



Graffiti History in Hartford: A Story of Criminalization and Culture

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Hartford History Center

Perceptions of graffiti have changed in Hartford and the world within the last 50 years with the arrival of the Hip-Hop scene. Currently, there is little publicly available information on the development of the graffiti scene within Hartford, and that is what motivated me to add to the Hartford History Center's Hip-Hop collection about graffiti

The current Hartford History Center's Hip-Hop collection focuses on the peace train competitions from 1983-1984. The Hip-Hop collection largely exists online and can be accessed by going online to the CT Digital Archive and under collections selecting the Hartford Public Hartford History Center then the Hip-Hop collection. Although, the Hartford History Center's physical location exists within the main Hartford Public Library on the third floor at 500 Main St.

What is Peace Train?

Peace Train was a non-profit in Hartford that was dedicated to highlighting local musicians and artists through its various concerts and shows. It elevated the Hartford Hip Hop scene from 1983-1985 but mainly focused on its Breaking and Popping contests.

Research Questions

1. What is the insider vs. outsider perception of graffiti in Hartford in the 1970s/80s?
2. Is there another narrative apart from the Peace Train dominant narrative of Hip-Hop in Hartford from the 1970s/80s?

Methodology



Two qualitative interviews with Dooney Bates



Archival scan of Southside Media News from 1970-1987



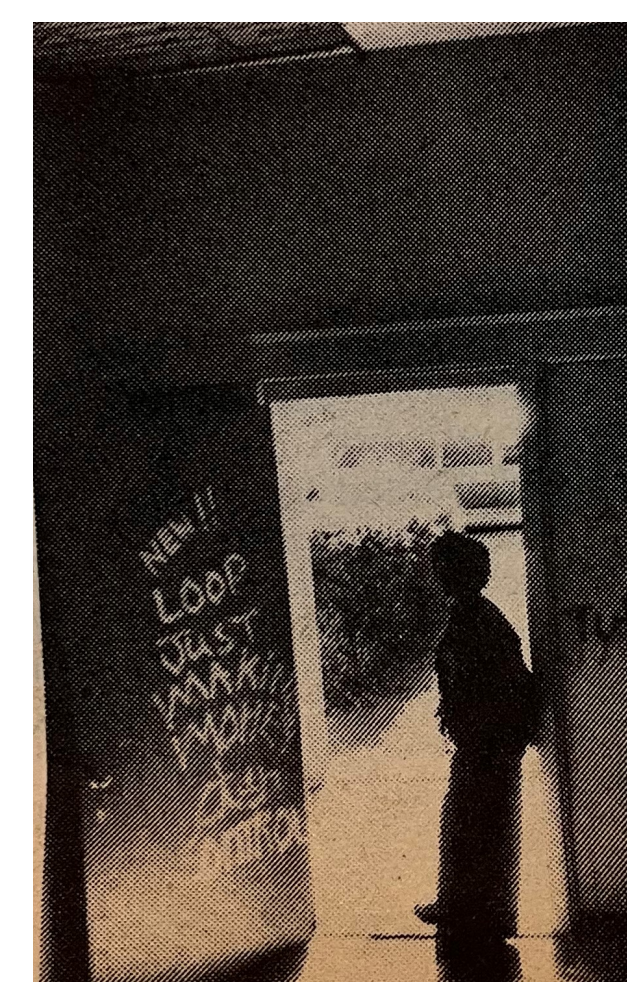
Scan of existing Hip-Hop archive at Hartford History Center

Newspaper Findings

In the early 70s and 80s, graffiti was categorized as **vandalism and gang-related property crime**, while murals were regarded as art. This led to the increasing **criminalization** of Black and Brown youth and led to many gang arrests within Hartford.

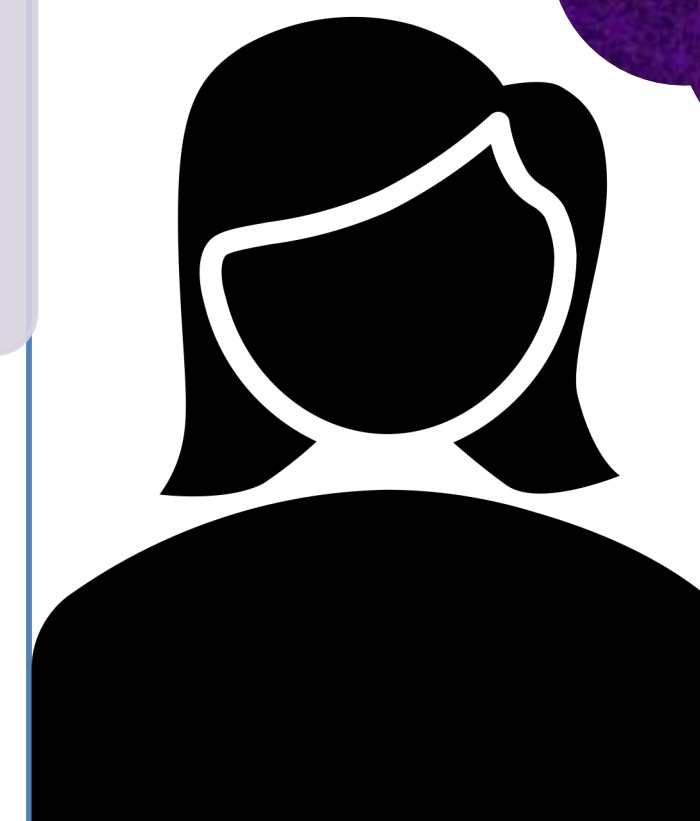


Scan here for access to newspaper clippings referring to graffiti and art around Hartford



"Park Street has another negative physical characteristic that sets it apart from any other area: vandalism and gang-related graffiti, found predominantly in stores operated by Hispanics throughout Park Street."

"25% of people surveyed believe that crime and vandalism are the biggest problems," - Survey conducted by the Association of Hispanic American Merchants. 1982



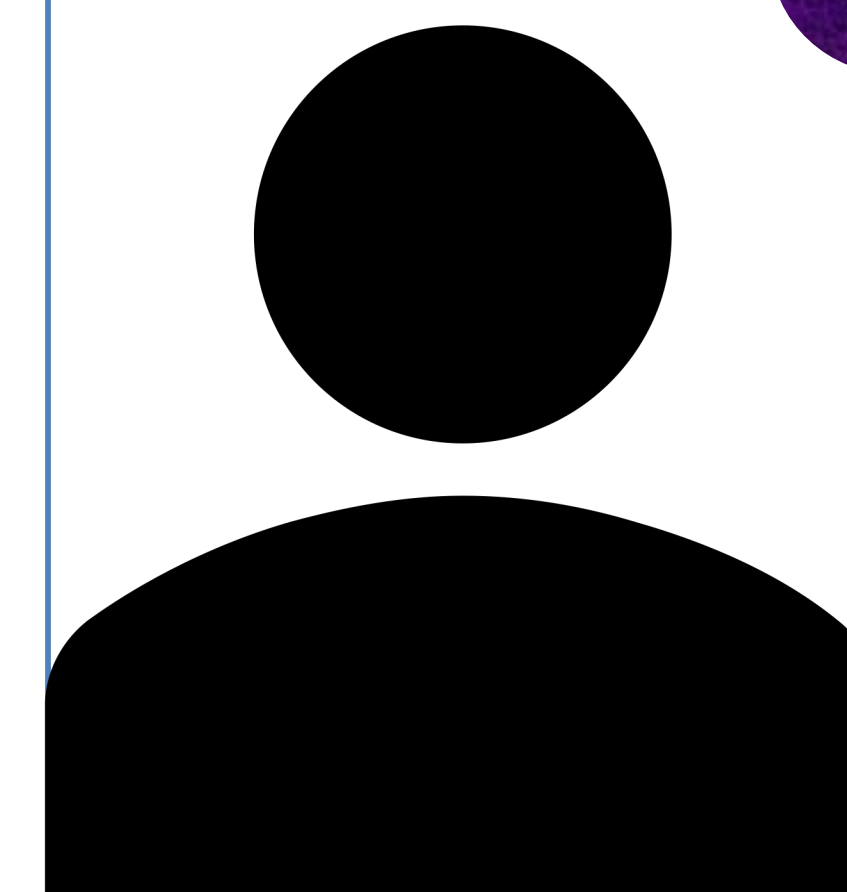
Interview Findings

- Dooney's interviews shed light on how graffiti culture at the time was about **mentorship** and often a way for **neighborhood youth** to avoid joining gangs.
- There was a direct connection between graffiti artists in New York (the birthplace of Hip-Hop) and Hartford, evident in the tagging by the **Savage Nomads** and interview with Dooney Bates, something the Peace Train narrative failed to consider.



"So, New York's had their own rhythm and Connecticut had their own rhythm so I would take some of their stuff and bring it back here and, man, people would be fascinated"

"We ain't out here shooting and killing nobody, we doing art, some of the art they like to take pictures by"



Conclusions

In all, the newspaper clippings and interview findings come together to tell a story of criminalization and culture within Hartford in the 70s and 80s. While the Southside Media News upheld positive reviews of murals and local arts projects, they failed to extend that courtesy to the artists of the streets. As the newspaper moved to criminalizing graffiti, there simultaneously existed a subculture of art and community that came from graffiti. The artists were building connections in New York and establishing a counterculture to gang life.

Limitations

Focusing on Southside Media News might have led to limited diversification in neighborhood perspectives.

There were logistical challenges in setting up interviews ultimately delaying the interview process and timeline.

Because we focused on a time period 40+ years ago, it is possible our interviewee's memories might have been incomplete.

Recommendations



Investigate Hartford Advocate and Hartford Courant articles from 1970s/80s to compare perspectives of graffiti from other areas in Hartford outside of the South End.



Interview other graffiti pioneers of the 1970s/80s to paint a more comprehensive (i.e., non-media dominated) picture of the graffiti scene.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jasmin Agosto, Professor Seth Markle, Professor Laura Holt, and Erica Crowley, for your ongoing support of my intellectual curiosities.

Community Research Fellows 2022

References available upon request.