

2 LIVE CREW

Graffiti groupies and slick piecers need to take their cool shades off and look to the city that started it all. Philadelphia's Curve and Esteme are stylin' on you.

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Photography By Stephen K. Schuster

Apparently we're in no-man's land. All of us are up on this 40-foot-wide elevated freight trestle that's on the border of South Philly. Over the edge, two stories down, there are piles of discarded mattresses and tires. To the north are Center City's skyscrapers and above us are rows of copper signaling wires for railroad communications. I'd seen their stuff on the internet and now they're writing on the electrical boxes in front of me, but this is my first time meeting Curve and Esteme.

They stand still for photos and a huge freight train slowly chugs by while the conductor blows the whistle and shakes his head at us. Twenty minutes later a CSX freight cop drives up in an SUV, but he doesn't look too worried. He says that the conductor called us in because we're on private property. We tell him we're reporting on a local rap group and he asks us why they're covering their faces. When we explain that they're called the "No Names" and that it's part of their mystique, he relaxes even more and tells us that his name is "Jabba." Well, that's what everyone calls him because he's fat. But not lazy, because only a few years ago, during brutal winters, he used to wait in the bushes behind us and catch thieves trying to cut down and steal the copper wires. Maybe he was lying too. Anyway, with just a couple years away from retirement, Jabba's not trying to work too hard now. He hurries us to finish the photo shoot, but is very friendly about it and makes so much small talk, I feel like he's lonely. As he's jotting down the fake names and addresses, someone stumbles and Jabba casually encourages, "Just say anything." Jabba's not too concerned with details. Because if he noticed, the "No Names" are two very regular looking dudes in their mid-20s, and young rappers dress flamboyantly. As we all walk down the embankment from the bridge, Jabba rolls by with a lit tobacco pipe, waves and drives away. If Jabba had a hip partner, they might have caught Curve and Esteme, two career vandals who spend a lot of time on Philly's freights.

Buddy cop movies are great. They pair two different personalities together to solve a mystery with sometimes hilarious, and always-violent results. The genre especially won fans over in the '80s when the two cops tended to fight crime in really glamorous places. Into the '90s, filmmakers tied-in oddities like detective duos driving Porsches off of bridges onto escaping yachts. It's really come a long way from the original buddy cop movie, 1971's *The French Connection*. The Academy Award-winning film is set on the gritty streets of '70s New York, where two detectives uncover an international heroin smuggling ring. The screenplay was adapted from the 1970 non-fiction book of the same title, which was based on the adventures of two real-life NYPD detectives. For greater film audiences though, certain plot turns were fictionalized, the most famous being a car chase pursuit of an MTA subway train that's been hijacked by an escaping suspect. There's no graffiti on that train, though, because that year, *Top Cat* had just migrated to New York and delivered a new writing style, now called *Broadway Elegant*. He'd come from Philadelphia where advanced handstyles originated, like the wicked—that's the story anyway. In Philly Corn Bread had been writing since '67 and was getting fame in the local newspapers and streets. However, New York had people visiting from all over the world, and a bunch of other variables, most importantly an intricate elevated subway system that went between neighborhoods. Writers could see styles from a place they'd never go in person and all kinds of folks started pioneering. Then as the general subway scene died into the '80s and '90s, graf went worldwide, where many writers stuck to walls and took to painting styles nobody ever thought were possible. Corporations took bites and the internet digitized what it could. It was almost sensory overload, and some people, especially in New York, found themselves more interested in writers who kept illegal graffiti—freights, clean trains, etching, street piecing and tagging—alive. Meanwhile, the City of Brotherly Love has kept bombing alive forever.

Curve moved to Philadelphia's Center City neighborhood in late 1996. He was born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, where his older brother introduced him to graffiti in '94. There was a scene up there, but Curve was most influenced by his frequent trips to see family in Philadelphia and New York. The move down to Philly really

accelerated everything. “I came out and I was going crazy ‘cause the scene here is so alive, you know?” remembers Curve. “All the old shit was still up, and people were still writing like they were [before].” At that point, Enem had older and newer shit everywhere in Philly. Born and raised in Philly’s Germantown area, Enem came out hard in ‘86 during a writing boom and kept the feverish pace up until the mid-’90s. “There used to be thousands of writers when I came up. I could come into any neighborhood and bump into different writers if I showed the sign. I could do a tag just in the air and this guy would be like, ‘What you write?’ ‘Oh yeah, you a writer? I’m a writer,’” he explains. “We were really living for the moment, hardcore. Not so much about who could out do each other, but we were into the scene.” Now 30-something, he remembers, “We had a very rounded, underground society that nobody knew about. Philly had its own world, it was all inclusive right here.

By 1997, Esteme, a native of an area near Germantown, had been writing for a few years too. Esteme and Curve started running into each other through a mutual friend, began hanging out and exchanged black books. “We were just on the same page,” remembers Esteme. “He had just come into town and eager to be on his explorer jawn [Philly slang for “thing”] and find new spots. You know, the real kind of hungry network: ‘Lets just try this.’ ‘Lets go here.’” Together they took in all things unique to Philly’s graf scene, like meetings. “They started back in the ‘70s,” says Enem. “[The meetings] are more based on knowledge. Cats are always looking for the knowledge of the wickeds [and] real solid hands in Philly. So they go to the older heads and ask him, Sign my book? Could you explain this to me? Yo, what do you think about this? It’s more like a tutorial. All the real writers clique up and all the young writers try to come up and get their autographs so they can understand the Philly scene even better.”

Esteme remembers, “We kind of combined forces as far as a couple of dudes. It was a time when everything was new. We put each other on to different shit. It counted for a lot. I had a lot in the book but [Curve] was really good, he was just wil’n out by himself.” Even having been exposed to different scenes, like Manhattan’s severely bombed Westside Highway of the ‘90s, Curve really took to Philly’s graffiti style. He remembers, “Mad tags on one wall, crazy handwriting that was just out of control. There’s just always graffiti around, it’s a really old city,” Around town, a lot of Philly forefathers still had graf running, but other real-talk patriots were planting seeds. “I was enjoying [the graffiti], but it was really, really dense. Not everywhere, but where it was, it was really out of control and I remember thinking, They will never clean it up here,” recalls Philadelphia native Nope, who has been writing since ‘92. “The mayor of Philadelphia from mid to late ‘90s was the one that really cleaned it up. They started by clearing these certain zones where they weren’t going to let graffiti live for more then 24 hours.” In ‘97, then President Bill Clinton came to North Philly promoting volunteerism, and brought along Mr. and Mrs. Bush, Gore, Carter and Colin Powell. They all donned matching orange t-shirts and painted over graffiti on Germantown Avenue while posing for pictures.

As high-traffic walls got bombed and buffed, just outside of downtown, there were still plenty of enormous abandoned factories and walls along the train tracks for Curve and Esteme to paint. “It was more the fun of trying it than the fun of people seeing it, ‘cause we didn’t really think we’d get a rep’ like that,” says Esteme in retrospect. The two had been branching out to paint in different areas, when in ‘98, their mutual friend Ronin exposed them to the Philly freight yards. Every Sunday they would go to the yards until that fall when Esteme left for college in Atlanta, where he continued to paint freights. “The day after I got put down with [the HOD (Hand Of Doom) crew], I painted the biggest train I had painted at the time—big chrome end-to-end—and I put up a big HOD on it,” Esteme remembers. “Within the week, that shit was in Portland and random HOD dudes saw it while they were painting and I got mad geeked off of that shit.” He began writing with all types of random travelers, taking advantage of Atlanta’s lazy buff and even popped a few MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) clean trains.

Esteme was back in Philly for break when the two established their crew TGE (The Great Escape) in ‘99. “By the time we started a crew,” explains Esteme, “I feel like we kind of created our little niche: We were always around and we talked to everybody, people knew who we were and we also had exposure to other places.” The next fall, Curve moved to suburban New York’s Westchester County for school and quickly linked up with other students who wrote. He would often visit New York City to paint, and now incorporated more throw-ups and tags, lots of times in do-or-die spots. Esteme and Curve were doing more graffiti than ever in their respective areas. “You come back and you’re used to having that freedom,” remembers Esteme. “So right when I came back in 2002, we were kind of about to wil’ out.” That Memorial Day, Esteme, who had just graduated, Curve, who had finished his sophomore year, and a couple friends were painting on the roof of an old factory in West Philadelphia. After finishing up, a few decided to hop down on to a corrugated metal awning about two stories high. Curve ended up falling through the roof, and

everyone rushed down to find him lying on the ground, bloody and unresponsive. The fall gave him broken bones, traumatic brain injury and left him in the hospital for about a month and a half. But writers piled into his hospital room, dudes started bombing “get well” for him and there was even an initial push by his crew to paint more. “Nobody really slowed down, which was hard for me,” remembers Curve. “I was just jaded and all fucked up, just wanted to be how I was before I got hurt. There’s no way I’m ever gonna be.”

Soon after the accident, various legal woes slowed TGE down. “Everything kind of came to a head at that point, so it was kind of the chill out. At that point I thought I would either stop writing...I don’t know, it was weird,” remembers Esteme. “I felt a little guilty being with [Curve when he fell] and trying to explain the shit to his moms.” Curve slowly recovered through cognitive therapy, like relearning how to do everyday tasks, and physical therapy over the next year. “I had crazy brain damage, definitely lost a lot at the time. I still have things that affect me now, different conditions, but I’m pretty much back to normal,” says Curve. “It changed my life forever. Before that, I didn’t care. I did so much crazier shit—going out on ledges, hanging off shit, walking on icy bridges. Doing everything crazy, trying to be that daredevil dude that hit the craziest spots. I pretty much felt like I was invincible...It kinda just woke me up.” In between getting healthy and graduating school, Curve started writing again and moved back to Philly.

Comcast’s new headquarters in downtown is now completed, making it Philadelphia’s tallest skyscraper. “It’s a different city now than it used to be. Philly’s trying to be a big time, E! Entertainment channel,” says Curve. “Not totally—I still paint Philly—it’s never gonna change, but it’s cleaner and more tourist-y, not as grimy, you know?” Today, the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN) utilizes a \$1 million annual budget and promotes property owners getting in on the crusade with free paint vouchers. Enem’s explaining all this in between filming the video for a song on the Infamy soundtrack. Though he’s considerably calmed down, if you’ve seen Infamy, you know Enem still has it in him. A few weeks before he’d gone to a WAB crew meeting and today, he demonstrates one of several Philly handstyles on a nearby wall. The can’s ball clinks around and his hand’s quick—it’s a lot to take in. Here’s this incredible, respected writer, really enjoying the intricacies of a tag. It sounds like, You better have handstyles or you get no respect in the City of Brotherly Love. “The widely popularized techniques and Montana [cans], all the silly graffiti trend shit—Philly don’t know shit about that,” says Esteme. There’s no way around it, but to have somebody you’ve been learning and writing with progress well must be encouraging.

“I feel that there is a pride in having a combo,” says Nope, who bombed a lot with Philadelphia’s Meak. “Just finding someone you could get a lot of shit done with, that wasn’t greedy or trying to outshine each other. People talk highly about that. I was always proud when writers would meet me and they would ask me where Meak was at.” Curve says, “I feel like [Esteme and I] are on the same type of shit that we both grew up on and both love: It’s just the craft of graffiti. I think we can just relate to each other with what we like.” But as you can see, the two aren’t weirdo twins, where one sprays a line and the other does too on some rooftop miles away. “I feel comfortable in saying I still think my shit is Philly shit ‘cause I’m certainly from here,” says Esteme. “But I have a lot of other influences.” In 2005, Esteme was inducted into the style brain trust, The Exchange. The program, started by Jersey Joe, includes 12 writers from around the world with distinct styles. In rotation, the members pair off, sketch their partner’s name and send them to each other to be painted. Though Esteme is maybe the least established participating member, he’s quick to paint the sketches and does them illegally. “Curve is the type of dude that people recognize from the way he paints—and you can tell a lot by the way people paint—but he is always one of those dudes that everybody and their moms respected,” says Esteme. “This city especially, to have that much of respect from the local heads—big accomplishment.”

Curve and Esteme have comfortable lives in Philadelphia, with their own places, girlfriends and jobs working with kids. And though the duo likes traveling to paint, they don’t see themselves moving anytime soon. “It’s a good place for random mixing of people who like the same things. There is some good people and some good time painting and chillin’ [in Philadelphia],” says Esteme. “The only reason I’m writing graffiti to this day is because I’ve been fortunate enough to meet so many good people along the way that kept me in it.” Outside of the graf scene, certain areas of Philadelphia are slowly being modernized and gentrified, yet there’s also an incredible amount of violent crime in other areas. Last year, there were over 400 murders in Philadelphia, it’s highest rate in a decade. Only three months into 2007, there were 100 murders in Philadelphia, and so rent prices stay low relative to other big cities. Having spent a brief period of time living in New York, Nope lives in Philly and stays productive. “Certain things can exist down here that can’t exist in New York or any bigger more publicized city. [In Philly] people can do more stuff under

the radar, people can do things cheaply. That's one of the things that kept me here," he says. "I've learned to be really resourceful here and I can survive here. I like the space, I like to do my own thing."

On another weekend in Philadelphia, Curve and other writers from GOA (Getting Over Always) are painting on the side of a house with permission from the owner. There's also other generations of Philly writers in on it like Braze, who's in 1987's Spraycan Art, and even this tiny 10-year-old kid painting that badass, pointy "S" that everybody did when they were 10. Esteme shows up and everyone's drawing in black books, eating pizza, drinking beer and eventually bombing other buildings on the block. Curve's already finished his piece by the time the cops show up and tell everyone to leave, but it's just a speed bump. Here in Philly, writing would have ended up on that street anyway...And then probably buffed. "That's the way I'm thinking about graffiti, man. People think it's like something sacred—it's not, it just comes and goes," says Curve. "I know I sure as hell like doing it. Somehow you'll feed it. Somewhere, one day, somebody will see it and then it'll be gone and you just keep doing it...It's just there, part of urbanity."