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MOVIE REVIEW

## Wild Style (1983)

### 'WILD STYLE,' RAPPING AND PAINTING GRAFFITI

By VINCENT CANBY  
Published: March 18, 1983

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THE 1983 "New Directors/New Films" series, sponsored by the Film Society of by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the department of film of the Museum of Modern Art, begins modestly and in good faith tonight with the showing of Charlie Ahearn's "Wild Style" at the 57th Street Playhouse at 8:30.

The film, which will be shown again tomorrow at 3:30 P.M., looks to be a partly improvised piece of fiction, about the cheeky, highspirited art of the south Bronx, that is, subway graffiti, also known as "writing," and about rapping and breaking.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, rapping refers to a very particular kind of musical communication, in which the singer, backed by a monotonous, rhythmic beat, talks in rapid, always nervy rhymes that proclaim the singer's superiority in one sort of endeavor or another. Like good calypso, good rapping is a mixture of the primitive, sophisticated and topical.

Breaking, or break-dancing, is a way of dancing to these and other forms of music, a religious experience with extraordinary athletic skills. The high point of a great break-dancer's turn may be a pirouette on his head.

The slight narrative of "Wild Style" is about Raymond (Lee George Quinones), a skinny, outwardly mild-mannered Bronx teen-ager by day and, by night, the notorious "Zorro," a celebrated but unidentified spray-paint artist for whom every subway car is an empty canvas. Raymond scorns his fellow graffiti artists who turn their talents to legitimate, commissioned murals on the walls of playgrounds and business establishments.

"Graffiti is taking risks," says Raymond, who likes to dodge over and around third rails in the subway yards at night. He prefers painting in the dark since, after all, "I know all my colors by heart." He also likes outwitting the police as he makes the world more exotic.

"Wild Style" also has a slight love story involving Raymond and Rose Lady Bug (Sandra Pink Fabara), a spray-paint muralist who brings Raymond back to his senses when he takes his art too seriously.

Mostly, however, "Wild Style" is a series of random encounters of graffiti artists, rappers and breakers, leading up to a giant rap-break concert in a Lower East Side band shell decorated by Raymond.

Unfortunately for the film, Mr. Ahearn, who is an artist as well as a film maker, never discovers a cinematic rhythm that accurately reflects and then celebrates the rare energy and wit of the artists within the film. Too often "Wild Style" has the effect of dampening the enthusiasm of its amateur actors or of not being able to keep up with their nonstop pace. It always seems to be trailing them, as if it were a little brother who can't run as fast as the others.

The subjects are appealing, especially Mr. Quinones, a graffiti artist in real life, and Frederick Braithwaite as a very cool artistpromotor, who attempts to transform Raymond's midnight talents into fame and riches. The film includes one rap contest, which goes at such a clip that it may leave you exhausted, and a funny East Side art-world party, where Raymond is seduced by a beautiful, relentless patroness of all things temporarily new.

"Wild Style" lacks a lot of the style of the people in it, but it never neutralizes their vitality.

#### Bronx Pastimes

WILD STYLE, written, produced and directed by Charlie Ahearn; photographed by Clive Davidson and John Foster; edited by Steve Brown; music by Chris Stein; produced by Fred Braithwaite and Jane Dickson; presented by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the department of film of the Museum of Modern Art as part of the "New Directors/New Films" series. At the 57th Street Playhouse, between Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue. Running time: 85 minutes. This film has no rating.

Raymond Zoro . . . . . Lee George Quinones  
 Phade . . . . . Frederick Braithwaite  
 Rose Lady Bug . . . . . Sandra Pink  
 Fabara Virginia . . . . . Patty Astor  
 Zroc . . . . . Andrew Zephyr Witten  
 Raymond's Brother . . . . . Carlos Morales  
 Boy with Broom . . . . . Alfredo Valez  
 Art Patron . . . . . Niva Kislac  
 TV Producer . . . . . Bill Rice  
 Curator . . . . . Glenn O'Brien  
 Zoro Double . . . . . Dondi White  
 Gangster . . . . . Pookie Daniels  
 Champagne Winner . . . . . Chief Rocker  
 Busy Bee Community Organizer . . . . . Joe Lewis

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