CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Charlie Ahearn Q&A Pt. 1, Pt. 2**
Author(s)	Sam Chennault
Source	*Play: The Rhapsody Editorial Music Blog*
Date	2007 Nov 13
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	Ahearn, Charlie
Film Subjects	Wild style, Ahearn, Charlie, 1983

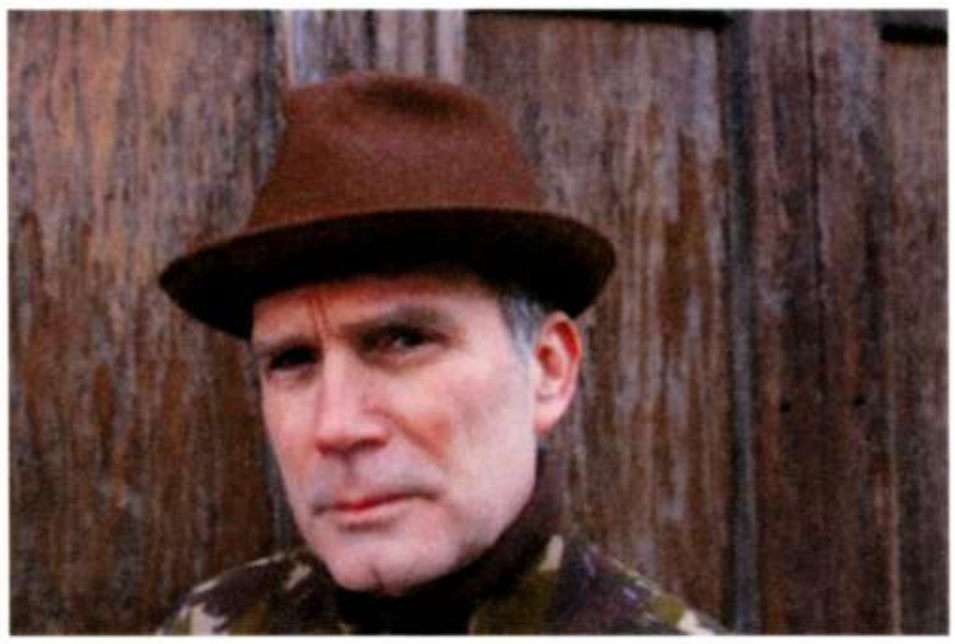
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Play | The Rhapsody Editorial Music Blog

13 November 2007

Exclusive: Charlie Ahearn Q&A Pt.1

by Sam Chennault



Along with Henry Chalfant's documentary Style Wars, Charlie Ahearn's 1982 film Wild Style is the quintessential document of hip-hop's formative years. Ironically, the film picks up just as the culture's first phase was coming to an end. By '82, New York authorities were beginning to curtail the art of subway graffiti, breakdancing was going out of fashion, and the legendary two-hour park jams were in the process of being paired down to the three-minute pop songs we now recognize as rap music. But Ahearn captures the culture in its original glory -- from the subway cars traveling across five boroughs, announcing new illegal masterpieces by the city's talented and anonymous artists, to the stoop raps of the Cold Crush Brothers and Double Trouble. His film is both a reflection of what he hoped hip-hop could accomplish, and what we now imagine it was like back in the day. If you have even a passing interest in hip-hop's roots, this film is indispensable.

In the first part of this exclusive interview, Charlie Ahearn discusses the seeds of the film, debunks a couple of myths and draws out the movie's unseen inspiration. Look for Part II, where we discuss the cultural impact of the film, later this week.

Rhapsody: Hi, Charlie.
Charlie Ahearn: Where are you calling from, Sam?

I'm calling from San Francisco.
I love San Francisco. I did a show at Punch Gallery when I came out there a few years ago. I had a book called Yes Yes Y'all. There were a very cool group of people and DJ Shadow came out. It was a great party.

That's awesome. I used to work for a place called Future Primitive Sound. We used to do stuff with graffiti artists, and our focus occasionally overlapped with Punch's. We did Doze Green's show.
That's one of the people I worship.

He was in Wild Style, wasn't he?
Well, he certainly is on the cover. [Laughs.] And he certainly went to Japan with us. His relationship to the Rock Steady Crew has always been a bit of a mystery because I was friends with him and he was down with Rock Steady, but I don't know – yeah, I guess he is in Wild Style, sure.

We also did a show for the photographs of Style Wars director Henry Chalfant's photographs. What's your relationship with him?
We're like brothers. I met Henry in September of 1980 when he did a show in Soho of his photographs. In many ways, that was a turning point in the whole graffiti movement, because a lot of graffiti artists were on the down low [before then]. They had to keep their identities very secret. They weren't sure who would turn them in. At that opening, people came out because this was the first time graffiti photographs had been shown like that and all these writers met each other for the first time at that show. I met Lady Pink there. I had been working on Wild Style since June, so we were pretty deep into it already by that time. But obviously, I hadn't formulated the whole movie yet. I hadn't even met Pink yet, and I hadn't met the Rock Steady Crew until much later. But the basic idea of the movie was very much in play by then. I was working on patterning character actions; I was working with Fred Braithwaite [a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy], going to clubs every weekend, and I knew all the main cast of the emcees was pretty much in place by that time.

How old were you at this point, if you don't mind me asking.
I was 29. I was an old man compared to these teenagers that I was hanging out with, so when I would go into a club in the Bronx, people would look at me like "What the hell is this guy doing?" and not because I dressed differently. I was the only white guy at these places. But I generally always had

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

individuals that I was going there to meet and I always felt connected to things. A short while after, I started taking pictures; I'd bring slide projectors and put up sheets behind the DJ booth and show slides to create more of a feeling that I can be part of this.

You said the seeds for Wild Style were planted in June of 1980.

There's no doubt about it. There was a specific moment when I had done this kung fu movie called The Deadly Art of Survival, which was shot in a neighborhood where Lee Quinones lived, and he had painted all these incredible murals. I had known about Lee Quinones, but he was always kind of a mystery character to me, although I was always impressed by his art. So I was part of this big free-for-all art show in Times Square called the Times Square Show in June of 1980, and this tall very dark-skinned guy with dark sunglasses approached me and introduced himself as Fred and said he worked with Lee Quinones and heard about me from Lee and my kung fu movie. He had this idea that he wanted to talk to me about making a movie with rap music and graffiti. I said, "If you can bring Lee Quinones here tomorrow morning, I'll give you some money to buy some spray paint and you can do a mural on the side of this building." I was really attracted to the idea of making a film that would use Lee's experiences as a graffiti writer as a makeshift story by which to formulate a movie. And that was the beginning of Wild Style.

So you initially wanted to approach this in a guerilla style of filmmaking?

In retrospect, I can see I had really clear ideas in my approach. But at that time, I was veering back and forth between wanting to document this culture and not wanting to make a documentary. I wanted to make a popular film, something that could be played to teenagers in a movie theater. To me, at the time, documentaries where something on PBS and television, the way Style Wars played.

Now, I love Style Wars and I love documentaries, but that wasn't the kind of movie I wanted to make. The Deadly Art of Survival used the same format [I wanted to use for Wild Style], where you cast real people in a roughly fictionalized story that somewhat reflects the [lives of] people acting in the film. That pattern was sort of set by the Warhol movies. A lot of times, they would create these fictional stories, but they would use real people. And it was okay, because they think that people are interesting in their own right. I knew all along that I wasn't trying to make a movie the way movies usually seen in a movie theater [are made]. It's closer to a documentary in style and attitude.

My idea was to create scenes that would give the performance as much screen time as possible. So that in a normal movie, characters might go to a club, but as soon as they enter a club, the music would be turned down so you can hear the dialogue. In my movie, they go to the club to see the performers. The narrative was always secondary, and it was always a vehicle to create a platform for all this talent.

I was a big fan of Harder They Come, a movie starring Jimmy Cliff about the birth of reggae. But it was also a fictional story about this guy who was running marijuana and being sought by the police. In a way, Lee Quinones was being sought by the police. In a much lighter way, we were making a kind of similar story.

There are cultural links for this as well; hip-hop came out of Jamaica.

The very first experiences I had with hip-hop was going to this outdoor jam in the Bronx. And Fab and I approached this together. He, by the way, was really seeing hip-hop in the Bronx for the first time as well. A lot of people say he acted as my guide and he introduced me to hip-hop in the Bronx – it's not true. It's just stories made up of whom they perceive him and me to be.

Fred was a very interesting person involved in the downtown world. He was very good friends of Blondie; he went to the clubs downtown, so it's sort of a cliché to say that he would introduce me to the Bronx. I had been going to the Bronx for a year before that. On the other hand, what I was trying to say in the story was that when we entered the park, to the right I heard this dub music playing. It was this Jamaican dub music, and way over to the left I heard James Brown music coming out of another sound system. And these two parties were not really aware of each other, and it really was the way it was. It's not a story that people even tell or think about; but those two groups existed simultaneously, and there's no doubt that hip-hop came out of that. Herc coming out of Jamaica and bringing some of that idea of using sound systems to create music.

You mentioned Fred or, as most of us know him, Fab 5 Freddy. I was recently watching the movie Downtown 81 that he was in.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

It's a nice film. The making of that film has a lot to do with the making of Wild Style. When they were originally thinking of putting that film together, and they were talking to Fred about playing a role in that film, I think the fact that they were talking about that film might have helped plant the idea in Fred's mind for Fred to come over to me and say, "What about making this movie with graffiti and rap music?"

Go to part 2 of the interview with Charlie Ahearn.

Posted by SamChennault on 13 November 2007 | Permalink

TrackBack

TrackBack URL for this entry:
http://www.typepad.com/t/trackback/627246/23318112
Listed below are links to weblogs that reference Exclusive: Charlie Ahearn Q&A Pt.1:

Comments

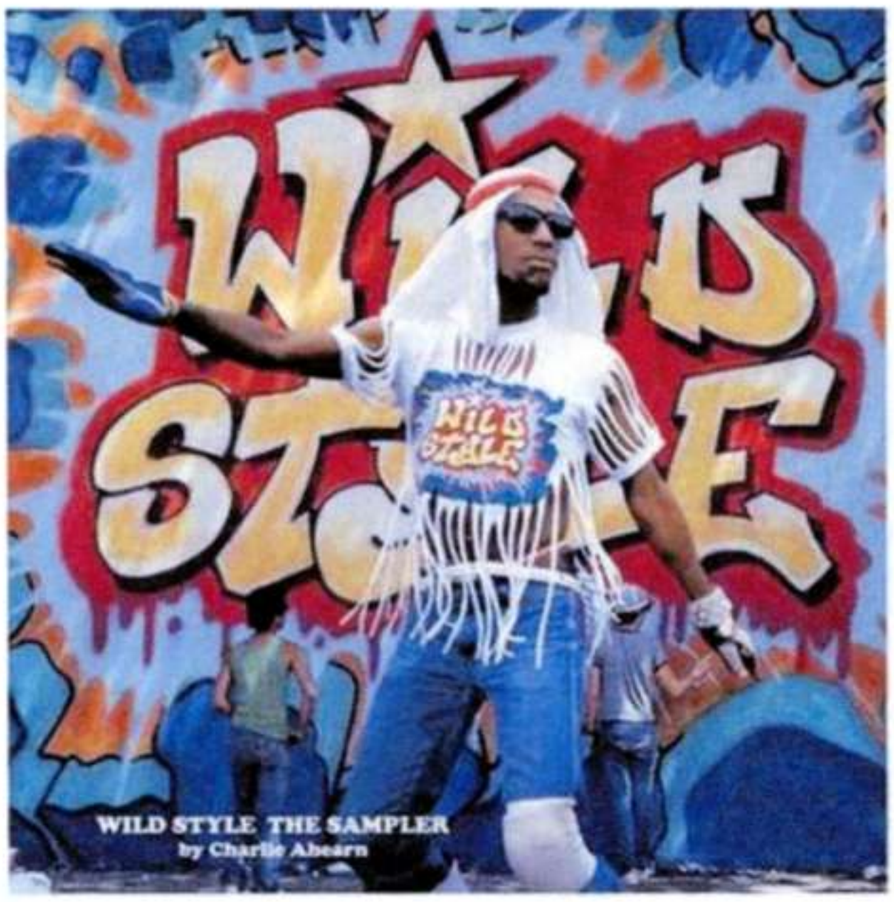
WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Play | The Rhapsody Editorial Music Blog

15 November 2007

Exclusive: Charlie Ahearn Q&A Pt. 2

by Sam Chennault



In the first part of Rhapsody's exclusive interview with Wild Style director Charlie Ahearn, we discussed how the film came to pass. Here, Mr. Ahearn talks about the movie's impact and how it has been interpreted – and occasionally misrepresented – by a generation of hip-hop fanatics across the globe.

Rhapsody: People mythologize the '60s, but if you look at all that was going on in New York during the late '70s and early '80s, it seems as if almost as much was happening – if not more. Were you aware of this when you were in the middle of it?

Charlie Ahearn: No doubt. There was a playful sense of the enormity of this undertaking, to take a picture of this emerging culture. Once Fred [Fab 5 Freddy] and I were working on it, we used to giggle all the time, because of what we were undertaking. It was so obviously really huge and important. We were looking to try to create an overview, a movie that would really be archetypal to that culture: both musically and in a way that the graffiti captured. Everything about it was made to represent a kind of hip-hop that reflected the '70s as opposed to hip-hop during that time. [During that period], Bambaataa was starting to use drum machines (on "Planet Rock"). We didn't get involved with that; we tried to stay with a more classic sound. The amphitheater scene at the end of the film was something I first experienced in the Bronx, but the way that it's pictured in Wild Style really creates an image of unity, of all these various forms coming together, which you didn't really experience in real life. But it's something we wanted to project, like trying to project the perfect band or perfect mural, or perfect image of hip-hop as a futuristic statement.

That's kind of utopian...

When you bring together a group of artists you want to use, you want to harness that creativity to project something new that hasn't been seen before. And in retrospect, the film represents old-school hip-hop – or a document of old-school hip-hop. At the time, I think all the artists involved were struggling to create something new for the film. Look at the basketball scene. When I explained it to them, the emcees understood what it meant and understood how important it was to make that scene really work. That was a life-and-death thing to them, to make sure they came off with their rivals; it was taken very seriously. Now it's sort of looked at as if "what was it like to go into a community with video cameras and document this great thing." We never went into communities with cameras. This was collaboration with all these artists.

Did you ever worry that your film makes people look back at that time through rose-colored glasses?

Yeah, it worried me a lot when people don't look at it creatively and they study the details to copy it. Or use it as a thing to criticize something. But on a positive tip, I [point to] my experiences going around the world and meeting people from different areas, like Brazil and Africa. I speak to these people on how, after 25-30 years, hip-hop has found places in the globe that really needed its representation. How it was needed in the Bronx in 1970, it's needed in places like Africa where there's groups of people who really don't have a way to be heard. Hip-hop has given them a platform and a voice [in a way that's] really crucial, so I'm proud of that.

Interesting you say that. In a recent interview with Chuck D, he was asked why hip-hop is the way it is? He said that – and I'm paraphrasing wildly – around the world hip-hop is alive, but hip-hop has almost left America.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

I agree with that. One could make blanket statements like, "Well, hip-hop could never happen in New York right now, because of the change in society. It required this sort of severe condition of neglect and abuse that people lived under in the '70s in New York, for that culture to evolve the way it did." But those conditions are very much present around the globe, and people are taking the form of hip-hop – whether you're talking about graffiti or other aspects of it – and using it to be seen and heard. I think that's one of the most basic functions of hip-hop.

At the time you were dramatizing the expectations you had for hip-hop. How has the culture surpassed these expectations in America, and how has it disappointed in some way?

That's a huge question. I'm not like a school mom with a little stick that points at people and shakes their finger at them and says, "That's not a good thing" or "This is good or bad". It's used in so many ways by so many different people. It's so much a part of the public vernacular, whether you're talking about car advertising or are you are talking about dumb television shows on VH1, or doing a tribute to Wild Style, as happened recently.

Equally big, but more specific to you: How do you think Wild Style changed hip-hop culture?

I'd say for the most part, by even appearing on the scene and meeting the emcees, I was a magnet for all their fantasies and hopes and what they might get out of hip-hop. I was seen as someone who could help make them more famous, or give them a platform for their rhymes. People know who Double Trouble are, even though there were many, many other groups that were out there at the time that nobody else knows right now. Is that clear or honest?

I think what you're asking me is, "In what ways did the film help transform the culture." There's no doubt that by focusing on graffiti like we did right at that moment, we brought it to the public in ways that might not have happened. [Same] is true of the emcees. We took 35 people from the Bronx to Tokyo in 1983, and in weeks, changed what was thought of as popular teen culture in Japan, by merely arriving there. It also changed the people in the Bronx that came to Japan. A lot of these people had barely left New York City before. They were looked at as people on a world stage. It's a really complicated thing – it's not always positive. What do you follow that up with? What are you promising people? I couldn't promise people a career for the rest of their lives – a movie couldn't do that. It certainly gave people a shot.

I think it helped transform a lot of those people from what they were. It transformed all of us, including myself and Fab 5 Freddy. Fred became representative on MTV and became famous in that way. There's no doubt he did that because of his role on Wild Style.

Do you think the film transformed peoples' attitudes toward the South Bronx and the people living in the South Bronx?

That's a great question because at the time we were making Wild Style, the whole world had seen this movie called Fort Apache: The Bronx. A lot of people had not really thought much about the Bronx outside of Yankee Stadium, and [in Fort Apache] they were getting this picture of people in the Bronx, and it was this negative picture which was very vile and hopeless. You could even say racist. When we set out to make the film, I think we shocked people, because when they heard I was making a film about the youth culture coming out of the Bronx, they would be like, "WHAT?!" They were incredulous at the idea that anything positive was coming out of this place, [as well as] the idea that it's not only coming out of this place, it's emanating from teenagers who were previously thought to be out of their element. I didn't have to emphasize the element of poverty and crime in the Bronx. That was a given before people saw the film. I let the backdrop of the Bronx be in every shot. There's the stick-up scene, which is really there to remind people that it was a dangerous place to be, but that most of the people in the film are not involved in that. That's not the focus. It really was true that everyone I met there was super-positive and super-focused on whatever they were working on at the time creatively. It sounds a little corny, but that was the message.

When the film actually premiered in 1982 in the Bronx, did you get a sense of the community's reaction to it?

We fliered the high schools. We patterned ourselves after the street promoters in the Bronx. We used a lot of the same techniques. We created these small sized fliers and paid kids 25 bucks a piece to stand in front of their school and give out fliers to the kids on Fridays when they came out from school. And Wild Style was the second highest grossing movie for weeks in New York City, and that was accomplished really because of this flier thing. It's a reflection of the enormous wave of curiosity among teenagers in the boroughs – especially in the Bronx. Kids would go because they heard about this movie starring people that they heard of. They were amazed that anyone would make a movie with these people. I don't know if it was definitely the first independently made film that really appealed to teenagers. Certainly the first art movie that teenagers went to see in droves. I went to see the film a couple times [in the Bronx] incognito, just to check out the audience; it was definitely a high-school scene. It was a huge party in the theater; people were selling loose joints in the back row. People would stay there all night. It was definitely a party.

Was there ever any backlash to the fact that this film was glorifying graffiti?

Yes. Not in New York, [but] when we went to Philadelphia. People don't realize that graffiti originated in Philadelphia in the '60s. Unlike New York, Philadelphia was always a brother town as far as graffiti went. Graffiti was huge in Philadelphia and there was a mayor there – [W. Wilson] Goode, I believe his name was – who tried to stop the film when it was showing there. It played there for months and months because it was very popular. Next to New York, it was the biggest gross that we had in the country.

I've seen the movie a half-dozen times. But what can we expect in terms of new material on the 25th Anniversary Edition?

Well, the edition has shorts that I've only made recently, including a film called Bongo Barbershop with Grandmaster Caz and an emcee from Tanzania, Balozi Dola, who's rapping in Swahili. It projects what I see as contemporary hip-hop. That's part of my answer when people say, "Why don't you make Wild Style 2"? I say I'm making it one day at a time.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)