

GRAFFITI CULTURE AND HIP HOP – WORKING FROM WITHIN

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Introduction

Personal Profile

Mick Jones has worked with young people for over 8 years with a focus on working with young people at risk. He has been a Youth Development Worker with Wollongong City Council since 2000 and has coordinated Youth Services Aerosol Art Program since May 2002. Mick is responsible for monitoring the "legal wall" at the Youth Centre as well as liaising with businesses and organisations that require artists for paid work. Mick has acquired an extensive knowledge of local graffiti culture and worked closely with a range of young artists. This includes highly experienced artists proficient in their artwork and successful in gaining commissioned works, and also those young people starting out to learn the skills and protocol of graffiti art.

Service

Wollongong Youth Services is a service of Wollongong City Council. We are a generalist Youth Service providing information, advice and referral on a needs basis as well as offering a range of programs and activities to young people aged 12 to 24 years in the Wollongong LGA.

Approach to Working with Communities

My approach to working with Graf artists is the same as my approach when working with any other cultural group. Put simply it is a relationship built upon respect and trust. It is a non-judgemental approach underlined by the philosophy of meeting people where they're at. I see my role as a youth worker not to judge, lecture, punish nor persuade but to provide information, knowledge and opportunities. This in turn provides choices for young people to express themselves in their chosen form and in a legal setting, whilst enabling them to engage with the wider community on a level chosen by them. Essentially it is about choice and learning that good choices can lead to positive outcomes for the individual and community.

Why Work with Graf Artists?

To be able to meet Graf writers where they are at it is important to place Graf in its context. This context is firmly with Hip Hop Culture. Hip Hop is more than a genre of music. It is a street culture with elements that promote self expression and participation. Hip Hop is described from within as the 'Culture of Kings'. Let me explain. Hip Hop culture is essentially a battle culture and is made up of four elements. In each of the elements the goal is to be the best i.e. acknowledged by your peers the King. There can be one or many Kings reigning at any one time in any locality. Whilst the term King would imply that only young men are involved in Hip Hop Culture this is not true. Though predominantly a culture that attracts young men there are young women active in much smaller numbers in all elements.

The four elements of Hip Hop are:

- Emceeing ie rhyming on a mic
- Turntablism ie Djing
- Breakdancing
- Graf Art

Hip Hop - The Battle Culture

I will explain further what I mean by a battle culture, as this can often be misconstrued. The essence of the 'battle' is centred on the individuals chosen element not on physical prowess. Whilst the normal tensions that can often surface between young people sometimes also surface in the Hip Hop community it is more likely that conflict will centre and be resolved in the chosen element. This is most obvious when looking at the element of Break dancing.

In Break dancing loyalty lies with your crew and glory in the battle with other crews. Individuals and Crews will gather to battle, in the form of dance. This is accompanied by much sledging and gesturing in which Crews and individuals will strive to prove positive that they are the best. At the end of the day it is the crowd or the dancers themselves who decide who was indeed the best and deserving of the title of Kings. At the conclusion of the battles there is rarely any animosity and crews will shake hands and often embrace as an expression of this. Much like true sportsmanship the aggression is left on the field. In Hip Hop the sorting out of hierarchy lies with the element.

Hip Hop Culture is unique in that is one of the few times in the western experience of culture that young men come together to make music, create poetry, dance and paint. This form of expression based culture provides for young people and in particular young men a healthy, safe and non violent outlet to express their thoughts and emotions. Given that the world inhabited by young men can often be a particularly risky one where violence is concerned, Hip Hop can be a big positive.

Relationship of Artists with Wollongong Youth Services - the Legacy of Frank Mincone

Wollongong Youth Services has a unique relationship with the Graf and Hip Hop Communities in Wollongong. This can largely be contributed to the establishment of a large legal aerosol wall at the Youth Centre more than 10 years ago and the many programs and projects run through the centre. Instrumental in this was a long serving employee Frank Mincone. Frank a.k.a. Slap 618 was a well respected Graf writer and Hip Hop DJ. He is a member of local Hip Hop outfits Myspherical and the Argonauts. Frank was employed as the Youth Services Arts and Entertainment worker at the centre until his departure to Melbourne in early 2002 to spend more time developing his music. Having Frank employed at the centre provided what I would term a 'gateway' worker. The respect and trust that writers had in Frank as 'one of their own' transferred to Youth Services. This sense of trust and respect between our service and the largely underground and secretive community of Wollongong writers to this day remains very high.

Graffiti Movements – Fellowship, Fame, Art and Crime

I have found that there are many motivations for young people in Wollongong to involve themselves in graffiti. These can be broken into the broad groups of Fellowship, Fame, Art and Crime. There is a cross over between groups and also a certain degree of progression as well. For instance, a young person who first becomes involved in Graf because it is a risk taking behaviour, i.e., crime may then realise that it is a way of gaining a sense of recognition (fame) and therefore belonging (fellowship) and finally after they mature come to view their activities as a legitimate art form and make genuine attempts to elevate their activities and skills into more mainstream pursuits.

Fellowship and Fame

In my conversations with young people involved in Graf, the primary motivational factor described is fellowship and fame. To gain the recognition and respect of ones peers is a huge thing for adolescents and indeed adults of all cultural backgrounds. Through Graf and Hip Hop Culture young people and young men in particular form a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie that is not matched in many other spheres of their lives. This camaraderie and fellowship seems to be strengthened by the secret and underground nature of the Graf community.

By 'being in the know' and being known in a small but active community young people gain a strong sense of acceptance and kudos from their peers. The fact that there is little knowledge or deep understanding of the culture outside of the circle of active writers heightens the feeling of being a part of a select group. The power of their tag allows these individuals to take on an alter ego who is able to gain recognition and experience feelings of place that is often denied to many young people.

In the Graf community this is achieved by getting up and being seen. Tagging is essentially about this. By getting tags up in many locations an individual is communicating to his peers that he is active and courageous. Individuals gain a certain degree of satisfaction of seeing their own tags up as well and get easily annoyed if another writer goes over their tag or crosses them out. This is the main source of conflict among graffiti writers and the ultimate way of showing contempt or disrespect towards another writer or crew. Tagging is therefore essentially a means of communication between writers, a way of gaining respect and street fame. An individual's respect and fame increases if they are also getting throwups – rough outlined fat stylized letters done quickly often roughly or not filled and coloured pieces seen as well. This is more difficult technically and high risk than simple tags, as these are take much longer to complete.

Art

There are many writers whose primary motivation is the art of graffiti. They pride themselves of elevating the art and taking it new levels and in new directions. They focus a great deal of time and energy into improving their skills and mediums. They are more likely to be involved in other creative expressions and less likely to spend time tagging and more time piecing in legal locations and illegally in areas where they are less likely to be detected. This is so they are able to spend greater amounts of time experimenting with refining technique. Locations such as large drains and more remote structures are often frequented by this group of artists.

Crime

There is undoubtedly a group within Graffiti Culture that is attracted to the illegal element of the activity. These writers are the most likely to be in conflict with other writers and are often involved in other high risk and criminal behaviours. These writers are big on tagging and often show little respect for any of the accepted protocols that exists among the majority of writers.

Location and Its Relationship to Fame

Location of tags, throwups and pieces can also enhance fame. Some sights are more highly prized than others. The rule of thumb is basically the more high profile the site the better. Historically sites located along the railway lines and other high traffic areas will be more highly prized. Pieces on trains or 'panels' as they are referred to within the culture are the most highly valued among many writers. This value has historical links to the beginnings of Graf in New York City in the early 70's. The more high profile the site particularly trains themselves, the higher the risk in terms of safety and likelihood of being detected in a criminal activity. For a great historical perspective on graffiti and its beginnings refer to Subway Art*.

*Chalfant, Henry and Cooper, Martha. "**Subway Art.**" New York, New York: Henry Holt & Co, publisher. ISBN 0-8050-0678-8 1984, 1995.

Profiles of Wollongong Artists

There are as many as 60 active writers in the Wollongong LGA. There would be as many or more 'part timers'. I have found in Wollongong and its surrounds that the young people 'actively' involved in Graffiti are largely in full time employment or study. Many of the older writers are university educated and involved in other artistic expressions and commercial applications. Sign Writing and Printing are popular avenues of employment as are graphic design and other computer based design applications.

It is this that I find is of particular interest to me as a worker. This reapplication of the skills learnt as a Graf writer into gainful employment and vocations means for me, that it is of great value to work with these individuals and assist in anyway possible to ensure legal avenues of their chosen expression are available to them. This is particularly important given the top end leakage with the culture. That is, that as the majority of writers mature they move out of the Graf scene into other either other elements of Hip Hop, creative expressions or interests.

Projects Summary

Wollongong City Council through its Youth and Cultural Service teams facilitates a number of successful Aerosol Art projects each year.

These projects serve to establish working links between the writers and local authorities. These links provide the opportunity for workers to raise the writers' awareness of the possibilities available to them for further artistic and educational development.

The programs run at the centre since the mid nineties have generally aimed to provide legal opportunities to writers, for the developing of working relationships and assist writers to develop an understanding of other legal and possibly profitable means of expression. They also seek to encourage writers into other mediums of expression whilst remaining faithful to their aerosol graffiti roots. Essentially the relationship enables us to speak to offenders directly and intervene early to effect positive change to new arrivals in the culture. I hope that this approach will assist to effect a 'generational' change in perceptions, behaviours and attitudes of writers.

Projects

Projects facilitated through Youth Services can be broken into a number of areas. These areas are:

1. Wholly Funded
2. Partnership Projects
3. Legal/Permission Walls
4. Commercial Opportunities

Wholly Funded Projects

These programs are provided on a needs basis and give young people links to legal opportunities for artistic and cultural expression. In many cases young artists have been employed to facilitate these workshops.

Major wholly funded programs have included partnerships with Wollongong City Art gallery and Council's Cultural Development team to undertake painting a series of panels on the exterior of the Art Gallery building. The program involved the commissioning of artists and a public launch of the project. From this an artist was also invited to provide work to the Australian National Gallery.

For the past two years during Viva La Gong; Wollongong's annual Community and Cultural Arts Festival, aerosol art murals have been facilitated through Councils Cultural and Youth Services. These murals are painted in highly visible and frequented public spaces and provide a positive demonstration of aerosol art. It also demonstrates that a high quality and publicly acceptable level of work can be achieved when opportunity is provided.

A mural project was also facilitated to paint two entire buildings at the Lakeland's Reserve in Dapto - the home of Dapto Junior Soccer Club. Thirteen artists donated their time and talent to paint two 360 degree murals on both the club house and canteen buildings on the site. The mural was largely in club colours and prominently featuring the club name and logo. This highly successful project improved the facility which was heavily graffitied and displayed to the many locals and club members who came along to watch, the talent and commitment of the artists involved. It also permitted a huge cross section of active writers to participate in a single project and allowed many to get their first legal graffiti experience. The outcome of this project is that many of the participating artists, now with the insight of the possibilities when painting legally, are actively seeking legal aerosol work.

The Hip Hop BBQ which forms a part of each of our School Holiday Programs also provides as part of these 'mini-fests' an aerosol element. Mostly this takes the form of repainting the aerosol mural on the forecourt of the Youth Centre. Most recently we ran stencilling workshops and created a mural to specifically provide a legal space for stencilling, which has been gaining prominence in Wollongong of late.

All of these projects provide opportunities for young people to be involved in creative cultural pursuits through their chosen art form. Through these projects it has been demonstrated that young people want to participate in the promotion of Graffiti as an art form and are more than willing to take up opportunities to paint in legal areas.

Through Viva La Gong and the Lakeland's projects a cross-organisational approach to the problem of illegal graffiti is demonstrated in the willingness of Councils 'Parks and Recreation' to redirect funding from removal and repainting of areas into mural creation. This not only provides for greater legal opportunities for artists but saves Council money, as this is more often a more effective long term solution to further vandalism than simple removal or painting over.

Partnership Projects

Beat Graffiti – 2001 An Aerosol Odyssey

Wollongong City Council has also undertaken a number of partnership programs over the past 10 years. I will make mention of the two most recent.

In 2001 Wollongong City Council was successful in its application to the NSW Governments, Beat Graffiti Grants Scheme receiving funding to run the highly successful '2001 An Aerosol Odyssey' project. This project achieved a number of positive and notable outcomes. Young 'beginner level' Graffiti artists were channelled into the positive and rewarding painting of legal murals through a series of workshops run by established and well respected 'old school' aerosol artists. Artists were involved in a live exhibition at the Viva La Gong: festival of arts and culture.

Aerosol Art was created for an 'off the wall' exhibition in the Project Art Space, Wollongong Music Library and Council Building Foyer. In this part of the project the artists were challenged to take their art 'off the wall' and onto canvass and other surfaces suitable for exhibition. For this part of the project was facilitated by a 'non aerosol' artist with links and experiences in working within more traditional art spaces. Having this facilitator assisted participants to gain experience in the creation and promotion of art in more traditional art spaces.

A large legal mural was painted over a heavily graffitied community facility which has led to a reduction of illegal graffiti incidents on the facility. This site has only been damaged on one occasion in the 2 years since it was painted. This damaged was quickly repaired by the original artists and since then has remained free of attack. A postcard and website was also created to increase public awareness and create opportunities for legal work outside of the funded project. Three of the artists involved in this project were subsequently commissioned to do legal work by private business and community members immediately following this project. Wollongong and Shellharbour/Kiama Council's now employ on casual basis two of the artists who were involved in this project.

Graffiti Solutions Graffiti Traineeship Program

Traineeship

The Graffiti Traineeship Grant Scheme was designed to support councils in the delivery of anti-graffiti youth workshops or other projects that divert young people from involvement in illegal graffiti by providing artistic and training opportunities in local communities. The Traineeship Scheme provided customised training to local graffiti artists in the form of a five and a half day youth work and community art course to be delivered by NSW TAFE Plus. In addition to this a grant of \$2600 was then provided to Council to allow the artist to engage a Trainee to coordinate an anti graffiti Youth Program.

The Wollongong Youth Services aim for the Trainee was for them to act as mentor to a number of identified active young graffiti writers, and coordinate two mural projects. Two new sites for mural projects that had been regularly targeted by graffiti writers were secured. Both these sites (walls) were located on privately owned commercial properties in high profile areas. The support received from these local businesses and the many positive comments from passing public on the paint days was a great boost for Trainee and the artists.

Crown Lane Mural Project

The Crown Lane Mural was painted on the north facing wall of the premises on the corner of Crown Lane and Keira Streets in the heart of the Wollongong CBD. Wollongong Youth Services was approached by the owner of City Central Laundry after the premises had been vandalised with tags. The wall is 15.5 metres in length and varies in height east to west from 3 to 1.5metres. Following initial discussions with the business owner a meeting was arranged to meet with the building owner who after hearing of the projects aims and objectives gave the project the go ahead.

Artists that had previously been identified by Wollongong Youth Services through their patronage of our legal wall were offered the opportunity to take part in the project. Six artists took up the opportunity - half of which had never previously been involved in structured legal projects.

The Trainee conducted two workshops with the artists prior to the painting of the mural. In the first of these workshops the Trainee discussed the course objectives and promotion of graffiti in the community through legal mural productions and the discouraging of anti social behaviour.

He provided participating artists with information on the laws and penalties relating to graffiti in NSW as well as a historical overview of Graffiti on a local and international level. He provided instruction on basic design fundamentals, the use of different paint and selection of available nozzle

types. A discussion was facilitated on Graffiti culture in the local area. A surrounding environment and site inspection was held and ideas as to possible themes brainstormed.

In the second workshop a theme was selected and a design for the mural created. Colours were selected and paint ordered from a local supplier.

Day three and four were dedicated to the painting of the Mural. On the first day there were many positive comments from passers by. Only one dissenting voice was aired by a local woman. When she complained about the mural, the wall had only been buffed a beautiful ocean blue. She complained to the business owner that it was tacky. When challenged about the fact that the wall had only been painted blue she replied. "I can tell it will be tacky from the music." The young men were listening to some local Hip Hop.

On this day another woman also approached us who at first was a little antagonistic. I was able to explain to her the objectives of the program and she became quite positive. Later that week I was approached by the local Rotary Club of which she was a member to talk about graffiti management. I spoke at one of their meetings and was well received.

Overall the project was very positive. Since painting the mural has only been damaged by one person who tagged on the 'fence' that was a part of the design. I have identified and spoken directly to this person who apologised saying he was drunk at the time and not thinking. The Trainee says he will go back and repair the damage though it is only minimal and almost unnoticeable in the overall design.

As a direct result of this project one of the young artists participating was employed by a local community based service in his suburb to paint a mural on a heavily vandalised Council owned facility. The trainee inspired by the TAFE short course has now enrolled in a full time 2 year youth work course at Shellharbour TAFE.

Unanderra Project

The second of the mural projects was painted on the north east facing wall of David Carlon Motors in Unanderra. This was a highly desirable location given it is between the Princes Highway and the railway line/station in Unanderra. The wall in question and the surrounding area is one of the most highly graffitied areas in the Wollongong LGA. The wall had only in the past few weeks been painted by the owners and already it had been vandalised. The adjoining walls and surrounding buildings were covered in layers of graffiti that had built up over the years. The wall that we secured to paint was in a similar condition until the owners had painted it in the weeks leading up to the project.

After consulting with the owner of the business and obtaining a design brief, a workshop was held for the participating artists and trainee to develop a design. This done, paint was ordered and arrangements made for the paint day. On paint day artists arrived early and worked solidly all day until last light to complete the mural. Feedback from residents, passers by, local business and the police was universally positive. The police who stopped to watch the artists were impressed with their skill and engaged with the artists in a very positive way, discussing the designs, paint techniques and wider cultural issues.

The quality of the finished work was extremely high and the business owner, the artists and trainee are very happy with the project overall. All were keen to be involved in further projects.

This project successfully provided for:

- Job related skills and development opportunities for both the trainee and participating artists - particularly on how to plan, cost and implement legal projects and activities.
- Information regarding the history of Graffiti, its historical and cultural context as well as the legalities pertaining to graffiti in NSW
- Opportunities for participating artists to greater their awareness of the issues raised by illegal graffiti in the Wollongong LGA
- For the artistic and cultural needs of young people in the Wollongong LGA.
- an increase in public awareness and understanding of graffiti art as a legitimate art form practiced by sensible young people
- greater public awareness and creation of opportunities for legal work outside of the funded project.

Legal/Permission Walls

Wollongong City Council through its Youth Services manages a number legal/permission walls in the LGA. The back wall of the Youth Centre has been designated as a legal wall for 10 years and in subsequent years walls at Fairy Meadow Skate Park and on the Southern wall of the Smith Family in Keira Street Wollongong have been added. These walls are managed on a fairly informal basis and are largely incident free with writers respecting the space. On the odd occasion we may have the need to paint over an offensive remark. Usually we are able to identify the person responsible and approach them directly to remind them of the conditions of use. Bulli Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) also has a permission wall on the rear of their building in Bulli. This is a great site given it faces and is visible from the Railway line and Station.

Council is also currently in the process of setting up another legal/permission wall in the Northern Suburbs of Wollongong. This site will be supervised in cooperation with Thirroul Neighbourhood Youth Project - a community managed organisation.

'Private' Permission Walls

There are two other sites in the Wollongong LGA that are private permission walls. These sites have been secured by artists themselves and are regularly painted over each time with the permission of the owners.

Commercial Opportunities

A positive outcome of these projects is that participating artists have been commissioned to do both private and public work They have been employed by other organisations and local government authorities to do further community art work. This develops their artistic and work based skills as well as raising self esteem and stimulating interest in further education. Most importantly perhaps is that the artists and their art form are recognised as legitimate and they are compensated appropriately. These commercial opportunities are most effective in diverting young people from the illegal to legal spheres of aerosol art Some of these projects have included the painting of signage for local businesses and mural creation in child care centres, markets and at other sites. Artists once they have gained this type of recognition have also gained work facilitating projects for other organisations.

Opportunities and Outcomes

Consequently through these opportunities a reduction in crime is achieved, as artists become more interested in the legal expressions of their culture. An awareness of the negative effects of illegal behaviours is achieved through the examination of historical and legal aspects of graffiti and positive contact between the artists and the Council officers involved in graffiti management assists in raising awareness of the issues at a local level and builds mutual respect as well as fostering understanding.

To further address the issues of graffiti in the Wollongong LGA, Wollongong City Council has recently developed a formal Graffiti Management Plan. Many of the strategies outlined in this comprehensive and cross-organisation approach have already been initiated.

Local Context

All I have written of here is in a local context. My knowledge and experience of Graffiti and Hip Hop Culture is limited to the Wollongong Experience. Whilst there may be many similarities and parallels with what I claim here within other localities I have no doubt that place and environment would counter any universal assertions that I may have made.