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## Stray Paint

They know it's wrong. They know they could go to jail. But the boys in the PBJ crew are hooked on graffiti anyway.

**By Sara Smith**

On a muggy Sunday evening, five attractive young white men in their 20s sipped iced coffees around a table outside Stauf's Coffee Roasters in Grandview.

Occasionally stopping mid-sentence to scoot their chairs out of someone's way,

they chatted enthusiastically about their passion: graffiti.

By all appearances, these five self-avowed vandals fit right in at the hip coffeehouse. There were no wife-beater shirts or baggy jeans, no gang tattoos or gold chains. You had to listen closely to hear them discuss their conquests and their plans to vandalize more property as soon as the sun went down that night.



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### **Columbus isn't a graffiti-friendly town**

They call themselves graff writers, indulging their muses in ad hoc crews of anywhere from three to 30 people.

Most of them are members of the Columbus PBJ crew. Asked what PBJ stands for, they hesitated, mumbled among themselves and finally settled on "Poor Boys Justice."

"There are two things that define graffiti," said a crew member who goes by Wes Flexner. "First, it's illegal. Second, it's an art form based around the letter form."

Explaining why they're drawn to it proves trickier.

"I do it for the pussy, the adrenaline rush and the notoriety," said Kayo, who insisted on meeting at a Popeye's Chicken on Fifth Avenue, away from the swank of Stauf's. Like all the others, he agreed to speak only if his given name and the locations of his favorite places to practice his craft weren't published.

Kayo added, "You're never going to rationalize what we do."

But Kесе was willing to try.

"I want to stress graff is bad," said Kесе, who has a bachelor's degree in fine art and a nine-to-five corporate gig that he doesn't like to talk about. "But at the same time, it's embraced by

corporate America. You see it everywhere."

Sukoe recently turned down a full scholarship to the Columbus College of Art and Design. Instead, he writes graffiti almost every day and holds down a full-time job at a campus eatery.

"I would love to sell out," he said in a self-conscious street accent. "Put me on a fucking Wheaties box, for real."

Kayo has a simple explanation for the difference between real graffiti and what you see in a Coke commercial: "Graffiti itself is not mainstream. The vandalism aspect is tied into it, and vandalism will never become mainstream."

"That's what makes it pure," said Flexner. "That maintains a certain integrity."

"But," Sukoe said, "it's fucked-up integrity."

While nobody argues graffiti is a legal pursuit, Flexner contends it is essentially a victimless one.

"That's how you justify it," he said. "You're not creating any structural damage or harming a person."

"It's an interactive thing, even if it's illegal. With graffiti, it's really direct—you've affected your community right then and there."

There are two kinds of graffiti. The most spectacular—and least likely to be seen by the public—are called pieces, short for masterpieces. The writer of a piece works painstakingly in a "chill spot," a hidden location where he doesn't have to worry about being disturbed by the police or other passers-by.

Then there's bombing, sometimes called tagging. It's done in a hurry on a Dumpster or an exterior building wall, out where the rest of us can see it.

"Bombing is like an advertisement," said Ender, a PBJ member who has been writing graffiti in Columbus for six of his 21 years.

If you're going to get caught in the act of producing graffiti in Columbus, it will probably be while you're bombing. And you'll probably be in big trouble.

Among graff writers, Columbus has a reputation as a particularly inhospitable place, a jurisdiction where the cops like catching them and the courts like sentencing them.



*"It's like saying, 'I was here'": Almost every reachable square foot of the PBJ crew's "chill spot" has been spray painted*



"It's not like we're selling crack to kids," Ender said. "We get chased by helicopters and shit."

"It's hard for us to fathom that graff is this big of a problem," Flexner said as his friends nodded in agreement. "There have been people put in jail for six months for graff."

They were probably put there by Franklin County Environmental Court Judge Harlan Hale, who said he routinely sentences first offenders to 10-day jail sentences, along with \$1,000 fines, five years' probation and 100 hours of community service. He also orders them to pay restitution to property owners for damages.

**They packed into a couple of cars and headed to the abandoned factory they share with moldy debris, buckets of shattered glass from empty 40-ounce malt liquor bottles and a handful of homeless men.**

"We see a graffiti artist at least once a week," said Hale. "I have imposed significant jail time on graffiti artists—when it's egregious and they've been caught repeatedly."

"Fuck Hale," said Druid, a repeat offender the judge sentenced to 18 months for writing on a King Avenue building.

"I ended up serving four months because I had a lawyer," said Druid, who has emerged from his incarceration a changed man—because now he has street cred. Any future graff writing he chooses to do will be taken more seriously by other writers.

Prison time "ups your punk-rock point," said Kese, who has never had the good fortune to get caught vandalizing property.

If there's a way for graffiti artists to earn points without defacing other people's property, Sherry Palmer would love to know what it is.

"If we have some frustrated artist, well, we have some great art schools here," said Palmer, director of Keep Columbus Beautiful, the city organization responsible for cleansing public spaces of graffiti.

Palmer said she has considered many ways to dissuade graffiti artists from defacing public property, including city-funded art classes and public mural space.

"I'm looking at a lot of things," said Palmer.

Some cities have set aside walls specifically for graffiti artists to do legal, authorized pieces, but she's not inclined to follow their lead.

"Other cities have found that these free spaces really haven't worked," she said.

When the last of the iced coffees were gone, it was time for the members of the PBJ crew to change venues. They packed into a couple of cars and headed to Columbus's hottest chill spot, an abandoned factory they share with moldy debris, buckets of shattered glass from empty 40-ounce malt liquor bottles and a handful of homeless men.

They stuck close together as they went from room to room, critiquing the pieces and pointing out which ones were theirs. Their mannerisms and street dialect—affectedations they kept in check when they were at Stauf's—became more pronounced as they climbed over heaps of metal and scaled warped staircases to get to secret rooms.

Every few feet a cluster of empty spray paint cans sat abandoned on the cement floor.

Ender paused to point out one of his prize pieces, a 6-foot-high study in shades of blue. He was particularly proud of the shadowing technique he used and happy to show it off.

"I think any artist would want to have their stuff seen," he said. "It's like saying, 'I was here.'"

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