

REFRESH YOUR HEAD

It's been a long time coming but we finally caught up with everyone's favourite graffiti legend, Tizer, to talk about the history of London's graffiti culture and where it all began for him. We met up with him a few days after the opening of his first solo show at Pure Evil Gallery. Fresh from its success, Tizer was still beaming with joy from the sheer volume of people who turned out to support him. And it's no surprise. After all, as someone said to me at the show, 'He's the nicest guy in graff.'

You're a member of ID crew, how did this come about?

My brother and I were both in a crew called SHK during the early '90s but it got a bit too big, there were about 60 to 80 people in it by the end so we felt that we should start our own crew. It was originally meant to be a two-man crew. We were taking the piss with the name as there was a crew in the '70s in New York called the Ebony Dukes and we called ourselves the Ivory Dukes because we were white, not a race thing though. When we were kids we were really into the Dukes of Hazard and used to call ourselves the Dukes Brothers, it was just a pisstake thing

really. After about a year and a half he put one of his best friends in it and I got pissed off and put one of my friends in it. Now there's about 12 different people, but it's a solid crew and we're all friends – more like a family than a graffiti crew, really.

Do you still get to work with each other a lot?

Yeah, we paint with each other all the time. There's been a couple of guys who have slowed down over the years but every person has done a lot of illegal and legal graffiti and they've all held their own name within the culture. A lot of the people weren't getting recognised that

much in their own crews or they were by themselves, so we formed our own thing.

Does your brother still graff?

We started to do it as a job in the early 2000s and after a while he got sick of it and didn't want to do it anymore. Then he was put into the Zulu Nation, which was founded by Afrika Bambaataa to promote the positive sides of hip-hop culture. My brother is a DJ and he did lots of interviews for Graphotism and Undercover magazine, which is a hip-hop magazine, then the UK Zulus chose him to be the next Zulu member. At one point I was having quite a lot of beef with different crews and he had to take a side-step because he was supposed to be showing the positive side of hip-hop culture, so he couldn't really do that and beef people as well, although he would have obviously backed me up if something went down. He got sick of meeting dickhead graffiti writers and he felt their morals were fucked up and they weren't doing it for the right reasons.

He has started painting again now and enjoying it. I love painting with him as we always come up with stupid ideas and have fun doing

it. In the late '90s we changed the name of Ivory Dukes to Idiots Crew because most of the people in the crew were dyslexic or they had relationship problems. If we were cussing ourselves, other people couldn't cuss us. We started doing lots of comedy walls because at the time everyone's crew names were really aggressive and they were doing aggressive pieces, so we kind of flipped it on its head and were doing pisstake walls, which were funny and stupid. I met this kid once who said "You're making graffiti fun again. Everyone takes it so seriously and it's supposed to be fun and you and your brother make the funniest fucking walls." So we did that for a long time but didn't want to be the laughing stock, so we started doing our own stuff, but once in a while we'll do a dumb wall.

Do you think it's important to have that crew mentality?

Yeah, if you're doing big productions and stuff like that it's good to have camaraderie. We all have the same main goal and every person in the

took us to see the Futura piece that he did when he was touring with The Clash, and that made us look at New York style graffiti in a different way. My parents were really political so we went on a lot of marches and stuff like that. In the early '80s there was a lot of political graffiti that my brother and I were noticing and around '83/'84 is when New York style graffiti started to flourish in the city. We lived in South London and there were a lot of tags on buses that we were trying to read, we started recognising it and understanding it. Then we both got heavily into hip-hop and that was the way we could be a part of the culture, as we couldn't afford decks or records. Graffiti was free, we were either making our own markers and inks or stealing spray paint, so you could do it quite cheaply but still be quite important within the scene.

Did living in America influence you? When did you move to London?

My mother's English, my dad was a violent alcoholic and we had to

and I wasn't interested in a lot of things, but my brother and I always drew, so it was an obvious transition to get into graffiti, really.

Would you say that hip-hop culture is integral to your life?

It is and it isn't. I still do lots of b-boy characters because that's what I was into when I was younger and now I can actually paint them how I want to paint them. I guess the whole idea of 'each one, teach one', has always been important to me and I do a lot of youth projects and school people who aren't as good. That was really lost in this country, whereas in America people schooled the younger generation on how to paint, whereas in London it was always very selfish and all the writers kept everything to themselves and didn't teach anybody the laws or the rules of graffiti, so that's why graffiti in this country is a little bit messed up now, with young kids tagging over people's pieces and thinking that's cool. Whereas if that was in the '80s you would have got your arse kicked.

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crew has a completely different style but we work well together. We didn't want everyone to have similar-looking graffiti, it was quite important that every person could stand on their own, really. A lot of the guys have flourished, one guy Agent who is writing Gent now, he's originally from Birmingham but he wasn't really being recognised in this country and then went to Australia and, the minute he moved over there, people went crazy over his stuff.

Where did your interest in graffiti start and how did you get into it all?

My cousin was a punk when we first moved to this country from America and he was doing punk graffiti and

get away from that. We moved here when I was seven and my brother was nine; it was pretty difficult for the first few years. There weren't any Americans living in South London at that time so we got a lot of shit for it. Mainly because the only kind of American TV shows that were out at the time were Dallas and Dynasty, so most kids on the bus, when they heard our accent, thought we were rich and were always trying to fight us. England was pretty racist back then and I was an angry kid. My brother and I were both quite angry in fact, so that was a good release for us. Skateboarding and graffiti were the only things that made us proud of ourselves. I'm really badly dyslexic and wasn't good at school

Have you seen a lot of change in the graffiti culture from back in the '80s to now?

When my brother and I started we didn't really tell anyone who we were for years because it was quite dangerous. It was a violent scene, more so in the '90s. London went through a really dark period where it was more like the scene in New York and Paris with a lot of kids getting beaten up or mugged. You could get into a lot of trouble from doing graffiti if people knew who you were. Around 2000, when people started doing street art, it was a really exciting time because there were graphic designers doing stickers or people doing wheatpastes or stencils and it kind of mellowed

the whole scene out. Whereas in the '90s if you weren't doing a DDS style, who were the most important people of that era, then you weren't shit. It kind of opened it up and you could actually do different stuff. Zumbo and Diet really taught a lot of people how to paint and those people taught other people, so in one way it was great, as it was a London style and it didn't look like anything from anywhere else, but on an international scale people in other countries weren't really that interested in British graffiti. But it's going full circle again and people in other countries are interested in specific writers like they were in the '80s.

Do you think with the mellowing out, that turf wars and beef don't exist as much anymore? Or do you think that, as the older generation, you don't see it as much now?

I'm older and I'm taller than a lot of people, so not many people will try and fuck with me anymore. There's a lot of beef within our culture but it's changing. You can have a long graffiti career in this country if you're clever about how you do it. If you don't act like an asshole, people won't test you as much. If you're not the main person the police are looking for, then you can still be up in the city but not be the person they are kicking doors down looking for. With CCTV in this country it's pretty hard to do illegal graffiti but I think it's important that I still do illegal pieces. It's nowhere near what I used to do and I don't really paint trains in this country – I don't do tracksides anymore. I've been doing it for 24 years and I started when I was 12, so for the first part of my childhood I was going to halls of fame but I would never paint them. Firstly, because I could have got robbed and, secondly, all the people that were painting there were better than me so I wouldn't go over them. That's why I was doing tracksides – they were the only places I could paint. There are certain people who hold the history of British graffiti and they only got on with certain people so they deny a lot of other people's work. You only remember who you want to remember. There's a lot of people who have been forgotten even though they did a lot or changed a lot

of things. The older I get the more I realise I've become a role model and the younger generations look at me for guidance. If I do things in a positive way or am positive with young people when they meet me, then they realise they don't have to pretend to be a gangster; you don't have to act how you think you should act as a graffiti writer.

How do you find having a career as a graffiti artist – does it work?

It's really fucking hard. Whenever anybody says to me 'I want to do graffiti as a living,' I say 'well, expect to be evicted from your house and lose your girlfriends.' You go through stages of being absolutely skint and then making a little bit of money and then being absolutely skint again. If you're not a specific name then it's pretty hard to make a living from it. On the flip side of that because I've been doing it for 11 years now as a job, people have asked me to do specific things that I would never have painted before, like a jungle scene with a spaceship and Mickey Mouse jumping out of it and I'm like 'yeah I can paint that!' I've taught myself how to paint leaves or bark or do backgrounds where I would never have done that on a wall, but I can bring all those techniques through to my actual graffiti.

Do you enjoy learning all those new skills?

Yeah, I think it's really important. If you want to do it as a job then you have to learn how to do everything so that people will want to hire you, as they know you can do lettering, backgrounds, graffiti, photorealism. If you can't do all those things you're fucked.

Do you think you'll do it until you can no longer hold a spray can?

Yeah, definitely. I can't do anything else! I was never good at school and didn't really get any qualifications, I'm dyslexic as fuck – I don't want to work in retail anymore or wash dishes. I started working when I was eight and up until 11 years ago I was working in bullshit jobs. I was really unhappy. In a way it was good because I was so angry that it made me do a lot of illegal graffiti, but I'm old now and I don't want to go to prison for graff. What I would think was a sell-out thing to do in 1988

has changed now. If somebody's willing to pay for my rent I don't care what the job is.

You were asked to paint Malcolm McLaren's casket, how did that come about?

My ex-girlfriend used to work for Agent Provocateur and its co-founder, Joe Corr e, who's Malcolm McLaren's son, knew that I did graffiti and I had known him for a few years by that point. He rang me up and asked me if I could write 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die' on the side of the casket because that's what McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop on the King's Road was called. I said to Joe that I could do that but that it would be nice if I could paint the Duck Rock album cover on the top, which is the boombox that Dondi had painted. Dondi was a famous New York graffiti writer who had passed away and he was important to me because he made me listen to Malcolm McLaren's music. McLaren had the first video on Top of the Pops that had graffiti in it and starred Dondi painting in the video, so that in turn started the whole wave of graffiti and hip-hop in this country. So I painted that and it was on the front page of every newspaper worldwide. It was mental. I had to paint it in the morgue, which was really weird and there were people under sheets and I saw some dude's foot hanging out. To paint anybody's coffin is a real honour, but to paint his casket was insane. It was quite incredible really. A depressing honour.

Can you talk about some other projects you've worked on that stand out for you?

I really enjoy doing large-scale public murals because they change areas and become focal points and bring a lot of joy to people. For me as a kid growing up in South London, I was really into the political murals that were painted in the late '70s and early '80s because they were on such a huge scale. That's something I've been fortunate enough to do, but I'd love to be able to do more. Painting the Kilburn Tube mural was amazing, there's a little plaque there with my name on it too.

You opened your first ever solo show at Pure Evil Gallery a few nights ago. How did that come about?

Charlie from Pure Evil asked me to do a solo show. I had never been asked to do one before, so I was quite stoked. I had about three months to figure out what I wanted to do. I really like seeing other people's graffiti on canvas but I'm not really a fan of doing letters on canvas myself, I normally try to do character-based paintings because they're more fun for me to paint. I asked a friend of mine from Croatia, a guy called Lunar, what he thought I should do and he said he really liked the women I'm painting at the moment and said: 'Men like women

in Europe as an art form but people are actually selling art in this country, which is great.

There was an insane turnout for the show with hundreds of people lining the street. How did that make you feel?

It freaked me out. At about five o'clock in the afternoon I was absolutely shitting myself and thinking that no-one would come. I knew my mum and my brother would be there, but that was it. It was a mad turn-out. Charlie said it was the busiest show he'd ever had and a lot of my friends said it was the busiest graffiti show they'd ever seen. It was crazy, people cheered

shooting yourself in the foot. If you act like a fucking douchebag then people will treat you like an arsehole and disrespect you. I've just always found graffiti fun and it's a positive thing, as much as it is often deemed as a negative thing. I was lucky that my brother and I only hung out with two other writers when we were kids, so our friends were normal people who weren't writers. If you're hanging out with writers from an early age your morals get all fucked and you think that stealing or punching a girl is OK when actually it's not. Some people that I've met are great and will be friends of mine until I die and some people I wouldn't want to

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and women like women so do loads of women.' So I basically painted loads of girls and then Busk came round to my house and said: 'You need to have some letters and you need to have some b-boy characters as people will expect that from you.' So I did some of those too! Which was quite lucky really as most of the people who came on the night were graffiti writers. I painted my characters in a different way to how I would normally do them but I wanted to make it all instantly recognisable as my stuff.

Back in the early 2000s I was part of a group called 'They Made Me Do It', which was the first group graffiti exhibitions in the country since the '80s, so we kind of started the whole graffiti in gallery projects during that time and Banksy used to come to our exhibitions and see how he could do his own. People now have art galleries that specialise in street art and graffiti, which is just great. We are one of the only countries that is taking graffiti and street art seriously; it's more accepted

me when I walked out! It was really nice to see everyone together and having a good time... and tagging the shit out of the building opposite. There were two arrests.

What did your mum think of the show?

She loved it. People kept going up to her and saying 'Congratulations Mrs Tizer', which was hilarious.

Somebody described you that night as 'the nicest guy in graff'. What do you say to that?

Haha! they're lying, I'm horrible! For me, graffiti was always a positive thing in my life, so I try and portray that when I meet other writers. When I was a kid I met a specific writer who I really looked up to and he belittled me in front of eight guys and that made me instantly hate him and his artwork for 20 years. I never wanted to be that guy who was negative. The younger generation and the people who are your peers are the ones who like your artwork, so if you're a dick to the people that are in your own scene, then you're kind of

meet again but I still acknowledge their existence as they are part of our culture. I remember Chu saying to me years ago "A spray can is a tool. To a carpenter a hammer is also a tool but a psychopath may kill someone with it." So you can't say that the same types of people will use the same tools.

What's next for you?

I want to travel a lot and just paint, paint, paint. I'm going to Hungary tomorrow and Dublin next week. It's important for me to travel, as I want international people to look at London as a good graffiti scene. I want people from Germany or the States or Australia to want to come to London to paint. The UK has some of the best graffiti in the world I think, although I'm obviously biased. We went through a lot of hardships to get where we are and we've got some amazing graffiti writers. Even people who hate me, I think are great graffiti writers. I just want to keep promoting the British graffiti scene. I try to paint every day, it's tiring, but fuck it, I'll sleep when I'm dead.