

# SPRAY WHAT?

Graffiti exists in every city in the world. For most of us, the people behind the graphic scrawls that adorn public spaces remain something of an enigma. Love it or hate it, graffiti is a powerful medium of expression for those who wield the aerosol cans. Our writer hangs with some of them to get the lowdown.

BY SAMORA CHAPMAN

It was a cold Sunday morning last August when seven of Durban's most prominent graffiti artists were arrested and charged with malicious damage to property for painting a downtown wall. 'Graffiti gang caught red-handed!' screamed the headlines. 'Destructive and lawless graffiti vandals arrested!'

The Aerosol Seven case sparked intense debate. The morality of public art, both legal and illegal, and the very nature of public space were brought into the spotlight. Musicians, performers, artists and culture buffs united behind the accused. After being adjourned twice, the court case was suspended pending further investigation.

So who are these people, living on the fringes of the law? Largely misunderstood and often hated for colonising public space with their wicked scrawls and colourful wild-styles, why do they risk everything to write their names all over the city? What is it about graffiti that is so powerful, mysterious and addictive? And, of course, is it art?

## BEHIND THE SCENES

I ventured across the leafy 'burbs to meet one of the Aerosol Seven, old school graf king Jopeto, 26. He's an engineer who divides his time between working two jobs, studying and letting loose like a vampire by night. You'd never know he painted graffiti.

'I'm not an artist. I'm a graffiti writer,' says the tall, bleary-eyed Jopeto. 'I've been doing it since I was 17 and it won't leave me alone. I just write my name. I paint my throw-up (a quick, bold piece of two-colour graffiti, done in bubble letters with a drop shadow or perspective), the same one I've been painting for almost 10 years. That's what makes me happy,' he says.

Jopeto has a very distinctive style. His letters are geometrically perfect: the circles of his letter o's are so symmetrical they look as if they were painted with a giant compass. When kids started challenging him, he went out and started painting his name backwards. And his letters were still picture perfect, which made the kids admire him all over again.

## PEN PALS

The graf writer's principal tool is the spraycan. Occasionally they use acrylic primer (wall paint) to cover large areas, and tagging (writing your signature) is often done with marker pens. Graffiti is all about developing a unique style and mastering can-control – the ability to control the width and flare of the line you paint. A graffiti writer won't paint something at home, or make a stencil at home and then go out and put it up; that's 'street art'. The term 'street art' encompasses all forms of public art, and the use of any medium – from stickers to brushwork, mosaics and everything in between.

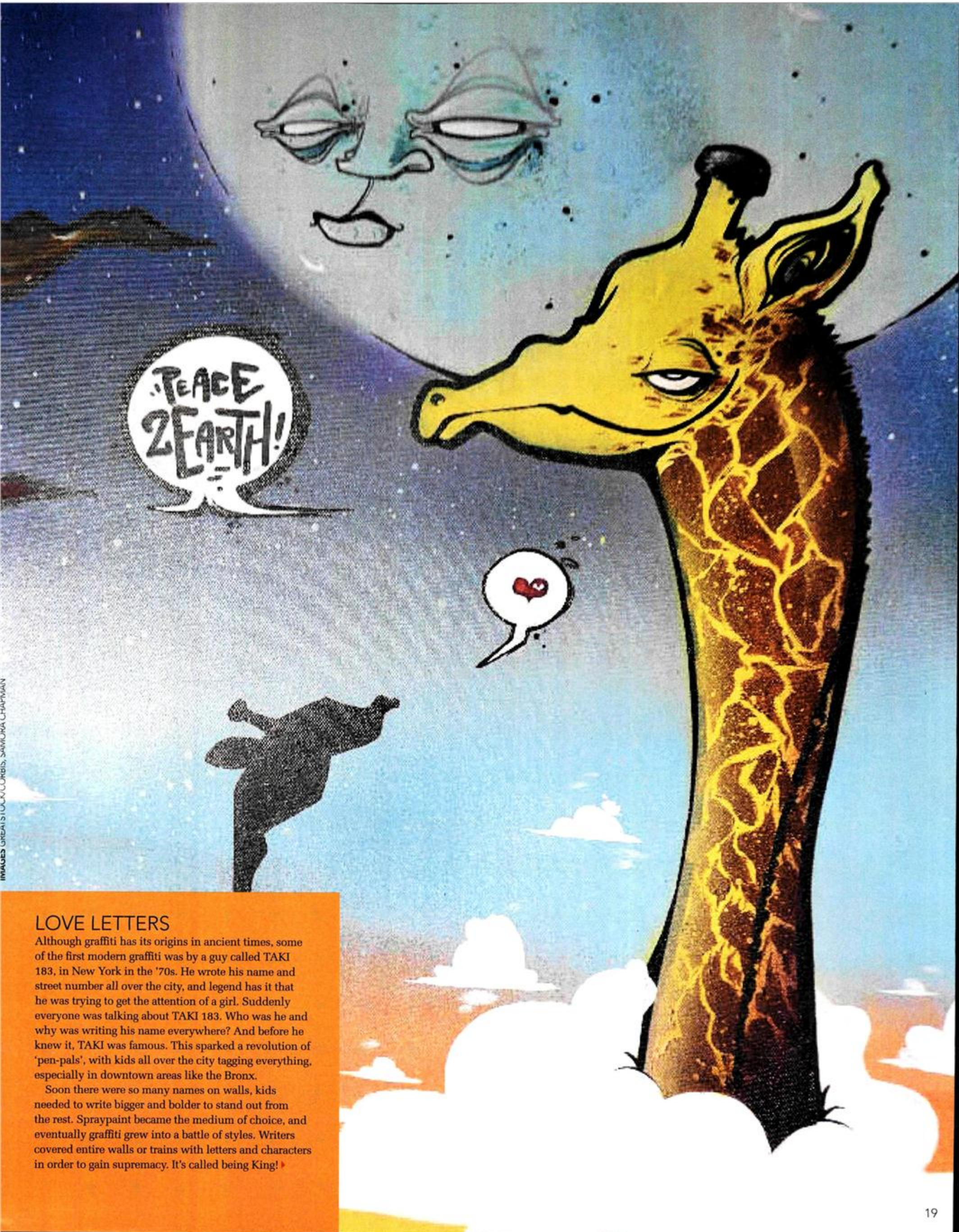
Jopeto pulls up his sleeve to show me his new tatt. A lighthouse surrounded by stormy seas stands tall, taking up his whole shoulder. On the inside of his arm is a ship amid wild waves. 'I'm gonna have a scroll across here,' he says. 'It's gonna say "smooth seas make for poor sailors".' It's the perfect metaphor for the life of a graffiti writer.

Left: Danbot, a writer from the same crew as Dok and Mookie, paints at a gig outside Willowvale Hotel, Umbilo, downtown Durban.

Right: The talent of Durban artist Dok has taken him into the corporate world. This giraffe canvas is one of his pieces.





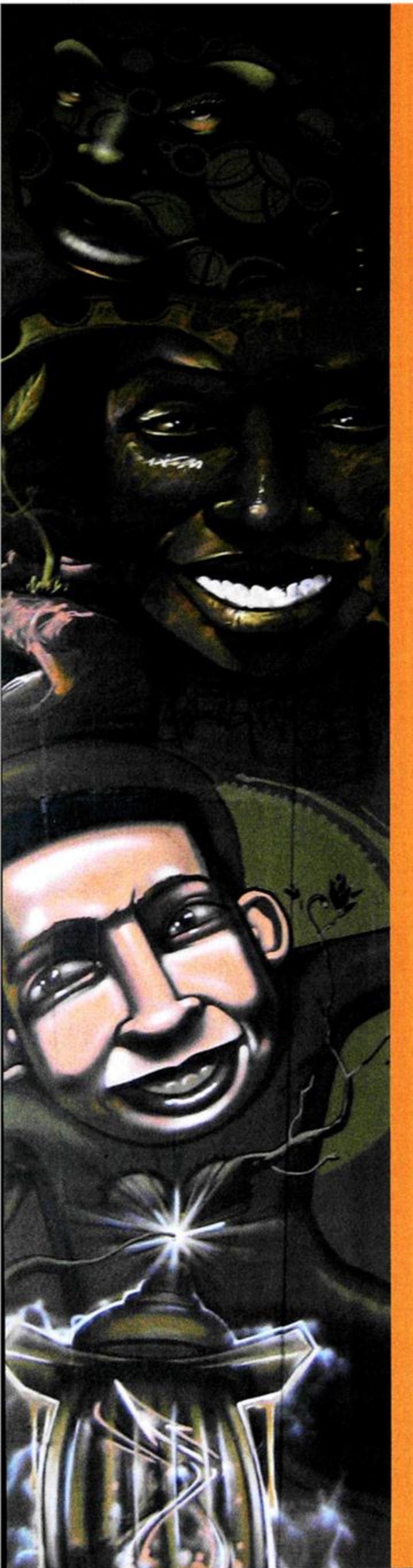


## LOVE LETTERS

Although graffiti has its origins in ancient times, some of the first modern graffiti was by a guy called TAKI 183, in New York in the '70s. He wrote his name and street number all over the city, and legend has it that he was trying to get the attention of a girl. Suddenly everyone was talking about TAKI 183. Who was he and why was writing his name everywhere? And before he knew it, TAKI was famous. This sparked a revolution of 'pen-pals', with kids all over the city tagging everything, especially in downtown areas like the Bronx.

Soon there were so many names on walls, kids needed to write bigger and bolder to stand out from the rest. Spraypaint became the medium of choice, and eventually graffiti grew into a battle of styles. Writers covered entire walls or trains with letters and characters in order to gain supremacy. It's called being King! ▶





Left: This piece, on a bridge in Newtown, Joburg, is by Mak1One, Elnino, Falko and Gogga.

Below: Mookie and Dok say their art has taken them to parts of the city where not many people have been.



## NEW GENERATION

Later, I meet up with Dok, 22, and Mookie, 23, another two of the Aerosol Seven. I take the cranky lift up to their dingy flat on Berea Road, amid clouds of exhaust fumes and the hum of traffic.

Tall, lanky Mookie lets me in and perches on an empty paint tin. A Fine Art student at Durban University of Technology, he has been gaining a reputation on the local scene for his bold public art. He recently painted an 8x3-metre wall at Alliance Française, depicting the Durban cityscape with a family of elephants floating like ghosts above the buildings. It's an obvious reference to the concealment of Andries Botha's controversial elephant sculptures in Durban.

Mookie makes a living painting family portraits, and murals commissioned by NGOs, schools and corporates. He's just won a national graffiti competition sponsored by BlackBerry, and was commissioned to paint six canvases. In true graf style he painted all six in one weekend. 'Graf is getting popular, which is good for business!' he says. 'You see it everywhere these days... in design, advertising and on TV.'

Dok sits on a plastic crate. By day he paints surfboards at a factory in the city. It's a harsh environment full of chemicals, but he thrives on the artistic freedom his work allows him. He recently got his first big commission – to paint the showroom of a Nissan car dealership. 'I rocked it in a day,' says Dok.

## POWERFUL MESSAGES

A graffiti name holds a great deal of significance for an artist. Your name is either given to you by an older writer, or chosen as a word that represents you. Writers tend to choose letters that are versatile and give them creative freedom, and they sometimes add a number to the end of their name in the vein of Taki 183.

When asked about the issue of legal versus illegal graffiti, Mookie explains that the 'traditional' way of doing graf is to write your name in the public domain. 'Illegal graffiti (bombing) involves purposefully breaking the law and making a mark on your environment,' he says. 'In a way it's political because huge corporations are always making their mark on the public domain with advertising.' But Mookie adds, when graf writers do it, it's seen as vandalism.

'When I see a piece... it's like a sign of life,' he enthuses. 'Illegal graf is powerful and it has impact. Legal graf is more artistic, but it doesn't have the same subversive power.'

'It's like saying I was here,' says Dok, with a wry grin. 'Your name represents who you are.'

## DISCOMFORT ZONE

Mook picks up on the thread: 'Graf makes you see the world in a different way. Someone who's done graf knows the city. He's been where not many people have been. Some traditional fine artists are happy to sit in their studios, shutting out the real world, whereas when we do murals, we're out there engaging with people and our environment.'

He acknowledges that graf can be vandalism. 'But if it is done in the right way and fits the environment, it can be incredible.'

Graffiti is often 'allowed' to exist in the run-down and neglected parts of the city, so this is where graffiti writers often end up going. 'Graf writers often go into dangerous areas,' says Mook. 'Some live on the wrong side of the law... and it can be an ego thing at times – earning respect. But we're not gangsters. We're more like a flock of birds or a school of fish than a gang.'

Every artist strives to be recognised for their own unique style, for bending their letters into new shapes and painting imaginative characters.

'Dok's forms and shapes have been pushed so far,' says Mookie. 'They're like science fiction, bru!'

And Dok says Mook's style is bold, with a strong element of design. 'It's a true graffiti style... you can't miss it unless you're drunk or something,' he laughs.

In terms of the pending court case, Mookie is quietly confident. 'We got a lot of exposure and it put graf on a public platform where it was debated. The general outcome was that people think graf is cool. People know we are legit street artists.'

## Graffiti in other cities

BY CARLA VISSER

Even though graffiti only started in South Africa in the late '80s, it spread across the country rapidly, reaching small towns such as Rustenburg and Tzaneen.

Joburg has several legal walls, with lots of space to paint and no bylaws, yet the scene is rather small at the moment. Cape Town has bylaws in place, yet the scene still has a lot of writers and crews forwarding the culture.

Jozi has writers like Rasty, Angel and Curio who do legal pieces that add to the city's beauty. Rasty has represented the South African scene all over the world.

Another Jozi graf artist, Mars, says: 'From the bombing side of things, the four main crews in Jozi at the moment are PCP, EDK, DS and Own. There seems to be no younger generation coming up.'

Cape Town graf artist Toe expands: 'The scene in Cape Town at the moment is struggling. The graffiti bylaw was passed a year ago, and it states that no one is permitted to paint anywhere in public (even if the land owner has given you permission) unless the council gives you permission, which takes roughly 60 days. Despite this, there are still several crews keeping the scene alive – CK, OK, TVA, TRD, 40HK, BH, and NME.'

'There is a huge amount of support in underprivileged areas,' Toe adds. 'There are a lot of graffiti artists making those areas more beautiful with their art. Many feel that they need to be cheered on, not arrested. Cape Town always celebrates its diverse culture – until someone takes out a can.' At the moment there doesn't seem to be new dedicated writers who will take the scene forward, but graffiti always goes through phases.'

Cape Town also has writers like Nard and Falko who are evolving the scene by creating split-pieces. These are pieces painted on different walls but, when photographed and joined together, all form one big mural.