not nobodies, we exist, and this is what we can do, and we're gonna continue doing it.

[BIO]

When we were young my parents didn't know what I was doing, for a while – until they started noticing all this paint popping up in the house. At one point I couldn't hide it any more, 10, 20, 30 cans, then 50, 60 cans – what is all this stuff? Where are you getting all this stuff?!

[BEEGEE]

I used to have cans and cans, my mum knew I was an artist, but after a while she was like, “what you doing?” ... “what you doing? That's graffiti! You better get these cans outta here!” - and I had to call Bio, and get him to pick up the cans from my house... and then he has to get rid of the cans!

[COCO]

I think my parents sort of suspected I was doing something... they probably saw paint on my hands, I never brought anything home, I disposed of everything before I came home. I don't think... they probably thought I was in the park playing. And I was at the park playing. LAUGHS. Y'know, my own park, where they park the trains. Yeah!

[RIFF]

Like my mother said, never let your right hand know what your left hand's doing... She instilled that in me, “never let your right hand know what your left hand's doing”, and even when she found out when I was 20 years old... I came in, I came home from college and everyone was round the dinner table, and she popped me. And I was like, “what was that for?!” And she said, “you was out there, almost killing yourself, running up and down them tracks and on them trains, yeah I found out” – and then she asked me: “where did you learn to be so SNEAKY?” - and I said, you're not gonna pop me if I tell you? - and she was like “no, where did you learn?” - and I said “from you!” “from me?” I said, “you said, never let your right hand know what your left hand's doing!”... and she started laughing... it was so funny cos, I really thought she was gonna pop me again... but she laughed and said, yes I did tell you that.

18'10" CRIME + VANDALISM

MUSIC: Jimi Hendrix - All Along The Watchtower

[JAY]

I just wanted to get away with something, to beat the system, y'know walk into a paint store, walk out with ten cans of paint under my coat, and whistle a happy tune... It was a lifestyle, an addiction, it was what you thought about when you woke up in the morning, when you went to bed, your photo album was a reflection of how much you mattered... The biggest kings, who had their names up the most, they didn't have girlfriends, they inhaled a lot of paint... probably sacrificed the most in terms of life...

[GREG]

Why would you choose to do something wrong, stupid and illegal?

[ERIC]

The risk factor, the illegal factor is what draws certain parts of this community to what they do.

[FLINT]

Um... yeah, it was vandalism! LAUGHS. But, yeah, it was. It's still illegal, it's still vandalism.

[GREG]

For lots of people, graffiti is ugly, vandalistic, and I'm not denying that. It's vandalism... now, oftentimes it's very CLEVER vandalism, can be written on a dumpster, like a garbage bin, and if someone's attempting to make a garbage bin look a little prettier... maybe that's not the worst thing in the world.

19'40" ARTISTIC MERIT

There was always art in a criminal act [...] but graffiti writers were somewhat opposite to criminals since they were living through the stages of the crime in order to commit an artistic act...

[GREG]

I don't subscribe to the notion that graffiti is either art or vandalism. I like my art vandalistic, and I like my vandalism artistic. "Artistic vandalism" to me has a nice ring to it.

Art is not peace but war, and form is the record of that war.

[GREG]

My name is Gregory J Snyder, I'm a sociologist and ethnographer, over the years I've studied different urban subcultures, my most significant work to date has been a ten-year study of graffiti writers conducted here in New York City.

20'40" NORMAN MAILER ARTICLE

[GREG]

It's a false assumption that when kids first started writing graffiti everybody hated it, and finally in 1989 they got it off the trains. That is incorrect. And if you go through articles, Richard Goldstein in the Village Voice... ..if you look on my wall, right there, that's Esquire Magazine – and what does it say? It says "The Great Art of the 70s". And that article is written by Norman Mailer. So in 1974, our nation's leading novelist, and one of the most well respected persons in literature, was declaring to the nation that the great art of the 70s was being created by kids in New York City. And New York City... stopped it. Now, they HAD to stop it. You can't have a bunch of kids, running amok, painting your subways, and have any semblance that you're an actual, functioning city... LAUGHS... you know, if those are your trains, keep them clean. I get it. At the same time, there was an opportunity to utilise these young people's artistic energy in the service of NYC culture. And one of the outgrowths of the graffiti movement is that people all over the world came to New York seeking NYC culture – and part of that culture they were seeking was the graffiti written on our subways.

MUSIC: Miles Davis – It's About That Time

22'30" THE GREAT ART?

[JAY]

I believe everything that happened in the European, at least on the context of subways and pieces being done, is a result of what happened in New York. ... It WAS the bible for Europeans, because it came at a point where the art had evolved at a very refined point.

[JAY]

And what's interesting is that jazz – another American art form connected to people of colour, inner city, demonised, had to go to Europe to be embraced.

MUSIC: Miles Davis - It's About That Time

[FLINT]

Graffiti is an American art form that we created. How many are there of that? You got jazz, and I dunno baseball, so, out of New York City, by the kids, and like it or not, call it vandalism or not, it's American artform, and now it's all over the world. So, you think we got something to be proud of? I think so.

[ERIC]

Was it the great art? It was the great art MOVEMENT. It was the biggest art movement. It's still the biggest art movement!

[JESTER]

It was the “great art”, it's international now, it's accepted! I guess graffiti has made it! (laughs)

[COCO]

It's great art of the 70s, and it's the great art of OUR movement. I mean if you go down the line and see, how long has Cubism, Impressionism, the Dada movement... we're talking about a movement that's um, over forty years strong. And it doesn't seem like it's gonna stop any time soon. So yeah, it is the great art. I'm not only gonna limit it to the 70s, because there's a lot of people out there carrying the torch, y'know. We lit it, and it's like the Olympics, people passing it on to other generations, and continue painting.

24'50" LEGACY + INFLUENCE

[FLINT]

It's the fire that never dies. There's always gonna be graffiti artists. There always were. You think I'm the first? Kilroy, the Egyptians, the cavemen... everybody wants to leave their mark.

Graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of what it may well have been, our first art of karma, as if indeed all the lives that ever lived are sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge.

[FLINT]

Well, I'm 57... that's how it is. I've been in many shows, and I remember, in one show another artist had a work of art, and I tagged it. And I had to apologise, he was very upset – I just thought my name looked good there! Cos that's what I think! I think my name looks good in places! LAUGHS... I like to see my name in print, on walls... so... what the heck?!

MUSIC: Tommy Tee - Aerosoul

[TATS]

NICER: Graffiti has gone through an evolution, and it will continue to evolve. It's now socially accepted in places where 20, 30 years ago that would have been impossible. It's now showcased in certain museums – and let's say in another 30 years from now it may be hanging in the White

House!

[TATS]

30 years from now... let's see, I'm 47... you'll be 77, I'll be almost 80... BG: I'll be 81...

BG: We'll be hanging our painting in the White House. ... NICER: I'd paint on the outside wall – (LAUGHS) I don't care, if I'm on a respirator, laid down, and I can move my hands, wheel my bed over to that wall!

NICER: You wanna paint on the outside wall? BIO: If they let me out the nursing home, yes! (LAUGHS)

MUSIC: Tommy Tee - Aerosoul

27'00" END CREDITS – SALLY v/o

In GRAFFITI: KINGS ON A MISSION, you heard Riff 170, Jester, Coco 144, Flint Gennari, Eric Orr, Tats Cru, and Terror 161.

Kerry Shale was the voice of Norman Mailer.

Special thanks to Jay Edlin, Gregory J Snyder, and Peter Gerard.

The producer was Steve Urquhart – and it was a Falling Tree production for BBC Radio 4. / BBC World Service.

MUSIC: Tommy Tee - Aerosoul

27'55" ends

R4 PRES BACK ANNO

If you go to our website, you can see a “reinterpretation” by Tats Cru, of the BBC Radio 4 logo.