

# CONFESSIONS OF A MAD BOMBER

James Reitano's autobiographical graphic novel series is a secret history of the graffiti subculture in 1980s Santa Cruz **BY STEVE PALOPOLI**

remember this guy we used to see around town," says James Reitano. "He had no legs, and one arm, and was in a wheelchair. One night he told me he was this famous graffiti writer. I knew he wasn't, but he told me this whole story. 'Yeah man, it's me! I'm going to go back to New York with all my subway buddies and go bomb!' I'd see him around town, and think 'I know you're not who you say you are.' Just odd stuff like that would happen. And I was like, 'I gotta get that in there.'"

The "there" in which he had to get it is *Nineteen Eighty Five*, a series of graphic novels in which Reitano recounts, in comic-panel and often surreal

form, his days as part of the underground graffiti subculture in Santa Cruz in the 1980s.

Populated by misfits of all stripes, the Santa Cruz of *Nineteen Eighty Five* is oddly schizoid. On the one hand, the narrative is propelled by high-energy teenage kicks—tagging runs across the Boardwalk trestle and under the Laurel Street Bridge, skirmishing graffiti rivals who paint over each others' work, music geeks obsessing over their favorite bands while flipping through records at Logos.

On the other hand, a sinister ambience hangs over the Santa Cruz of these comics like twilight fog. It has the uneasy feel of a place that hasn't yet recovered from its rep as the murder capital of the world.

The stories center around a fictionalized version of Reitano in 1985, when he was 15 (the character is even named James), and his real-life crew. They wear the same clothes every day. They spend a lot of time running from the cops. They stroll down Pacific Avenue. They get caught up in the burgeoning hip-hop scene. They go to a quinceañera in Watsonville. They argue about the differences between Santa Cruz High and Aptos High. They encounter Satanists in donut shops.

In real life, Reitano moved to Santa Cruz with his family when he was 10 years old. Within a few years, he was frequenting Club Culture, a mid-'80s venue on Front Street that hosted all-ages

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**BREAKING NEWS** James Reitano's 'Nineteen Eighty Five' comics show how graffiti and early hip-hop culture intersected in Santa Cruz in the 1980s.

shows and was run by Rotten Richie (a.k.a. Richard Walker, the African American drummer in the popular Santa Cruz punk band Public Enemies). Reitano did his very first tagging behind Club Culture, and eventually he put together a crew. Though from a mix of ethnic backgrounds (Reitano is of Italian descent), they all affiliated themselves with the Afrocentric, straight-edge Zulu Nation movement begun by early hip-hop star Afrika Bambaataa (best known to punkers of the mid-'80s for his single "World Destruction" with former Sex Pistol John Lydon and Bill Laswell, as Time Zone).

"Then I just kind of ran with that group of dudes, which is what the comic's about. That lasted for about two years, then it just died," he says. "I kept doing it for myself, and then it came back in the early '90s, a whole new generation of kids that regarded me as this, like, Yoda type guy. I was only 21! They were like, 'Oh my god, you're still around, bro?'"

## Making a Name

The punk scene was already well established here, but the earlier generation of punks scared the hell out of Reitano and his friends.

"The punk and skateboarding scene of the early '80s was really scary. Those guys were all older and gnarly," he says. "They'd always have like a black eye or something! They were kind of crazy, so we were scared of them. Years later, I worked with all those guys, cause they were all retired almost, and doing screen printing at Santa Cruz Skateboards. 'Oh yeah, you're Mike Neider from Bl'ast!? Oh cool! You're from Spaceboy?' Knowing them in that setting was interesting, but those guys were all really intimidating."

Reitano chose the title *Nineteen Eighty Five* for the series—of which he is currently prepping volume five out of a projected eight—because that's the year everything seemed to click with his original crew.

"It all kind of kicked in. We got a little bit of notoriety in other towns. People in San Francisco started paying attention to us. Graffiti was still very regional—there was no Internet—so if you heard about people, you just saw the photos. 'Oh, that's so and so from San Francisco.' But you never met anybody. We kind of made a name for ourselves," he says.

Though it's hard to figure out the exact time span that weaves through the volumes of *Nineteen Eighty Five*, it's clear that it all takes place before the 1989 earthquake—a significant point, as Reitano sees it.

"The earthquake was kind of a demarcation line. That's what I wanted to write about," he says. "As you write, you think, 'oh man, *that's* what this is about. It's not really about running around spray painting. It's about this city, and how before the earthquake, it was kind of this last gasp of the '60s. The earthquake was kind of like, no, now this is dead, and the town has a chance to shed all that past. All of a sudden, the dream was over. Because Berkeley and Santa Cruz were always the places you could go and it was like 'Wow, these guys are still hanging on!' The '80s were in full swing, and everything here was going against that, there was this whole political movement."

## Elder Statesman

And yet, for Reitano the '90s would turn out to be even more interesting. Santa Cruz's impact on skateboarding culture was huge in the '80s—San Jose may have had bigger stars, but the best boards were over the hill at Santa Cruz Skateboards. In the early '90s, white street skaters began adopting hip-hop style, and more Latino and African American kids began picking up boards. In Santa Cruz, Reitano began hanging out with kids in this new scene, who romanticized him as an old-school hero even though he was only a couple of years older than they were. Through one of them, he made a life-changing connection.

"One of the guys, Dimitri, who I would go graffiti with, he got hired at Santa Cruz Skateboards. It was like 'oh shit, you got in there? That's awesome!' And he said, 'they're looking for a guy to do board

designs,'" Reitano remembers. "I went in there, got the interview and spent four years there. I spent every single day at that place thinking I was going to get fired."

Even so, he was thrilled to see kids skating around town on boards he'd designed. But he was also ready to hang up the spray can. By the mid-'90s, he'd been busted several times—including once at Disneyland, where only the intervention of a relative on the Anaheim police force saved him from juvenile hall.

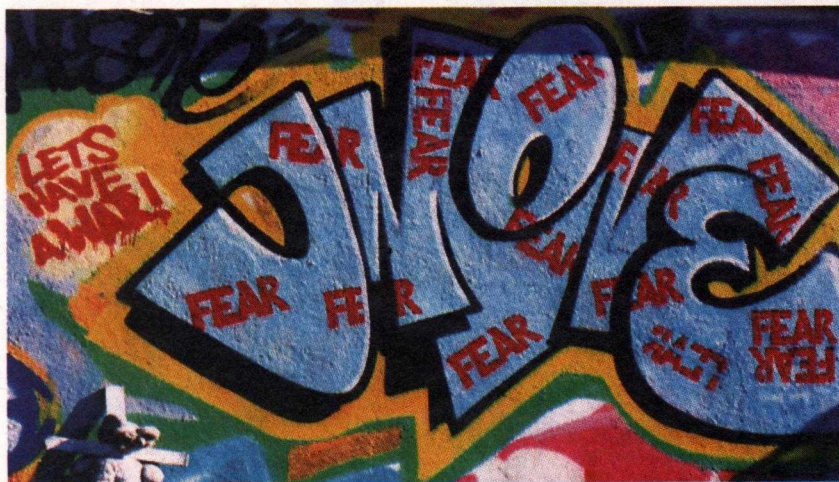
## Running With The KutMasta

Within a couple of years, Reitano moved to L.A. He found work at an Internet start-up, having no clue that he'd soon have a separate career doing music videos for some of the biggest names in underground hip-hop—and later, electronic music.

It all started with KutMasta Kurt, aka Kurt Matlin, who was part of Reitano's crew. Matlin is also Santa Cruz's only hip-hop breakout success story. In the mid-'80s, at age 15, he had done a fantastic show called "Solid Funk" on local public station KUSP (clips from the mix CDs that accompany each volume of *Nineteen Eighty Five* document Reitano guesting on the show, as DJ Icee J).

Matlin moved to L.A. to work with Kool Keith, whom he still collaborates with to this day, and once Kool Keith's legendary *Sex Style* album broke in 1997, KutMasta Kurt was in demand, producing Dilated Peoples and Linkin Park, and doing remixes for the Beastie Boys, Mos Def and more.

It was Matlin who first approached Reitano about doing an animated video, for the song "We All Over," by Masters of Illusion, which featured Kool Keith, KutMasta Kurt and Motion Man. Flash animation was big on the Internet, and Reitano was an early innovator. He was working for Fox at the time, but after the Kool Keith video got some traction online, he got a call from representatives of Biz Markie, who had blown up with a string of Top 10 hits like "Just a Friend" and "Young Girl Bluez." Markie wanted an animated video for "La Da Da."



**WE NEED THE SPACE** Graffiti from Reitano's tagging days in Santa Cruz, with a reference to the iconic punk song from Fear's 1982 album *'The Record.'*

"So I got hired to do a Biz Markie video," he remembers. "Holy shit, I couldn't believe it. I quit Fox, and spent seven months on that video. From there, it was one video after another. It was a crazy time. I did one for the Dickies ['Donut Man'], Madlib [the iconic video for 'All Caps' that defined the Madvillain project with MF DOOM], Quasimoto ['Bullyshit'], a bunch for Stones Throw Records, Manchester Orchestra ['Golden Ticket'], Cut Chemist ['Spat']. I just did one for Skrillex last year [for 'Burst']. It was totally crazy. I spent a year on it. These things are a big chunk of my life."

It was also during this time that Reitano got his first graphic novel project, a biography of Wu-Tang Clan's GZA. It ended up shelved, but was clearly a dry run for *Nineteen Eighty Five*.

"I wanted it to be an actual biography about Ol' Dirty Bastard, RZA and GZA, and the impetus of Wu-Tang. I took a lot of artistic liberty in there, and I don't think he liked that," he admits. "I think he wanted something more fantastic. I was like 'we should do an indie comic like *Love & Rockets*, where you guys are just yourselves and it's '86, and the crack epidemic is about to hit New York. I went to New York and took photos of their old neighborhood for research. It was an intense year and a half."

In 2006, though, after years of requests for his "war stories" as a tagger, he started putting together notes and making sketches for the

comic he really wanted to write, about his misadventures in Santa Cruz.

"The funny thing about the book is I wouldn't have done this if I stayed here. I needed to move to do a book about my hometown," he says. "When I look back, it was kind of a dark time. It's interesting what we did, but my teens and 20s? I'd never want to go back there."

All the real-life members of his old crew have seen the books, and apparently all but one have been very supportive, and pleased with their portrayal.

"This guy Stokely who's in here, he was my best friend. He just disappeared, and no one knew where he went. It turned out he changed his name, and he's a professor of hip-hop studies. I've emailed him, but I guess he's just severed ties, I guess with everybody. I was like 'you're in the book!' But I don't think he's happy about it," says Reitano.

He's almost finished with the fifth volume, and there are many more strange characters and bizarre stories to be packed into the next two books. But for the finale, he has something truly radical planned.

"The eighth issue's going to be about Santa Cruz of 1885," he says. "The same characters, but set in the 1800s. That was the year that surfing was introduced by the Hawaiians, it was the year the railroads were fighting over who had access to the main corridors. I think I can tie all that in and make it this weird historical comic about Santa Cruz County back then." 🐉