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CRAVE Books | Henry Chalfant & Sacha
Jenkins: Training Days

By Miss Rosen

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Graffiti is like a virus of the best kind. It resides deep in the heart and it makes its presence known in ways large and small. It travels from writer to writer around the world, bringing different handstyles, letterforms, color combinations, and placements to life. It is here today, gone tomorrow, one of the most ephemeral of all the arts.

Were it not for the photograph, some of the greatest masterpieces of graffiti would be unknown, and so it is with great fortune that Henry Chalfant began taking pictures of New York City trains between the years of 1977-1984. In total he amassed of 800 photographs of full trains from some of the greatest writers working during those years. "I have always been attracted to youthful rebellion and mischief," Chalfant observes with a gentle laugh.

In order to photograph a full car when it arrived in the station, Chalfant stood on the platform on the opposite side, so that he could have enough distance to get 15-foot sections of the train inside his viewfinder. Using a 50mm lens, Chalfant took four or five

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photographs of each car, and then spliced them together using a razor and adhesive tape. As a sculptor, Chalfant's hand was flawless, as he was able to translate the scale of each train to the photographic image. But the skill needed to get these shots? That was like stalking big game.

Chalfant rose with sun and was at the platforms by 7:30am. He would shoot to catch the morning sun, which made the colors of the paint pop against the bright blue sky. He couldn't always know where a whole car would be before the train arrived in the station, and sometimes he'd have to move fast to align himself to get the shot. He remembers, "I would run up and down the platform and people would look at me like, 'Who is that fool?' [Laughs]."



Capturing the trains in full was an on-going challenge. Chalfant observes, "I was lucky to get it at all. Sometimes you would see it go by before you got there, and I had to wait for it to go all the way to Brooklyn, then back up to the Bronx, and then it would be on the wrong side, so I would have to wait for it to come back down again—and then there was the concern about missing the morning light. And sometimes the train would go out of service in Brooklyn, and it wouldn't even come back at all."

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For the first few years, Chalfant did not meet any writers. “I wondered why I didn’t see anyone painting,” Chalfant observes with a laugh, reflecting on his naïveté at not knowing that writers painted in the yards when trains went out of service. “I later learned that although I didn’t see them, they had seen me but they didn’t want to approach a middle-aged white man taking photographs. They thought I was a cop. I looked the part.”



Eventually, Chalfant started speaking with a writer who was taking photographs at the same time, and Chalfant was directed to the Writer’s Bench at 149 Street and the Grand Concourse. Chalfant made the connection, and began inviting writers down to his Soho studio. He remembers, “It became the Museum of Graffiti for awhile.”

It was at his studio that Chalfant first met Jenkins through Carl Weston of Videograff. Chalfant and Weston were working on videos together, and Jenkins had begun working on Beatdown magazine at Chalfant’s studio. The two have come full circle with Training Days, bringing the stories of New York’s graffiti hey days to life. In Training Days: The Subway Artists Then and Now (Thames & Hudson), Chalfant partnered with co-author Sacha Jenkins to present the inside stories of writers including Daze, Jon One, Kel, KR, Lady Pink, Sharp, Skeme, and Team.

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Like Vasari's Lives of the Artists, Jenkins' stories take us deep inside the writers' worlds, giving us extraordinary insights into the legends that created the masterpieces Chalfant photographed. As Jenkins observes, "I wanted to hear from a broad range of perspectives. People from a diverse range of neighborhoods and backgrounds. Different levels of skill, too. The funny thing is, after you read all of the interviews, you see how interconnected these kids were. This was long before social media. The Broadway line was like Facebook back then. It was how they all checked in."

Indeed, it was the trains, the black books, and the photographs that made graffiti a phenomenon, capturing the most elusive, ephemeral, and dangerous of all the arts of the time. Throughout the 1970s, graffiti was an underground phenomenon, with minimal media and art world attention. All that changed in 1984, when Chalfant partnered with Martha Cooper to publish *Subway Art* (Thames & Hudson). The book was a phenomenon, as the works of New York City writers captured the imagination of teenage boys and girls around the world, inspiring an explosion of local cultures that Chalfant likened to an "epidemic."



Jenkins recalls, "Henry's book *Subway Art* has inspired so many people and I am one of those people. I used to stare at the pages for hours on end when I was a kid. If you would have told me back then that I would go on to know Henry, I wouldn't have believed you. That book was spiritual for so many of us. When I was a teen, I would up meeting Henry and becoming a production assistant on a documentary he produced called *Flyin' Cut*

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Sleeves--which is about gangs in the South Bronx. These folks were proto-hip hop. They represented the foundation. It's funny how things have come full circle, as I interviewed Lorine Padilla--a crucial figure from Flyin' Cut Sleeves--for my film Fresh Dressed. But I digress."

Jenkins continues, "Subway Art is forever a classic. There is no way to improve on that book. I just wanted to create something that would compliment Subway Art. Hearing the stories from the writers themselves was just a cherry on top of the ice cream sundae that is Subway Art. I wanted people who weren't there to understand what the train yards smelled like and I wanted people who weren't there to understand that this mega art movement was created by kids who didn't give a shit about making it in galleries. Sure, they wanted to make it on Broadway, but their Broadway was the Number 1 subway line."