

TATS CREW

TATS CRU ARRESTED FOR LOVE

A tale of survival by Roosevelt Franklin.



In front of The Point, Bronx NY

B.G. 183 had just got back from Germany. He walked through J.F.K. International with his man Brim, looking for a phone to let wifey know he'd arrived safe and sound; welcome home. She informed him of Big Pun's death from a heart attack caused by his excessive weight. He couldn't know it at the time, but in little more than 24 hours, his two partners in their graphic arts business, TATS CRU, would be locked up for expressing their remorse. At the time, Bio and Nicer, the other two thirds of TATS were up at their office in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx. They'd been gettin' calls all day about Pun and been making a few of their own; they'd decided to do a memorial mural for their friend. The wall they planned to paint, located at 163rd st. and Rogers Ave. on the side video store, was one they'd been doing for over ten years, always with the store owner's consent. An expression of their sense of loss which could be shared with the community, it was their way of mourning. Only a few close heads were told, one being Fat Joe, whom they'd known since back in the day. Less than an hour after arriving at the spot, however, it had become a media circus; news vans, lights, cameras, representatives from more than 5 major news organizations. Regular folk from the area and throughout the city came through to show support, dropping off

hundreds of flowers and wreaths, lighting mad candles. By the time B.G. showed up, the site looked like a shrine. Police barricaded the block off while the cats from TATS painted, trying to ignore the microphones and incessant questioning of reporters. Fat Joe, perhaps viewing them as vulturistic, refused to comment, staying seated for the most part behind the tinted windows of his ride. Nicer would eventually step up to handle the situation so the rest could finish the work. Meanwhile, across the street, sitting in an unmarked police car were two members of the vandal squad secretly videotaping the scene as part of their surveillance. A unit of the Housing Police (both Transit and regular NYPD have their own individual vandal squad units), they sat and gathered evidence on them all night 'til one in the morning when the CRU finally packed it in. By 10 pm the next day, they'd finished the mural, an aerosol painting of Big Pun standing in between the two words that made up his name. On their way back home, away from the media crews and supporters, the vandal squad decided to move in. Nicer was picked up on the way to the laundromat. Bio and guest artist from Germany, Nosm, were picked up driving the TATMobile which carried their equipment. After being handcuffed, they were informed that the owner of the building they'd been

painting had called the police station complaining about kids doing graffiti, vandalizing her property. She wanted to press charges and the people responsible placed under arrest. "You have the right to remain silent..."

Train Art Theater

TATS CRU began more than 15 years ago in the South Bronx back when Hip Hop, still in its early years, dominated the landscape. D.J.'s played in the park and on the block, plugged into a lamp post while kids poplocked and did the electric boogie, developing new forms of street dance. Cats walked with big boom boxes blasting, metamorphosing ebionics into futuristic slang, creating new styles in fashion from what little they could afford. For TATS, graffiti became the most natural way for them to represent. B.G. 183, one of its earliest members, first caught the fever having to ride the subway to James Monroe High School every day. Aspiring to become an artist since a shorty, he saw a form of graphic illustration not being taught in the school system; the crazy tags on the insides, top to bottom whole car masterpieces on the outside. He could only daydream of doing pieces with color until he hooked up with other kids at his school who got down, one of whom was Bio, who he met in art class.

Bio taught him not only how to do his name in designed letters, but also that he needed a name in order to play the game. Inspired by crews like TLP, ESP, UBA and writers like Seen and Lee (among others), Bio had been catchin' wreck since junior high, especially at the Rego layup on the 6 and on the 2,5,6 lines in general. B.G. quickly became addicted to bombing as well, particularly around the layups from Soundview to Castle Hill. Being out and about, he picked up on who's who, what crews were running shit, who the real writers were and who were the fakes.

B.G. 183: "You'd know another writer just by lookin' at 'em. The way he watched trains as they went by...the ink on his clothes, the paint on his sneakers. You might approach a kid and be like 'Yo, what you write?' He might not say, cuz you could be an undercover cop, or you might have beef with him cuz he may have written over you, or you may have written over him."

By 1984, the two aerosol fiends, along with Nicer, hooked up with other like-minded artists (including Brim, Mack, Shame, Raz, Cem2, Kenn and T-Kid). Their average age being 14-15 years old, they named their crew TAT, for Teenagers Are Tough. As crew, they stuck tight, stayed within the crew, didn't try to be down with other crews, feeding off of each other's energies instead. Somewhere down the line, they ran into another crew who did graffiti, Terror Squad/TS, which included a teenage Fat Joe. The two crews never officially merged, but got up so frequently together that others began to associate one with the other, referring to them as TATS.

Tuff Ass Teens

Nicer: "The law of the jungle went like this: If you was down in the tunnel painting and there was just two of you, and you saw 4 or 5 other guys coming toward you, you had two choices. Either get ready to fight for yours or be out, pack your shit and be out, cuz you knew you was outnumbered. There's just certain basic rules, like y'know, a tag can't go over a throw-up, but a throw-up can go over a tag. You can do pieces over a throw-up but you can't do a throw-up over a piece. It's not written anywhere, but you just knew."

Like most kids in the ghetto, cats from T.A.T. originally crewed up for reasons other than mutual respect. In the street with the creeps and freaks, you need someone to watch your back. As romanticized as graffiti may be in the 21st century, the reality was more dangerous than most realize. As if the risk of being fucked with by faggot police wasn't enough, writers were also vulnerable to the jealousy, paranoia and general hatred of competitors. One's peers often became the main obstacle to growth and expression.

Bio: "You had to be strong or you could get robbed. If you went to the spot to get up and had no props, or you got caught out in the wrong place by another crew, if you wasn't down with 'em, you was getting' robbed, they were taking your paint. You had to fend for yourself. The strong survive, the weak just got robbed and had to retire."

Respect has to be earned, it's not given

freely. When they came up, TATS CRU represented a second generation who not only emulated but built upon a foundation already established by kings who'd been doing their thing since the early '70's. At the writers' bench on 149th and Concourse, their fame was evident. Crews like TNT, UA, CIA, RTW and OTB were not only known but feared.

B.G.183: "Our first time goin' up there, I was like, 15. It was just...thug niggas and mad crews; faces said they was ready to put it on you."

Bio: "Newjacks didn't try to fit in at first or even hang. Most likely you'd stay up in the background and observe, hoping not to get fucked with. Soon as that next train came through you might be on it. There was no tryin' to look down or act hard cuz you could easily get robbed. To us, they was like older kids. They might fuck with you just for fun, take your black book, whatever. After a while, we started to get known and came up a bit. Now all of a sudden, we're the older ones catching kids out there, fuckin' 'em up and takin' their shit."

B.G. 183: "Now niggas know that these kids are not to be fucked with. Now everybody knows you down, no question, these kids ain't playin'. All of a sudden, other kids start comin' up to you, wantin' to be down, be like, 'Oh yeah, B.G. I heard about you, I wanna get up with you, yeah...'"

Nicer: "It's a competitive art form, even physical, which is why there probably weren't too many women in it at first. How many women are gonna be into that, carrying all that paint, sneakin' under barbed wire, runnin' from the police? The mentality is like some survival of the illest shit."

Tough and Talented

Being a graffiti writer meant becoming part of a secret society, an underground community where everything you did revolved around the craft. Many lived as outlaws, coming out at night to put it down, doing whatever they had to do in order to support that lifestyle.

Nicer: "The art form was an illegal art form to begin with. The kid on the block who was painting was the guy who just came back from jail. He wasn't only a graffiti artist, he was a thief, a stick up kid, that's who a real graff writer was. The original writers were stick up kids, they was kids who, y'know, was on the block knocking old women down then bouncin', know what I'm sayin'?"

"Getting over" is a basic tenet and philosophical aspect of graffiti that most often manifests through the practice of "racking". A "real" graff writer never pays for their paint, while evenings were spent bombing the system, TATS CRU spent their days (when not in school) cleaning out hardware and art supply stores from Bronx to Manhattan. When the city dried up, they went out of state for paint, from New Jersey to Connecticut even all the way to Boston. Not everyone was guaranteed to come back from a mission, though. Some got caught out there and had to do a couple of days in jail. His cut of the loot would get divided up by the survivors. Racking wasn't just about spray cans; it included food, coffee,



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clothes, aspirin, whatever you needed get you through.

Bio: "You spend no money, whether you riding the train or eating, you spend no money; that's the rule. Even at parties we'd hustle, helping Bambaata or Grandmaster Flash carry their record crates so we could get in for free. Getting over, stealing, hopping the turnstile, it became your lifestyle. If there's a cop at the station, we'd just go to the next one. You might get chased, have to run on the tracks. If they catch you, they might spray paint all over your clothes, hit you with the black jack...Being a graffiti writer, we don't pay on trains, no matter what."

B.G.183: "Making sure you never got caught was the real rush behind it. You were always moving around. Nobody would see you writing but they'd see the name. The only ones who would know would be other writers."

Nicer: "These kids who write are coming from poverty, working class families, the slums. they're coming from people barely making it. The parents didn't really have to give, so the kids had to come up with their own thing. Graffiti gave kids an identity, a sense of being, power. It's his way of sticking his hand up so's to stand out in the crowd. "I'm here, I exist, I count for something." That's how a kid feels when he puts his tag up or goes bombing. to the rest of the world, they're nobodies, but with in a certain circle, they're known, they're somebody."

Is Graffiti the 1st Element of Hip Hop?

Bio: "Graffiti was outside of Hip Hop, it exists on it's own. It was later on that people put it together. I don't even consider it that. There was people who were in this movement who were not into Hip Hop

and when they started out, knew nothing about it. They were into Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath. Graffiti maybe part of Hip Hop, but it's not an element. It's it's own culture, it's own institution. We had so many people who were involved in it, but were not involved in Hip Hop, what happens to them? How do they feel, know what I'm sayin'?"

Nicer: "Graff was always mixed racially. It was never a race thing. It was more one of economics. We came from poverty. You had days where it was really a struggle to survive. Of course, there was always Black and Puerto Ricans doing they thang. But then, there were white kids who knew nothing' about Hip Hop, they were punk rockers or into Zeppelin, etc. It was really about your frame of mind, what type of social struggle you in. It's a form of expression."

Top Artistic Talent

By 1986, TATS CRU was recognized as official. With the streets locked, new horizons waited to be conquered. Artists like Daze, Crash, Lady Pink and others had been making moves on the gallery scene for years, but to TATS, graffiti belonged on trains. While admiring those involved and recognizing that these cats were opening doors, the gallery scene was another world to them, just not their style. Not being fools, although they never pursued it, they accepted shows when they came their way, from Soho and spots across the country to eventually overseas. Barely 18, they traveled to England with Afrika Bambaata, whose videos "Planet Rock" and "Renegades of Funk" featured their work. They met a young Goldie (before he became THE Jungle

D.J.) and 3-D(of Massive Attack) who were considered to be among England's best graff artists, they're primary influence being the work of Henry Chalfant(Style Wars, Subway Art, etc.) and movies like Wild Style. As they traveled throughout Europe and eventually on to Japan and Australia, they noticed whereas back home, they'd have to worry about gettin' vicked or fucked with by cops, like the jazz artists who came before them, they received love instead. Graffiti opened a new world to them, helping them realize there was a lot more to life going on outside the hood.

No matter how far out they went, they'd always return home to paint trains. By 1987, however, the year NYC introduced silver bullets to the subway system, replacing the white whales writers lived to Captain Ahab, TATS slowly but surely disbanded. No longer in high school, each man had responsibilities to handle... time to grow up. Families were started, jobs had to be held down, seeds to be fed. Still, the hunger never left them alone. Reuniting on Halloween every year to do wall productions at the Bronx Hall of Fame and then the Harlem Hall of Fame(106th and Park Ave.) helped them satisfy their urges and keep in touch. The more and more they got together, though, the more and more they got together. By the early 90's, their outside work led to them being approached by local merchants who'd hire them to paint their store fronts. At first, they'd do the job just for the amount of spray paint left over after the gig. Eventually, they got business savvy. Bio, Nicer, and B.G. 183 quit their day jobs to work for themselves full-time. Soliciting other local companies and utilizing their connections in



Photo: W.D. Allah

Mexico, 99



Photo: W.D. Allah

BIO at the Gallery



Photo: Angela Boatwright

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the music industry (doing designs and backdrops for videos), they established themselves as a graphic arts firm specializing in logos, commercial signs and promotional outdoor advertising. They've gone on to work for such corporate giants as Coca-Cola, St. Ides, Seagram's, Firestone, Avirex and ABC Carpet + Home. Some of the work they receive requires extensive travel so they've had to hire freelancers; EZO (who also organizes the Harlem Hall of Fame annual get together) helps to hold down Manhattan, Senz does Puerto Rico, Totem's in ATL and German natives How and Nosm represent overseas. Productions can be as large as 5 stories tall, requiring scaffolding and gallons and gallons of paint (at least \$20,000 worth a year).

Nicer: "Ironically, we used to make fun of kids who did walls. That's not real graff, it belongs on trains. To us, it was the same as if a kid came down the block and said he just bought 3 cans of spray paint to go bombing. We'd fall out laughing...or might just take his paint."

Their office is located at the Point C.D.C.(Community Development Center) where they teach classes in graffiti art and graphic illustration to kids from the surrounding Hunt's Point area. Artists from all over the world, some barely able to speak English, come through on the regular, looking for instructions from the Masters, to paint with the CRU or just take pictures. While reluctant to accept O.G. status, Bio, Nicer and B.G. 183 recognize graffiti may have saved their lives. As opposed to wildin' out with their boys, selling drugs and such, their art kept them busy, focused and away from the dumb shit too many youth fall victim to in the ghetto.

TATS CRU are Connected People.

So they're sittin' in a jail cell at the Housing Precinct when the phone calls start. Bio, Nicer and their German guest Nosm, still pissed off and confused after being illegally captured and detained, had already called up B.G. 183 and let him know the deal. He called and spoke to the desk sergeant, explaining they had explicit permission from the store owner whose wall they'd painted. B.G. was told that besides being locked up for graffiti/vandalism, the CRU would be hit with felony charges (due to the monetary amount of damages) and their company van that Bio drove was under investigation. If B.G. came down to the station to pick it up, though, maybe something could be done about reducing the charges...yeah right.

Meanwhile, supporters called and began to protest the CRU's incarceration. Pounding on the front desk, the owner of Jimmy's Bronx Cafe (world famous NYC nightclub for Latin Music) urged something be done to release them; a mistake had been made, these were stand up people from the community. Reporters called up continuously looking for information. Lisa Evers (ex-leader of Guardian Angels, ex-wife of Curtis Sliwa), host of Hot 97's radio program Street Soldiers, not content with the response she received to her questions, called up at the Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer. After hearing what she had to say, he called up the precinct as well. By 4am, the fuzz was nervous and had TATS transferred to Central Booking. The arresting officers began to go out their way to treat the CRU kindly, expressing their regret on the sly; they were just following orders, come from higher up, didn't even wanna do

this stupid shit, etc.. Relaying to Bio and Nicer the scene in the front of the station, the officers commented that they must have a lot of friends. As they entered the Central Booking lobby, they were met by Bio's brother, who'd been awaiting their arrival. He's a cop, also.

By 9am that morning, the owner of the building in question put in a call of her own to Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. She asked him to please relay to the D.A. that she wanted nothing to do with the arrest of TATS and refused to press charges. The vandal squad had, in fact, instigated the situation from the get go. First they tried to involve the owner of the video store in pressing charges against TATS. When he refused, they called up the owner of the building the store owner rented space from, telling her some kids were vandalizing her property doing graffiti, would she sign a complaint, never revealing who these kids were. Fortunately, the owner not only knew of Big Pun but about TATS and their work in the community. By 11am, B.G. knew the charges were squashed. He'd been on the phone all morning dealing with their lawyer and all the reporters looking for answers. Calls came in from ABC News and World Report, NY Times, Amsterdam News, and Associated Press among others. After being released that afternoon, the three members of TATS CRU sat down with their publicist and held a press conference to deal with their questions all at once. After all they'd been through, having been run through the shitstem and made to suffer for nothing, in the end, graffiti won. TATS CRU got that Mass Appeal.



RIP Big Pun memorial wall



Hand of Doom pt. 2



The Crew with Pun and Fat Joe