

PAINT PESTS

What we have to do to rub them out

By BRENDAN ROBERTS

Melbourne's worst graffiti vandal has avoided jail, sparking demands for greater punishment to stamp out this ugly blight, as BRENDAN ROBERTS writes

IT'S a sub-culture born in the back streets of New York in the 1980s, an underground movement that fostered hip-hop music, break dancing and a destructive and senseless social by-product -- graffiti "art".

Twenty years later and half a world away in Melbourne, that so-called art has become a lifestyle for a network of arrogant vandals.

Cryptic "tags" such as "Vosco", "Stan and Bonez" and "Renks" litter the city's rail network and buildings, causing hundreds of thousands of dollars damage and train cancellations every year.

They are the signatures -- the inked fingerprints -- of our most destructive graffiti vandals.

These criminals see Melbourne's train network as a moving canvas to show off their "work" and impress their peers.

"We are considered the graffiti capital," one investigator says.

"Melbourne has historically had the strongest roots in the graffiti sub-culture, so it's seen as a rite of passage to come down here. If you are a graffiti artist of note, doing a Melbourne train is seen as the highlight of your career."

This year, three interstate graffiti hoodlums flew down from NSW to deface Melbourne's trains.

Despite causing thousands of dollars' damage, Brendon Ussher, 22, Mark Anthony Cameron, 21, and Martin Raymond Weir, 18, walked free from court.

An unrepentant Ussher gave the thumbs-up and posed triumphantly for pictures as he left Melbourne Custody

Centre.

Others have followed.

Dressed in hooded jackets, street wear and with bandanas covering their faces, they scour train stations and holding yards, armed with the tools of their illegal trade.

"They're a sophisticated operation," the investigator says.

"They come well equipped and they have their targets ready. If they're going on a big job they take the trouble of organising two-way radios, spotters and disguises."

Many use internet chat forums to discuss and critique each other's work and to speculate on police surveillance tactics.

And while Melbourne sleeps, trains across the city are monitored, with those most likely to be in operation designated as targets.

"If they can get the train that's more likely to go out that day, there's a higher chance that their work can be seen on the network -- that's the ultimate goal for them," the investigator says.

"These guys know which trains are going out when and which trains are due to be stabled. They'll choose trains that are due to go out that day."

VANDALS can take just minutes to complete an outline, or spend up to an hour working on a "fill" where a large coloured mural is emblazoned on a train.

Many of the state's most destructive graffiti vandals have been flushed out this year because of high-level police surveillance operations across Melbourne.

There have been several major convictions, including Noam Jason Shoan -- a member of the notorious "Stan and Bonez" crew.

Shoan, 26, pleaded guilty to vandalising 72 train carriages, a tram, rail bridge, overpass and building during a four-year wave of attacks across the city.

He escaped without conviction after his lawyer argued it would be detrimental to his prospects of working overseas as a graphic designer.

Another leading vandal, 23-year-old Simon Nelsen, known as "Vosco", was convicted this week after pleading guilty to graffiti damage costing almost \$80,000 to Melbourne trains.

Several businesses are considering legal action against him to recoup \$800,000 in graffiti damage.

Nelsen, of Surrey Hills, was grabbed by the Melbourne transit safety division's "Crew 1" last October after a five-hour graffiti rampage across 130 locations in Melbourne's east.

"Vosco was considered untouchable in Melbourne, but we got him," the investigator says.

SWAPPING his trademark garb for a suit and tie in court, Nelsen was placed on a two-year community based order and ordered to perform 300 hours' unpaid community work.

Nelson's lawyer told the court her client was searching for a sense of belonging and achievement and had strived to become a bit of a hero in the graffiti scene.

Outside Melbourne Magistrates' Court, Nelson, who craved attention through his acts of vandalism, covered his face with a hooded jacket and pushed past media crews to avoid identification.

Police say Nelsen is typical of major offenders. "The people we investigate are not wayward youths of 12 or 13 years of age that might do something silly," Supt Kevin Sheridan says.

"These are organised criminals who are dedicated and well-equipped to commit these crimes."

The need for gratification and glory extends beyond the act of graffitiing, with many, like Nelsen, filming their work for their peers.

OTHERS maximise exposure by distributing DVDs of their work at hip-hop concerts.

"They go where they know there is going to be a high volume of people from the sub-culture," the investigator says. "They know there's going to be people who appreciate what they're doing. I've even been approached at South Yarra station and asked if I wanted to buy a DVD for \$10."

The Herald Sun has seen copies of DVDs showing vandals organising and carrying out graffiti raids on Melbourne trains.

Set to a background of hip-hop and rap music, one Brisbane-based film, titled *While the City Sleeps*, shows a

crew of vandals spraying large murals across entire train carriages.

Some wear fluorescent worker vests as they carry out their destruction, playing up to the cameras and pointing triumphantly at their tags.

But it's not only their peers who celebrate and glorify their mess.

Several Melbourne stores are also responsible for fostering the city's graffiti culture.

One Prahran-based hip-hop record store sells a train-graffiti-based magazine filled with pictures of vandalised trains.

Another city store was caught up in investigations into a group of interstate vandals who travelled to Melbourne on a graffiti tour.

The paint store was said to have provided the vandals with an out-of-hours service -- supplying coloured spray cans after the group's supplies ran out during a late-night attack.

"These places make themselves out to be honest stores that don't encourage graffiti," the investigator says. "They keep themselves at enough of a distance to avoid getting into trouble, but they are just encouraging it."

Steve Beardon, anti-graffiti lobbyist and founder of Residents Against Graffiti Everywhere, says the government needs to crack down on these stores.

"It's quite clear that their target market is not your typical law-abiding citizens and they need to be regulated," Mr Beardon says.

A vocal critic of lenient sentencing for graffiti vandals, Mr Beardon says Melbourne will continue to be seen as a soft touch until offenders are sent to jail.

"As long as the courts keep dishing out weak sentences, we will continue to attract interstate vandals."

"The maximum sentence for causing criminal damage is 10 years' jail, but none of these people are being jailed. They get a slap on the wrist and go out and continue to do it."