



## GHOST STILL HAUNTS VICTORIA

BY JULIE GORDON

Like a helium-filled balloon that has lost most of its gas, the image of a detached head hovers just above ground level on the red concrete wall behind Mount Royal Bagel off Cook Street in Victoria. At once sinister and comical, the head is part vampire, part clown. It is the sole graffiti on an otherwise pristine wall; and save for its rouged cheeks and nose, it's done fully in black and white. Arched brows and fangs belie a menacing connection to Dracula. A balding head and half closed eyes, together with the redness suggestive of drunkenness, add a comic edge.

This strange, vampire-clown is possibly the last remaining wall graffiti by legendary Victoria artist Hans Fear. Fear, whose tag was GHOST, pioneered the rebellious art form here in the 1980s along with a couple of friends. Yet to call him simply a graffiti artist does Fear a deep injustice. Amongst scribbles and tags, Fear created pictures of remarkable complexity and depth. He was an astonishingly talented and prolific artist, and while graffiti was his preferred medium, he drew constantly, producing hundreds of sketches, cartoons, and wall murals during his short life. When Fear, who suffered from schizophrenia, took his own life in 2001, he left behind drawings, stories and legends that continue to haunt Victoria's streets and stories today.

Hans was born in 1970 in Victoria. As a child, he was described as shy, kind, sensitive, loving. He liked to laugh, and to make others laugh as well; a characteristic that would follow him into adulthood and through even his darkest days. In his early school years, Hans' sense of humour and wandering attention span began to get him into trouble, as did his seemingly insatiable creative energy, but these characteristics were brushed off as youthful exuberance.

Fast-forward to the early 1980s – the height of the underground skate-punk scene in Victoria. Those who took part recall this era as near-epic. There was an energy at the time that was raw, palpable. Fast on the heels of prog rock – the sounds of bands like Led Zeppelin, Rush and The Who – punk hit the scene with the force of a tsunami. Victoria's young and young-at-heart embraced the intensity of it, responding with a host of fresh young bands. Home-based venues like the Rat's Nest served up all ages shows where kids from 11 to 50 piled in – often by the hundreds – to listen to the noise and feel the energy.







The music was raw and uncomplicated, and the intensity was exactly what Hans – then an adolescent – was looking for. He could often be seen at shows standing front and centre – directly in front of the speakers. During breaks, he'd ask the bands if he could play the drum kit. Most indulged, and he played pretty well, but when it was time for the band to go back on, Hans would usually need to be reminded to step down.

Hans' teens were a time of reckless abandon, and a time of stress for his parents. Aside from music, skating, hanging out with friends, and his ever-pervasive drawing, Hans was interested in little else. He was a true non-conformist, and school could not hold his attention. Drawing was the central activity in Hans' life; some described him as obsessed with it. He drew constantly, often through mealtimes and always in the classroom. His mother recalls drawing marathons, where Hans would sit at the kitchen table for 24 hours or more - the family given strict instruction not to interrupt.

In his adolescence, drawing began to get Hans in trouble. He was routinely reprimanded at school, and when caught doing graffiti, began a cycle of trouble with the law that saw him in juvenile detention more than once. But while these teen years were difficult ones for Hans socially, they were formative for his art form. Hans was a perfectionist, and he honed his craft by poring over works of influence like J.R. Tolkein, Robert Crumb, and MAD Magazine. His scope and range grew greater and more sophisticated. Hans began to emulate great illustrators like Disney's Chuck Jones and the French engraver Gustave Doré. Most who came in contact with him noted Hans' exceptional talent during this period.

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Those who knew Hans, and many who did not, today carry reminders of this time in his life. He was likely to create a rapid drawing and give it away to a friend, acquaintance or even a stranger – sometimes in trade and often just for fun. One story tells of Hans repeatedly visiting an acquaintance to buy pot. After the 4th or 5th visit, the seller told Hans enough was enough – to stop coming. An hour later, he found a piece of paper slipped under the door; on it, a cartoon depicting Hans attempting to buy weed from a toad. To this day, the seller, who prefers not to be identified for obvious reasons, laughs at Hans' irreverence.

While he had a lighter side, darker themes began to creep into his work as well. Hans was deeply opinionated and political. He cared about the state of the environment, hated cars and disagreed strongly with foreign policy. All of these issues would play progressing roles in his artwork and his world outlook as Hans matured.

Schizophrenia is a debilitating illness, particularly if not detected early and left untreated. Sufferers commonly begin to exhibit symptoms in their early 20s, and this was the case with Hans, although his mother and others close to him reflect that there were likely signs much earlier on.

At any rate, in Hans' case the illness went largely unchecked through his teens and into his early 20s. By the time he was diagnosed, Hans' schizophrenia had reached more debilitating proportions. He was plagued by the voices and delusions that accompany advanced schizophrenia. His mother, Margaret, describes his experience with the illness as a “horror film that played in [Hans'] head.”

Although he was prescribed medication, the drugs only dulled Hans' senses and dampened his drive to draw. The irony of this was not lost on Hans, who understood that drawing had all along been the one thing that could keep his demons at bay. As a result, he repeatedly went off medication, preferring the depth of his reality to the dull, if safer, medicated experience. Eventually, however, the illness became too much for Hans. At 31, he ended his own life, and thus, his suffering.

Like any good ghost, Hans Fear inhabits the world between the tangible and the implied. He is no longer here, but neither is he completely vanished from the living world he was once a part of. Today, while only the vampire-clown remains of Hans' once prodigious graffiti career,

posthumous sightings are still relatively frequent in a city that has all but painted him out of existence.

Alfons Fear, Hans' younger brother, returned to Victoria one year after his brother's death to – among other things – make sense of it all. In a strange case of synchronicity, Alfons rented an apartment in Vic West to discover that the bathroom wall was covered with a mural: a giant duck drawn by his late brother. In the living room, a thin layer of white paint barely covered what appeared to be another room-size mural by Hans.

Here and there in Victoria are remainders of a life committed to expression through drawing, caricature and art. Many individuals have single sketches by Hans. Others boast entire collections. Alfons, who is working on a book about his brother's life and work, put a call out for drawings and has to date collected more than 250 individual pieces. Some admirers even have salvaged pieces of drywall showcasing Hans' work from buildings slated for renovation or demolition - capsules of a creative life lived in Victoria.

Perhaps the strangest manifestation of Hans' ghostly presence is the Myspace web site created by his brother and a number of friends. On Myspace, Hans has 174 friends. They ‘communicate’ with him beyond the grave, telling stories about his antics, sharing art work and photos of him, and sending him messages, like “thinkin boutchoo” and “Happy go-skateboarding day, Hanz.”

And of course Hans' art, central to his being, today haunts the work of young wannabees and admirers. Look closely and you will see – in a testament to his talent – an uncanny similarity to GHOST's style on Victoria's best graffiti walls.

