



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

FAB 5 FREDDY INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Fab 5 Freddy, Artist
April 16, 2024
Interviewed by: Jackie Glover
Total Running Time: 29 min and 9 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

FAB 5 FREDDY:

Storytelling is everything for me. I mean, I love storytelling. My motivation for wanting to make film, to make art. I'm telling a story. There's always a story there that's so important. And finding more new, innovative ways of doing that is important as well. And that underlies what I do, why I do it, and how I do it. And I hope you get the story.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Fab 5 Freddy

Artist

00:00:51:00

INTERVIEWER:

First, I'd like to ask you to introduce yourself and tell us what you do.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

I'm Fred Brathwaite, more popularly known as Fab 5 Freddy. I'm an artist, you know, I work in film. I work in visual art. You know.

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INTERVIEWER:

And where did you grow up?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

I grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell me what Bedford-Stuyvesant was like when you were a kid?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

You know, a brownstone community that got a really bad rap because it's a lot of black folks and in the 60s and 70s, it was depicted as a ghetto, as a horrendous ghetto. They try to make it look like it was a lot worse than it was. There were parts of Brooklyn that were pretty bad, slummed out. And so a lot of times people thought everywhere in the city where people of color lived was similar, but Bed-Stuy was not. It was predominantly a home owning community, a lot of brownstones and townhouses and working middle class folks, which included my parents.



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INTERVIEWER:

What did your parents do?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

My dad was an accountant. My mom was a nurse.

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INTERVIEWER:

So where did you get the art? How did that come into your life?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

You know, my dad was close to the jazz bebop scene. Max Roach was my godfather. So as Max became a very important, prominent jazz player that created bebop along with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk. My dad was like in that mix and milieu, and as Max blew up, those guys would come to hang out with my dad and his crew in Brooklyn, and my dad just had a lot of creatives in the mix around. Close friends of his were sculptors and painters, and other people making music, you know activists, agitators. And so my house became like a hotbed for my dad's friends who would come at least four nights out of the week.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:



As I grew up, my house was like this think tank salon hang out. They indulged in cannabis. They discussed everything going on around the world, things particularly affecting Black folks, people of color. African countries were getting their liberation. Those were things that excited my dad and his friends. So that's some of the stuff that was going around, going on around me as a kid, playing with G.I. Joe, not realizing how much of this really rubbed off on me.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you think your parents encouraged you to be in the arts?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

No, not at all. My parents did not encourage me to be an artist, but they didn't censor or edit who I was going to be. They didn't edit or censor the friends that I hung out with. So essentially, as homeowners in Bed-Stuy, typically the people that own homes didn't let their kids play with any and everybody. My parents didn't censor my friends, so I ran with some of the best to the worst at that time. Didn't end up so well for a lot of them, but I had a long leash. But if I stayed out ten minutes past curfew, I was in trouble. So I got to hang with different types of people in my hood, which helped shape who I became along with my dad's friends. Influences rubbed off on me in ways that I wasn't aware of until I became aware.

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INTERVIEWER:

So with that talk about when you started first doing art.



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FAB 5 FREDDY:

I guess it happened over a period of time. You know, these things are not just, hey, I'm going to do this. It kind of developed along with me. Creatives were around very, like I said, very sophisticated thinkers, very cutting edge people that were tied in. I don't think it— I don't know if it wasn't just one thing, but that leaning towards creat— I guess, as a young kid, probably between 8 and 10, the first real thing I wanted to do and be was an architect. And so that became a very early passion and aspiration. And it happened when I was in school, I was really young, and I remember realizing that every room that we're in has been drawn out by somebody. Somebody has determined how wide the hallway is, how high the ceiling is. And that was drawn.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And that became really fascinating to me. So I started researching, once again at a very young age, architects and architecture and Frank Lloyd Wright and, you know, looking at his work and trying to read and understand what this was to be an architect. And then I remember this man once again, roughly between the ages of eight and ten, the Christmas present that I pleaded with my mother to get me was a repertoire graph pen, which is a type of pen that mechanical draw it, mechanical drawers and architects use to draw. You get a perfect size line. And it was a very expensive pen for that time, probably \$30, \$40, which was all the money in the world when I was really young. So that was the beginning of the creative initiative for me.



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FAB 5 FREDDY:

The school I went to, the high school I'd eventually go to, I was, you know, took mechanical drawing, but the teachers did not encourage me like I thought they would or like I saw them doing other students. So that kind of went away for me. But later when I got on the art scene, there were other friends that I met that also had a similar situation, and they basically had to leave high school and go to an alternative program to get an equivalency diploma. It was a really rough time for me and my parents. My mom in particular was not pleased, but eventually when I did make it to the art scene and stuff, there were several other people that had this similar situation, and then we realized that we were just not set up for that regimented school curriculum, because I did other things that fueled what I would later do. Like I would go off on adventures as a student, I would travel the subways and go to the museums around the city and go to these, for me, distant places at the end of the A train line, or I would take trains to the end to explore. And that was fun. And, you know, but not with like, I'm going to be an artist. That came a bit later. There was a certain series of events that would come together to make that a reality for me.

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INTERVIEWER:

So what were those events? What happened?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:



Well, once again, I equate it all to the kind of people I grew up around that were very creative leaning musicians, sculptors and painters that were friends of my dad. That was a thing. But, I think discovering Andy Warhol and his work kind of rubbed off on me. And then I think what happened was there was a light bulb went off in a way, when I realized that the work— Well, this is the New York graffiti world, which I had become a part of, which went from just scrawling my name, which is what everybody did just wrote their names everywhere at that point in the 70s in New York, just kids in New York trying to outdo each other, trying to be the best, the most prolific, the most active. It developed into a form of making art like a form of making the letters really big and colorful and three dimensional, and inspirations from comic books and from advertising and bright colors that popped or became an inspiration for what graffiti artists were doing.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And at a point I realized, so I'm looking at art books and here's Andy Warhol's work, here's Roy Lichtenstein's work, here's Claes Oldenburg's work, here's other pop artists that were inspired by similar things I began to notice. That we were inspired by. Comic books, advertising. And so at that point, something began to click in my head that we were doing something similar without any of this art history, formal awareness. We just organically picked up and jumped into this following pop art, which had happened ten or so years earlier, I should say, and all of that clicked for me in a really big way. That we were making art without realizing we were making art. And so I decided that I wanted to be an artist and work



in that space. And then that became a mission to figure out how to make that happen.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

The idea was to take it to this next level outside of the trains, into galleries, if you will, into a more formal art space and to also open the doors so other folks like us could kind of come in and get a and become a part of it. I didn't realize that it was a- it needed to kind of transition because skills and techniques had been developed just out of that competition, ways of using different cans and colors and ways of getting different sized lines. It was a whole bunch of technical stuff that came out of this frenzy that, you know, guys growing up becoming young men after doing it as teenagers like, you know, we can't keep doing this. And I think there's a way we can move ourselves into the art world and get it the attention of people that, you know, look at art and think about art.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And another part of what I had an idea to do, like I said, I was thinking about film, was if we could create a movie, a narrative film, we could depict ourselves in the light and show who we really are as people, as opposed to the media generally painting us as like, just, wild savage street urchins. And that became hip hop's first movie, a film called *Wild Style* (1983). I met a guy named Charlie A'hearn who was an underground filmmaker in New York. I pitched him this idea, and we right away decided to let's- let's make this film. The idea we had was, look, let's use all the real people themselves to play the graffiti artist. Let's use the real graffiti



writers, the real rappers, the DJs. So now in *Wild Style*, you have this early record of the people that really were out there creating this whole space of creativity under the radar of everybody.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And this is the first inkling many people get to see, you know, Grandmaster Flash, Rocksteady Crew, Lady Pink, these are real prominent people that were actually doing this that were featured in the film, which did really well, by the way. The film did well around the world and helped show people, hey, this is what it is. And they followed suit.

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INTERVIEWER:

You met Jean-Michel Basquiat doing graffiti...

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

I was— I had been yeah. The point when I met Jean-Michel was the beginning of this wanting to be an artist, figuring out my way into the scene, which was pretty much like an unpaved path, especially for a young, barely 20 year old, young African-American. It just— it just didn't happen. And so a part of what I was thinking about was how to make an impact, how to, like, circumnavigate the apparent obstacles to do what I wanted to do. So, I guess a part of what I did was I made some interesting alliances with some people. I looked at this downtown new wave scene that was raging at the time, late 70s, going into the 80s. Punk rock had happened. It was page two story— thankfully, my dad subscribed to a lot



of publications, which I looked at. The New York Times was one, and he'd bring it home all the time.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And it was page two stories about the Sex Pistols and The Clash, and I thought this was sort of revolutionary, something really exciting going on. And they were changing the way rock and roll had been set up, which initially had a very bad boy rough edge vibe around it. And these punk rock kids were like wanting to bring that back. And I was digging the energy where that was coming from, and I— and the things they were doing. I thought, man, these people are embracing some really extreme ideas. If I could connect with people plugged into that scene and tell them these ideas that I was developing about graffiti as a form of community, as a form of art, as some of us are making what I thought was some very visual, interesting visual art, as well as this new music which was developing in the Bronx that I was plugged into, which had didn't even have a name yet, but I was following this music in the streets and these DJs.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And I'm beginning to think of all this as a unique form of expression, as a unique form of culture that was not looked at at that time. There were no positive articles. Rap records had barely come out. Graffiti was the scourge of New York City. Young Black and Latin youth were always depicted, for the most part in the press, in a negative light, crime and things that were negative. That's how they would paint us. And I wanted



to along with, you know, creating a space for myself to create and be an artist. I wanted to also create a better light around all of us because we were all made to look pretty bad. And so, I then reached out and made connections with some significant people on the New York downtown scene, particularly a person by the name of Glenn O'Brien, who was a writer for Interview Magazine. I told him these ideas I was developing, and Glen basically invited me.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

He says, man, he liked everything I was talking about. This connection between— I felt like there was a connection between these street cultures developing and the energy of punk rock, essentially is what I told him, and that I was in the space. And I'm seeing these things. And wanted his feedback. He liked everything. And he said— he said in a couple of months he was going to do a public access TV show. He wanted me to come on and talk about these things that I had basically explained. And, in a couple of months, I got a call. He said, "Man, we're ready to do this TV show. I'd like you to come and be a guest on the first show." And that kind of was significant because the people that were the regulars in the audience and the guests were the cutting edge cream of the crop of downtown New York new wave punk rock, if you will, culture. They were cognizant... They were the people that were really pulling the strings, is who I began to meet and become good friends with. And, they listened to what I was talking about.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:



They all thought it was great. You know, they love the graffiti on the trains. It's like, "Oh, wow, you're one of those guys that do that? We love that shit." I was like, wow, this is great. And that began how I was able to really develop and then execute. Chris Stein from a group called Blondie was the co-host of the show with Glenn, and his lady, Debbie Harry, the lead of this group, Blondie. And, yeah, they all became friends and supporters, kind of mentored me. And Jean-Michel, we meet in that time frame. He had been doing his little graffiti in SOHO in The Village, and we met and immediately became very close. And then we started trying to figure it out.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

A key piece of that puzzle was... So that was early 80s, late 80s. Me being asked to host a show for MTV called, Yo! MTV Raps.

ARCHIVAL FAB 5 FREDDY:

Welcome back, Yo! MTV Raps. Q-Tip from A Tribe Called

ARCHIVAL Q-TIP:

What's Up, y'all?

FAB 5 FREDDY:

Which becomes like the highest rated show on the channel, and it put hip hop music in living rooms across the country and also around the world. The show would be picked up by MTV and all these other countries. So it was crazy, the way it all developed. It was very special.

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INTERVIEWER:

So you've directed many music videos, but I wanted to talk about one in particular, your Queen Latifah's "Ladies First," I want to know what inspired you to incorporate images of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, which I think were very powerful at the time because we were not necessarily seeing many of those images.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

Yeah. Well, once again, my awareness of that, it was a big issue. If you were plugged in on what was going on in the world, like many people around the world were fighting the apartheid regime in, in, in South Africa, it was a horrendous situation. There had been some other people in hip hop that have... Stetsasonic, Daddio from Stetsasonic, had made a very strong song addressing the issues. Bruce Springsteen and some other artists had gotten together to do a very strong, with a bunch of artists, anti-apartheid song. So it was a very, especially for me and people in my circle, it was a very pressing issue at the time. But I had this image of her as this strong Black female, and I envisioned, if Haile Selassie had a daughter who was also helping to fight the apartheid regime. It would be her. Like this female general, if you will.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And I gave her this kind of commanding presence in "Ladies First," which I was really proud of this video because there was no— It was all a song about women being strong. But I wanted to add in yes, women being



strong, and she is like one of the leading forces fighting the apartheid regime. So I set up her as a general. I had these pieces on the battlefield that she would strategically be moving as if she's the general putting the people here. And then I'd cut to people fighting and throwing bricks and shooting at them. It was pretty amazing that it worked. It came together. I was super proud of it, and it helped to really establish her image, too at that time, as a very strong, prominent female in hip hop, who still is doing her thing with her incredible presence, still making music, but the star of numerous films and TV shows. So that was just satisfying.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about the company you have? Be Noble.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

Yeah. So, you know, cannabis has been a part of my life most of my life. My dad was a cannabis aficionado and I was aware that this was a, like, beneficial plant medicine that had been given a very negative, like it had been just made to, to look— I mean, cannabis is classified equal to heroin when no one has died from use of this medically beneficial plant. Yet because of racism, they have painted this picture of this plant as being like a dangerous drug. It's the gateway drug, when medical doctors have prescribed opioids and hundreds of thousands of people have been afflicted and have died from opioid use. Cannabis once again has killed no one. There's significant medical benefits to cannabis. And so I got inspired to create a film called, *Grass is Greener* (2019). You can see on Netflix.



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FAB 5 FREDDY:

That showcases the history of cannabis in America, the reasons why it was criminalized. Once again, the racism and the lies that were forced upon us. The Reefer Madness era that scared the hell out of people. If you smoked this plant, you'd be criminally insane. Is literally the thrust of it. Led by a man by the name of Harry Anslinger. And so in 1937, cannabis was criminalized. And my film illustrates this, but it also really looks at the connection between America's music and cannabis, because a big reason for going after cannabis, it was bringing people together to enjoy this music, black and white. And cannabis was something that people enjoying jazz liked, and they came with these horrific scare campaigns that eventually led to cannabis being criminalized. But I also, in this film, wanted to look at the criminal mis justice, if you will, that disproportionately has criminalized hundreds of thousands of Black and brown folks, and forced them into prisons.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

And I had to look at that. In looking at that, the case I chose to focus on in the criminal justice side was the story of a man by the name of Bernard Noble. He was given a 13 year prison sentence in Louisiana for two joints worth of cannabis. And I just said, this is unbelievable. I have to look at this guy's case. Why did this happen? I interview his, his, his mother and his sisters. It gets really emotional. But because his case had become so celebrated, he eventually was given a parole and I was still in production. So me and my crew hop on a plane to fly back to Louisiana, and we document him walking out of prison into his family's arms. And it was



such a moving moment, late one night in Louisiana. And this guy was like, man on camera, you see, in the film, he says, “Man, I don't know what's gotten— There's people in prison for less weed than I had doing years.”

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

It just didn't make any sense. And his name was Bernard Noble. And that inspired me to create a cannabis brand in his name that we call Be Noble. So the brand right now has been in nine— we are nine states. We take care of Bernard, Bernard is living well and we donate a portion of our revenue in the different states we're in to organizations helping people that have been victims of— Coming out of the system, had been criminalized and coming out of prison. And so the Be Noble brand, which once again grew out of the film I made called *Grass Is Greener*, has become like a real thing, which I'm blown away by and super excited about.

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INTERVIEWER:

I'm going to go back to hip hop. Last year was the 50th anniversary of hip hop. What do you think about this journey 50 years plus later?

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

Yeah. The 50 years of hip hop. All the events and the acknowledgments of this incredible culture that happened all last year were mind boggling to me to see this thing grow. So many people jump on board. It was really amazing and exciting. And the biggest kind of moment was to be at a sold out Yankee Stadium on August 11th, which is that kind of date when Kool



Herc gave that first party. I was like, of course I gotta go, but I was blown away. The intensity of the crowd, grown people that grew up with hip hop culture, with their Run-DMC t shirts on and big gold chains, and it's just the whole hip hop energy, the look. Every group from the very beginning, all the way to NAS and Lauryn Hill came out on that stage and tore it up. You can watch it all on YouTube, by the way. The whole eight hour concert is like on there.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

That was like something that really made me go, man, this is wow. You know, when you're so close to something, sometimes it's hard to gauge how people really feel about it. And to, you know, once again, Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, where— When hip hop was being born in the 70s, I can remember there's a Yankee— the Yankees were in the World Series and on TV watching this game, you can see fires in the distance around Yankee Stadium burning, because at that time in the 70s, the Bronx was burning. Landlords were literally burning down the apartment buildings because they weren't making the money they felt that they could make from the— from the people of color that were now living in these buildings. It was like a horrendous scene. And hip hop was being born at that time. And to see Yankee Stadium sold out with all these fans was quite a pivotal moment. So yeah, it was special. What can you say?

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INTERVIEWER:

In the early days of hip hop, did you ever imagine how universal it would be?



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FAB 5 FREDDY:

Oh absolutely not. I didn't think nobody— We weren't. I wasn't thinking this far into the future back then. You know, I always give the example of the motivation behind *Wild Style*. We were trying to rock... We were trying to rock our core group of friends, our core group of people making it happen from the Bronx, up in Manhattan, from the ghettos of New York, and also the friends we had in the art world and our art friends. We were just completely like we couldn't envision. But I kind of— An interesting story, you know, when we were trying to get *Wild Style* made, Charlie A'Hearn and I had numerous meetings with funding sources. We brought in pictures, and once again, it's very little press on what this is, but we gave illustrations of here's this form of art, here's this new music being developed. We want to make a movie about these people making this happen. Nobody came on board.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

We went to all the sources where real classic independent filmmakers went. It was German TV, ZDF and the fourth channel in London that both heard about what we were trying to do, and they basically offered us a decent amount of money to buy the TV pre-sale, which when we went back, it was some of the people that said no when they saw like German television, English television for the fourth channel were getting involved. They said, okay, we're going to come on board. And so that's what got it going. And so we knew it was going to air in Germany. We knew it was going to air in England. And it caught fire over there. And so in Germany



and England, the seeds were planted and people started breakdancing and copying the moves and the style and the whole swagger was mind boggling.

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FAB 5 FREDDY:

But it was the first indication that this culture could translate because, you know, rap particularly is so English language based. How could somebody in, you know, French or Italian or German understand? But they did understand. They did get it. Just to feel the vibe. They're like, I know what these guys are talking about. I'm going to talk about what's going on here with us. And that continues to this day. It's pretty amazing to see it go down worldwide.

END TC: 00:28:58:00