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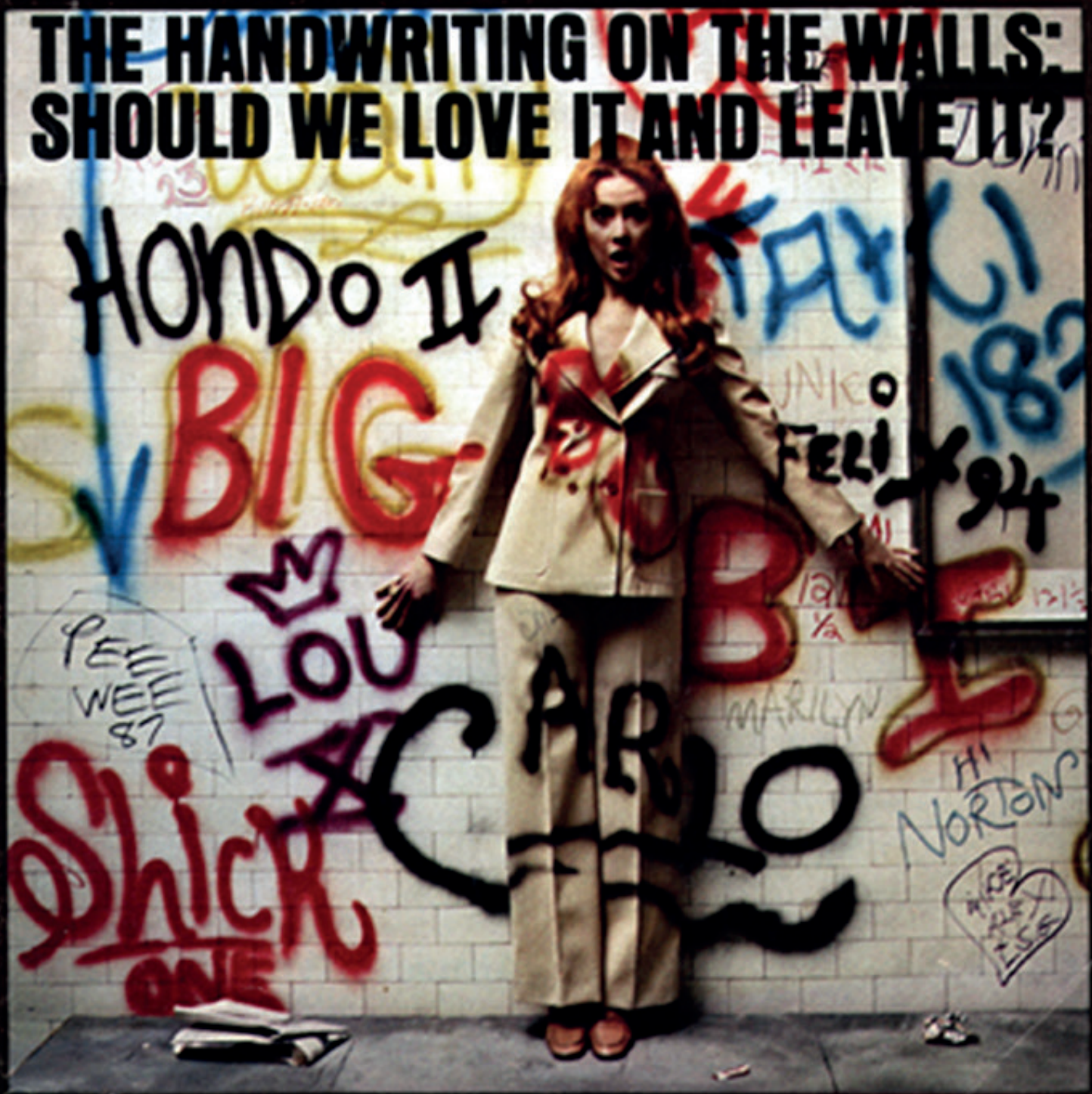
MARCH 26, 1973

NEW YORK

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALLS: SHOULD WE LOVE IT AND LEAVE IT?



Spin *wins the Taki Award for Grand Design, with a dazzling display of dots, drops, stars, vibes, arrow and crown*

Stop *is a runner-up in the Grand Design division with his soft bubble letters of sweet lime*

NEW YORK

The Graffiti 'Hit' Parade

"...It gets bigger and brighter. In recognition of this grand graffiti conquest of the subways, the Taki Awards are inaugurated..."

The law prohibits it, scrubbers keep scrubbing it, the brass keep blasting it, but the graffiti underground parade goes on and on, getting bigger and brighter every day. Virtually all of the city's 6,802 subway cars have been "hit" by the irrepressible graffiti artists who have graduated from simple identification scribbles to what they call Grand Designs and Masterpieces. The descendants of Taki 183—that ubiquitous name-signer who launched a thousand felt-pen pals three years ago—now work with a battery of spray paints and multi-size markers, producing works of colossal scale and juicy hues. In recognition of this grand graffiti conquest of the subways, *New York* Magazine inaugurates the Taki Awards (henceforth known as T.A.s) and shows the winners on these pages.

The graffiti explosion has provoked stern words from high places. Mayor Lindsay labeled the graffitists "insecure

Photographed by Bill Ray.

Taki Award for Station Saturation *goes to the IRT local stop at Broadway and 103rd Street.*

cowards." Transit Chief William Ronan urged that the "miscreants" be dealt with in the Criminal Courts. *The New York Times* deplored the "current insanity" and waxed wistful over the modest inscriptions of yesteryear.

Social psychologists are at odds over the issue. Faculty in the environmental psychology program at the City University advised the Lindsay administration to ignore the graffiti. Says Professor Gary Winkel: "There's no element of aggression in them. This is a different trip from before. Now it's a matter of the importance one feels when one sees one's name go by. The kids are showing indifference to public property, but they are far more interested in promoting themselves." But, says violence expert Dr. Fredric Wertham, this is the wrong kind of ego-boost. "It is part of the widespread vandalism, the mood to destroy, the brutalism that is everywhere."

To notables in the arts, however, the graffiti are not only acceptable but welcome. Saul Steinberg considers the activity "a necessity for entering the art scene." He notes that the graffitists work only on the permanent parts of the subways, avoiding ads because they are removable. Professional artists should be so lucky—exhibiting in a constantly circulating show with a guaranteed captive audience. For Pop Master and one-time graffitist Claes Oldenburg, the blossoming graffiti are like a dream come true. "I've always wanted to put a steel band with dancing girls on a flat car down in the subways and send it all over the city. It would slide into a station without your expecting it. It's almost like that now. You're standing there in the station, everything is gray and gloomy, and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America. At first it seems anarchical—makes you wonder if the subways are working properly. Then you get used to it. The city is like a newspaper anyway, so it's natural to see writing all over the place."

Currently some masters—and one mistress—from a group called United Graffiti Artists are getting applause from an unexpected audience. As part of dancer Twyla Tharp's lively new ballet, *Deuce Coupe*, the graffitists are spraying away on stage at the City Center, to the rhythms of The Beach Boys (see pages 37 and 76). Whether such ventures will rechannel their energies remains to be seen. Says Mike 171: "It'll take more than cops to stop the movement. There are kids all over town with bags of paint, waiting to hit their names."

Taki Award for Colossal Coverage *goes to Car 8826 on the IRT Lexington Avenue line.*

This Thing Has Gotten Completely Out of Hand

By Richard Goldstein

"...The graffiti blitz announces the first genuine teenage street culture since the fifties. In that sense, it's a lot like rock 'n' roll..."

Sometime during the summer of 1970, a guy named Demetrius begins to write his name all over Washington Heights. Only he uses his nickname, which is Taki, and he always adds his street, so the logo reads Taki 183, across stoops and lampposts and handball courts. Always the same legend in the same black scrawl, Taki 183. Pretty soon people are sighting his name like flying saucers, and wondering, what is this squad of Taki-commandos? Rumors begin: it is the surveying crew for a new subway line, or it is a madman quoting stock averages, or it is a street gang so obscure not even Leonard Bernstein knows them, or else it is some kind of arcane religious rite, like when I was a kid and people went around writing "Beware of 1960" on the roofs.

What finally happens is that some guy from the split page of *The New York Times* tracks Taki down and writes a profile of the dude. And Taki gets to talk about his aims as a writer of graffiti, his tricks of the trade, and especially about how great it feels to go around scribbling your name across public property. So that no matter where you are—say, delivering laundry in the farthest reaches of Astoria—there will be your own sanctified scrawl to get you on.

So far it is just the kind of glamor trip New Yorkers are hungering for, a harmless new mania with properly prole undertones. But most people don't realize that Taki is not the only graffitist floating around Washington Heights, and not even the first. There is Eddie 181 and Cay 161 and Julio 204. And these guys are beginning to discover each other's names—that is, Cay might notice Eddie and the two of them might start painting together, sometimes stoned on downs or coke, hit a wall on Audubon Avenue, and maybe a couple of stoops. Pretty soon people in school are noticing, the status mills begin to grind, and suddenly all the bloods are flashing dry markers the way you might flash a knife. Writing comes to represent a new accessory, like an earring or a car, and everyone begins to cultivate a name for its possibilities in shape and size. Soon the designs grow ornate, and the technology becomes more complex. Guys travel with five or six widths of marker—Nijis for detail, and Uniwides for broader sweeps. And then, inevitably, spray paint enters the scene, enabling writers to fuzz their names over storefronts and monuments at the flick of a wrist. The paint is a killer to remove. Once marked, the wall is yours.

And then this dude named Top Cat moves to the Heights from Philadelphia and brings with him the Philadelphia style—lean and geometric letters with little platforms. And now the bloods are calling themselves the Broadway Boys and their writing the Elegant style. It becomes an official thing in Washington Heights to write your name somewhere on the intersection of 188th and Audubon, which becomes known as Writers' Corner. Suddenly, kids from all over the city are noticing the Heights, and George Washington High School becomes *the* school of the seventies (the way Forest Hills High was the school of the sixties). G.W. is where you see High Latin flash—bolero jackets, pimp hats and platform shoes, the overalls cuffed just so. G.W. is where only the teachers look straight, and the kids are engrossed in a kind of *bas-couture* which must be as fiercely competitive as it seems dazzling to an outsider from Hunts Point.

All this in Washington Heights? You have to understand that the Heights, before the Elegant style, was the city's most anonymous ghetto, filled with miles and miles of endlessly baroque apartment houses, all those powder-puff bakeries, and dress shops with impossible hems in the window. Washington Heights was so forgotten that hardly anybody except the actual residents realized that the neighborhood was undergoing what the Barrio passed through twenty years ago—a massive Latinization, pouring into the streets a whole generation of kids with the classic urban problem of defending and defining turf. Which makes the Heights an obvious setting for the emergence of graffiti, since now, here is an opportunity to claim your neighborhood and your street, not the way kids in the fifties did it, gang against gang, but in true seventies style: self-reliant—you are responsible for spreading your name, and yours alone.

Soon kids all over the city are discovering the power of ubiquity which graffiti offer, and an astute observer can tell a writer's race and neighborhood from his style. Guys from the Bronx draw little clouds around their names and favor plump, curvaceous lettering. Out in Brooklyn, they draw ornate comet-tailfins around lettering which is so abstract as to appear indecipherable. Blacks adopt hip names like Nova, Lazar, Spin, and Nod; or African day-names like Cudjoe, Cuffy, Kwakoe. Puerto Ricans stick to their given names or else choose nicknames which are either Spanglish or hyper-American (Stitch, Snake, Cano, The Malo). Some names are chosen for their sheer mystique. Hitler II picked his name without knowing who his predecessor was.

By now there are formal groups, like WAR (for Writers Already Respected), and the code of the gang begins to influence even as individual an activity as writing. It is unethical to cover anyone else's name. Logos may be sold or handed down, but Roman numerals must be added to those names which originated elsewhere, and sometimes the process becomes exceedingly

"...The wagons are sitting there in the subway yards like silent whales, and the kids set about altering the flesh forever..."

elaborate, so that you wonder how it was that Rican XLIV determined his identity.

A writer's life-style emerges, with its own distinctive slang. To steal something is to invent it ("I invented a can of paint last night"). Any policeman, but especially a transit cop, is called a narco. A writer labels his inferiors toy ("He's a toy writer"; "T.A.s are toy cops"). To write on anything is to hit it. A subway car is a wagon.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TONY GANZ

United Graffiti Artists line up with their organizer, Hugo Martinez (bottom, right).

Soon there are writers' hangouts all over the city. During the day there is a coffee shop on Jerome Avenue across from DeWitt Clinton High. Late at night there are these soda-clubs in midtown—most of them sequestered between office buildings and card shops—where young Latinos go to get out of the neighborhood and dance. Certain stations, such as the abandoned platform at 91st Street on the Broadway IRT, are as sacred as Writers' Corner. Reputations are made and lost on these walls. There are legendary writers like Phase 2 (who is widely credited with introducing the Bronx "bubble" style at Clinton High) and Stay High 149, who adorns his name with a stick figure smoking a joint. These people are spoken of in the kind of reverential hush once reserved for Che Guevara and Willie Colón. Was it Phase 2 who used to work in white gloves so that only his hands were visible? How did Jec and Mike 171 manage to write their names on jet planes in Puerto Rico?

Finally, a younger generation of writers emerges—kids who are fourteen to seventeen, too young for gangs and too healthy for junk. These kids regard Taki with not a little disdain (he was always wearing sandals, he had no flash, he only wrote in black). They are unwilling to settle for monuments and walls. They want the maximum yield in visibility. And so, finally, some young geniuses realize that the very source of all mobility in this town, the one place where everybody you are ever going to meet on the street will have to see your name, is the subway. The jive IRT.

It seems harmless enough at first. Couple of kids from the Heights sneak down into the yards at night, stalking the tracks like the Dead End Kids in their overalls and polo shirts, wearing Mother's rubber gloves and baggy Army fatigue jackets to hide the spray paint—Red Devil and Rust-oleum being the preferred brands—and each can specially fitted with the wider nozzle from spray starch or Scotchgard, so the flow is fast and thick. Some dude has cribbed a set of keys from a conductor, so they can open any door, turn on the lights, blow the horns. And the wagons are sitting there like silent whales, and the kids set about altering the flesh forever, bodies moving up and down like action painters, deft, stealthy, until the whole thing, inside and out, begins to resemble the waves on someone's broken color TV. And in the morning, when the wagons are put into operation, they'll whiz down Broadway past the astonished eyes of maybe 100,000 dank souls, all of whom will have been subjected to the ace experience of meeting Snake-I or Stitch or Turok 161 or Trik as they wish to be met.

Suddenly this thing has gotten completely out of hand. The Krylon conspiracy is upon us, and no reporter from the split page of *The Times* can encompass it, as kids from all over the city take to the tracks. The city fights back. Art suppliers refuse to sell markers and spray paint to kids, but most writers prefer to invent their tools anyway, and a hardy black market in paint and ink keeps them well supplied. The T.A. is helpless against these rhinestone hordes. Of course, there is a public show of force. Writers are caught and sometimes punished on the spot by having their faces sprayed. Some are brought to Family Court and forced to scrub stations clean, wearing goggles and gloves. Even Boy Scouts are enlisted in the clean-up attempt. But the T.A. can make no dent in the invasion, and the presence of its toy cops adds just the element of mock-danger these kids crave. There is even an Officer Krupke figure in the person of Officer Schwartz, who is rumored to have busted all the best writers. But the word on Schwartz is that he wears his cop shoes under his jeans, which makes him highly visible to any writer with a sense of style.

Meanwhile, whole stations fall to the marker blitz. Trains pull by, buried in a confetti of names and numbers. It becomes a rarity of rarities to find a readable map. Only the advertisements remain untouched (perhaps in a gesture of empathy with certified hype). And there comes that moment when you watch the doors close around a Wall Street executive in a camel's hair coat and cufflinks which glimmer with efficiency, and you know that he is going to have to stand for the next ten minutes staring point-blank into the wobbly green T drawn freehand the night before by some balmy teenager in the yards.

About now you're wondering why someone doesn't come along and organize these kids—all that talent applied to some constructive purpose, as the Junior League ladies might say. Well, there is Hugo Martinez, a 22-year-old sociology student at City College. In October of 1972, Martinez forms the United Graffiti Artists along with the top twelve writers from Washington Heights. Each writer agrees to retire from subway décor in exchange for membership privileges. They meet in Martinez's apartment near the Soldiers and Sailors Monument (which many writers call Grant's Tomb). There, they write on oaktag and canvas, elaborate versions of the designs they used to draw in the subways. Martinez has given these kids the idea that they can build something tangible for themselves—like, say, a career in the arts.

First, he persuades the art department at City College to stage an exhibition of graffiti. Next, he arranges for the U.G.A. to design backdrops for Twyla Tharp's ballet, *Deuce Coupe*, at the Joffrey: six or seven dudes dressed in platforms and jeans spray away onstage while the performance takes place. The dance is an immense success—the hit of the season, actually—and suddenly, media men want to tap

Photographed by Herbert Migdoll

Graffiti and Choreography *mix media on the City Center stage as Twyla Tharp's company and Joffrey dancers perform "Deuce Coupe."*


TO YOU WITH LOVE
FLIP
COCO
WITH LOVE

Brooklyn *style graffiti (left) go in for swirls and lots of ornamentation. Letters are freely shaped into decorative patterns like Art Nouveau designs. In the process, such names as Nova, the "nom de felt" of Steve (below), whose work is shown here, become almost indecipherable.*

Manhattan *style (right), which in its fancier form is called Broadway Elegant, was evolved by Puerto Ricans. The artists use blatant colors and often outline their bold letters to reinforce the shapes. The flame, a popular feature with Snake-I (whose real name is Eddie), is his device for saying, "I'm powerful, hot."*

the source of this stylistic coup. The boys become accustomed to attention, and the most photogenic begin to preen at the drop of a flashcube. Ray-B 954, who is fourteen and lives in Hunts Point, has been on four channels in the past three months. He is now acting as business manager for the group, taking commissions for canvases and auto décor. Call it the New Realism. For a hundred bucks you can buy a U.G.A. original and choose the colors yourself. Would Ivan Karp stand for that?

Meanwhile, the rush is on. Hugo is negotiating with the New York Cultural Center for a major graffiti show in June. A lady up in Riverdale wants to have the U.G.A. do her dining room wall. People are talking about . . . graffiti Christmas cards, ad copy, window dressing (already there is a boutique on the Concourse called Taki 183). Suddenly this thing is bigger than *Throat*. The U.G.A. is looking for a studio in Washington Heights and hustling funds for its projects. Hugo's selling point is graphic: the only way to get the graffiti off the subways is to elevate them into art.

Maybe the whole thing will end up as a series of greeting cards featuring piquant couplets from old-time rock 'n' roll, but at least the exploitation is mutual. What Hugo has done is to take a group of young street people and turn them into working commercial artists. They seem sensible enough to regard their acceptance with skepticism, and nobody is counting on a career as Writer-in-Residence at the School of Visual Arts. It is still far more prestigious to see your name on the IRT than on the Joffrey *Playbill*, and it's far more glamorous to meet the real Phase 2, after seeing his name on so many walls, than to meet the real Twyla Tharp.

Actually, these kids all turn out to be rather ordinary fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds. There is Charmin 65—née Virgin I—the only woman who is not regarded as a toy writer (since she hit the Statue of Liberty last summer). And Mike 171, one of two Europeans in the group, who speaks with a Puerto Rican slur. And Co-Co 144, very short and thin, with comb-black hair, scuffed platform shoes, and the requisite jeans, cuffed and worn with the top snap open so that he is constantly checking out his fly.

Co-Co lives with his parents and his wife Tiny, who also writes. He is sixteen, she is fifteen. They share a tiny room, her dolls spread out across his bureau, a large plastic Snoopy hanging on the wall. Co-Co's parents seem to love him deeply, and they sit politely in the kitchen while he gives interviews. There is no disapproval shown toward Co-Co's writing; rather, they seem to recognize it as an integral part of his personal style, and they show me his oaktag paintings the way my parents used to show my poems to company.

One of the things that strike you about these kids is how good they look —so different from the ghetto junkie image. Though their experiences with drugs vary widely, none of these kids seem dominated by the Big Nod. They are healthy-looking and athletic. At home, their writing is often displayed along with trophies and medals, in the center of the household, on top of the TV.

The writers themselves seem to re-

Photographed by Tony Ganz

Bronx *style (right) is characterized by "bubble" letters. Phase 2 (otherwise know as Lonnie), a "master" who works in many styles, here embellished his bubbly name with wavy patterns and an enveloping burst of flames. Black graffitists often surround their names with cloud forms.*

Combo *of styles (below) blends Manhattan's sharp clarity with the tall, often platformed letters of the Philadelphia "school." Stay High 149 (or Wayne) is considered a wonderman of New York graffitists because of the "risky" length and complexity of his name, with its inevitable trademark: the smoker.*

gard writing graffiti as though it were a sport rather than an art. It is something men do together in teams, something which requires meticulous attention to form, mastery of technology, and evasion of hostile forces, represented by the T.A. Some spirit of the hunting party is involved in all of these groups, and when they speak of their days in the yards together, you begin to glimpse something of the masculine romance which graffiti can provide.

It just may be that the kids who write graffiti are the healthiest and most assertive people in their neighborhoods. Each of these people has to "invent" his life—his language, his culture are lifted, remodeled and transformed. In that ferocious application of energy to style lies the source of all flash, and the reason why immigrant groups exert such a powerful impact on popular taste. Style involves conflict, the strain of races, classes, ages, and sexes pitted against each other in the arenas of clothing and music and slang. For a long time I wondered how lower-class kids in this city were going to enter the fray. And then I began to look closely at the subway writers, at their use of color and design, at the way they dressed, putting chunks of other people's fashions together in a way that clashed, but coherently. I began to think about how coherent the subways look these days, as though each writer were working within a pattern which was consistent with his larger sense of how things ought to look. And I began to feel that the most significant thing about graffiti was not their destructiveness but their cohesion, bringing together a whole generation of lower-class kids in an experience which is affirmative and delinquent at the same time.

In that sense, the graffiti movement is a lot like rock 'n' roll in its pre-enlightened phase. To me, it announces the first genuine teenage street culture since the fifties. Not another season of imitation-psychedelia, but a fiercer, hotter style, much closer to the spirit of *West Side Story* than *Easy Rider*. If all this begins to seem as compelling to middle-class kids as the J.D. style did twenty years ago, then we are in for some inventive times. ▬