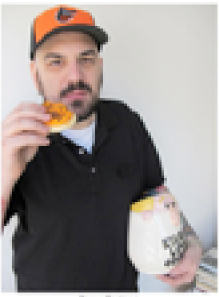
Roger Gastman on *The History of American Graffiti*

BY DAVID HERSHKOVITS



Roger Gastman

Roger Gastman is one of the unsung heroes of graffiti and has been its tireless evangelist since he was 14. Now 33, his endeavors have been rewarded with two recent major accomplishments: Along with **Aaron Rose**, he curated the **Art in the Streets** show at **MOCA Los Angeles**, and co-authored (with **Caleb Neelon**) *The History of American Graffiti*, out last month via Harper Design. I caught up with Gastman in his hometown of Los Angeles to talk about the state of graffiti then and now.

In New York we think that is where everything begins and ends, but you've made a real effort to survey graffiti throughout the rest of the country as well as the New York/L.A. nexus.

That's exactly what we wanted to do. I grew in the south of Maryland, DC, basically, traveling around painting, and Caleb my co-author grew up in Boston, doing the same. We knew there was so much more out there.

Is there a difference between what you found in the various cities and regions in terms of approach or aesthetics, or was it everyone somehow breathing the same fumes?

A little bit of everything to be honest. Some cities started way earlier than we ever thought. As the late '90s approached, it's much harder to tell the difference. If you just looked at a photo of each city from 1985, you would probably be able to tell by the style, but by 2002 it's going to be a guessing game.

Is that because it gradually got homogenized?

Absolutely, more magazines, more books, more press, and, of course, mainly the Internet. You know, graffiti is not a little subculture anymore, it's a real culture with many different cultures in it -- pop culture, fashion and music. Every little town has some sort of scene in it.

Graffiti was also a cultural movement, bringing people together, getting them to connect in meaningful ways.

That's so true. One thing we talk about is all the different types of people we met during the creation of this book. People who are criminals in jail, doctors, lawyers, a Pulitzer Prize winner, a trash man, somebody who works at a coffee shop, or still lives in their mom's basement. They all have graffiti all in common and they would have never been friends it wasn't for that.

You also note the multiracial/multicultural aspect of the graffiti world.

Growing up in south of Maryland/DC, I got into graffiti when I was about 14 through hardcore and punk rock music. I was going to hardcore shows, and everybody was straight edge, and everybody had a tag. You know, this was an early '90s, post Minor Threat and to my understanding everyone who ever wrote graffiti in the world was listening to hardcore music, was straight edge or had come out of that scene. But that was just my own little world. I would go to New Jersey with friends who were in bands on a weekend or to a hardcore show and meet people who wrote graffiti also.

I think when I was 15 years old, I ended up in Chicago visiting my aunt, and a writer in DC hooked me up with some older writers in Chicago, and I go there and they say "do you break?" And I was like, "what the hell are you talking about?" I had no idea they were talking about break dancing. I had no idea graffiti had to do with hip hop. They took me to all these loft parties, and they opened my eyes, and I think that really helped define that graffiti was a huge thing made up of so many cultures and so many people.

How long did it take to put this book together? Did you travel around the country and visit all the various cities?

I feel like in a way the book took since I was 14 years old, when I got into graffiti, to put together. But from when Caleb and I sat down and said "you know what, we need to do this book," to when we had the book in our hands, it was damn close to five years. It was five years of shooting up places, bringing our USB scanner in a park where we were afraid our laptop and scanner and everything would be stolen, and then somebody pulls out a drug store bag with old photos and there is weed residue and gum wrappers, a girlfriend's phone number from 1985. They have 12 photos in that bag, but those photos are golden.

What did you discover in the process that surprised you?

Who was creating the first arrows, who was doing the first crowns. Those things became so interesting to me because while it's very rudimentary-looking, it really is the foundation of where everything is.

What about girls? Do women play a larger role in graffiti than we formerly knew? Or was it all men.

That's something that comes up so often. It came up a lot with the MOCA show too, you know, there really weren't that many girls. In the early and mid '70s there were more girls in New York I think than probably any scene that there has been, but it was more just taggers hanging out with their boyfriends and things like that. There just aren't that many women that have come in the graffiti scene. There is a lot more post 2000, but the book doesn't really go that far.

What about fashion? Did you notice certain style trends in these communities?

In the '70s there was much more of a dress code, of a "look at me I'm a writer" attitude, that helped identify people, no matter what race or tax bracket they were from. I think it was very similar, especially again in the early '80s once the "Wild Style" and "Style Wars" films came out. As time goes on it's harder to spot a writer by their language, by their dress, by their swagger.

OK, fast forward, and here you have just finished working on the MOCA show. Would you say it is the end or the beginning of something new?

I think it's a new beginning. There are always going to be people who love the MOCA show, hate the MOCA show but in general we have 40-plus thousand square feet of the best of the best of graffiti, street art, skate culture, and just street culture, under one roof.

When does graffiti end and street art begin in your mind? Is it still possible to do graffiti or is everything street art now?

Well, graffiti and street art to me are two very different things, and they always will be. I think the lines are definitely blurring a bit by the popularity of street art the past dozen years, and you know names like Shepherd Fairey and Banksy who play in the same field with some of the same tools, but they're just different animals. But the popularity of street art is good for graffiti because it just draws notice to it. Street art is more digestible to the general public than graffiti is, so if we can get them in there with some street art, and teach them about graffiti, it's just another way in.

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