



WORDS: **ROOSEVELT FRANKLIN**
PHOTOS: **ABBY GENNET**

RF: What was your neighborhood like growing up?

JOE: I'm from Forrest Projects. It was a loving neighborhood. When I became a teenager, shit was changing, y'know, the crack epidemic, etc.

As a kid, it was beautiful, never fighting, always a lot of love, but growing up was real difficult. There's a lot of peer pressure. Either you gonna be a sucker that everybody's gonna pick on or you notice that nobody cares about you, so why don't you fight back, why don't you be a bully? The environment could change your whole attitude about life. Parents got a lot to do with it, but at the same time, I had beautiful parents. They couldn't stop me from doing what I was doing.

You used to be a graf writer. You wrote CRACK?

That's for real. Terror Squad started out as a graffiti crew. GIZMO and COSMO were the presidents. They invented the crew. They grew out of graffiti cuz they got fly and wanted to mess with the girls and all that, so they gave it to me. I was only 12 years old. I was so honored because these were the guys I used to look up to.

I got thrown out of so many schools for writing graffiti. I guess they knew my m.o.. Graffiti was dope for me cuz I wanted the fame, the recognition. I loved the art, the whole excitement, the adrenaline. It still plays a major part of my life, but once again, I can't do it now cuz I'll probably get sued if they find out. If you look around here, though, you'll see some papers with throw ups.

Were you a piecer or a bomber?

I was more a bomber, throw ups, tags, but I did piece. I think I got most of my fame on the street, although I used to hit the trains, too. At that time, I was so young, I used to sneak out my house when everybody was sleeping... it was some real shit. If I woulda got caught, my mother and father would have killed me.

What lines did you hit?

6 trains, 5's and 2's. Those were the cleanest trains but they were the most hit by the police, also. It was almost like a set up. I fortunately never got caught there. I got caught one time doing throw ups on the highway. Police chased me and I climbed up this hill for no reason. When I got up, the cops were up there. They jumped on me- "You've been caught by the infamous Vandal Squad."

What's the connection between TATS CRU and Terror Squad?

T.A.T. is TS. It's two crews put together, TATS. They were the greatest graffiti crew ever, T.A.T. (Tuff Ass Teens). They took me under their wing as far as the graffiti world goes and showed me how to piece, gave me flavor. We became one big family to the point where we never saw a difference between us. Being that they had repped that name for so long, it just turned into TATS. I still support them. Every album I drop, whether it's mine or one of my artists, we do murals where we promote the album. They do the album cover all over New York in graffiti. I get them little \$60,000-\$70,000 checks from the corporate world spreading love with the community, ya know?

People outside the ghetto may not see this, but me and you know- sometimes between Black and Puerto Rican people, there's a lot of tension in the hood. I notice that you a brother who always stands tall and firm as a proud Puerto Rican. At the same time, you a brother who gets along and has a very natural respect for Black people. Between our people there's a lot of beef, but a cat like you comes through and there's none of that.

That's my job. Growing up in the ghetto, it is Black and Spanish people in the hood. I was fortunate enough to not be in the family that you consider racist. My mother always opened the door to all the young Black kids and let 'em eat in the house and I always went to the black kids house. We never saw a real difference other than we take a lot of pride being Latino and in our culture. We always had love for the Blacks and the Blacks had love for us.

It was a natural thing for me to be down with this Hip-Hop thing. I came on cuz I felt like there was a void. Latinos been down since day one in Hip-Hop and they never got their props. I knew that people would wanna see a Julio or Juanito or Jorge on they TV screen. Sure, we support Hip-Hop, we love Hip-Hop, but wouldn't you think that between Gang Starr and KRS, you might finally wanna see a Puerto Rican dude with a ceasar and a half moon representing you?

As far as the future goes, I see a lot more of that in jail than out of jail. In jail, the Blacks are separate from the Puerto Ricans. I don't even understand that. I don't know how that happens. I judge you by

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your passion, how you treat me respectfully, what type of love you got for me and what type of love I got for you.

I got my start at Amateur Night at the Apollo. I went there five weeks in a row. I came in first place with an all black crowd in Harlem and I never felt intimidated. I never felt like we weren't one. I used to go to all the jams, everything. Now at this level, where I'm a prominent Latino figure that the youth look up to, I often let them see that there's Black and Latino. Pun was the same way. He was very proud that he was Puerto Rican but he let 'em know that we in this together. We sufferin' the same causes, the same conditions together. That's why that song 'Boricua, Morena' was so big.

I never let nobody get me to the point where I can't love someone else because of how they look or their race. I never let that happen.

We taught people what it is to be Puerto Rican, what it is to be Latino. We made it fly. So when you hear cats going, "Hey papi", yes, let it be known we were around Hip-Hop for 20 years and people weren't doing that 'til me and Pun blew up the spot. We made it cool to be Latino, but we also try to stress the fact that Latinos and Blacks will be stronger if we unite and get together.

Is it true the Spanish kids really made b-boying what it is?

As far as dancing, definitely. Spanish people ruled the b-boying and the dancing, but there was no money in that. The rappers were making money doing shows and making records and the Spanish people didn't wanna rap! They didn't go for the big money.

If you in the hood, take a 10-year old Puerto Rican and a 10-year-old Black; the Puerto Rican plays handball. Where the hell can you make a fucking dollar playing handball? The Black dude is practicing his basketball while you practicing your handball. He just make it to the NBA, he might just get a scholarship to college. I think our choices in life been minimized. We're the best at whatever we do, but we always choose the shit that gets us no money!

What did you think of Freddy Ferrer's running for mayor?

I (thought) his chances were very good, esp. since the Blacks and Latinos came together like my brother Rev. Al Sharpton supporting.

I heard Minister Conrad Muhammad wanted you to run for mayor at one point.

I'd probably beat somebody, too. I'd probably beat 'em for Bronx Borough President. I sell 100,000 records in the Bronx. I wouldn't do that, cuz I can't even sit here and act like I know what it takes to govern a borough or city like that. I ain't got what it takes to do that, but I could definitely speak for the young people who have an opinion, who get racially profiled, who have nowhere to go for after school programs. Those guys I could speak for because I'm a voice that some people might actually listen to.

